



Sport Social Work Journal

Volume 2, Issue 1

2022

Sport Social Work Journal

OpenJournals.bsu.edu/SportSocialWorkJournal

SSWJ.org

Editorial Board

Dr. Matt Moore (Ph.D, MSW) Ball State University - Editor

Dr. Stacy Eileen Kratz (Ph.D, LCSW, CAP) 98point6 Inc. - Associate Editor

Dr. Nafees Alam (Ph.D, LMSW) Boise State University

Dr. Akilah Carter-Francique (Ph.D.) Institute for the Study of Sport, Society and Social Change (ISSSSC) and San Jose State University

Dr. Marc Felizzi (Ph.D, LCSW) Millersville University

Dr. Paul Gorczynski (Ph.D., CPsychol, AFBPsS) University of Greenwich

Dr. Ginger Gummelt (Ph.D, LCSW) Lamar University

Dr. James Houle (Ph.D., ABPP) Ohio State University

Cindy Miller Aron (LCSW, CGP, FAGPA) Adjunct Assistant Professor of Population Health, College of Osteopathic Medicine of the Pacific and COMP-Northwest

Dr. Tarkington Newman (Ph.D, MSW, MS) University of New Hampshire

Daniel Pollack (MSW, JD) Yeshiva University

Dr. Jerry F. Reynolds (Ph.D, LMSW) Ball State University

Dr. Vanessa Robinson-Dooley (Ph.D, LCSW, CNP) Simmons University

Dr. Lorin Tredinnick (Ph.D, MSW, LSW) Rutgers University

Dr. Stéphanie Turgeon (Ph.D., Ps.éd.) Université du Québec en Outaouais

Dr. Khirey Walker (Ph.D., MS) Elon University

Sport Social Work Journal is published and supported by Ball State University Libraries, Muncie, Indiana.

Sport Social Work Journal is supported by the [Alliance of Social Workers in Sport](#).

[Visit the website](#) to submit a manuscript or to contact the editors. Authors retain copyright to their contributions but agree to license published content under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivates 4.0 License](#).



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**

University Libraries



Commentary: How Can We Use Social Justice Lenses to Conceptualize Contemporary Sport? Continuing to Make Sense of Potential Challenges and Future Pathways

Fernando Santos

*Polytechnic Institute of Porto and Viana do Castelo
School of Higher Education*

The purpose of this article is to provide insights and prompt reflections about what social justice promotion through youth sport entails, raise awareness about emergent challenges that undermine this pursuit, as well as point to future steps to infuse social justice within sport systems across the globe. Supporting coaches' efforts to teach social justice life skills may need to occur before social justice permeates the broader youth sport system and society in general as a culturally relevant pursuit. Conversely, if policy makers continue to assume social justice is simply an outcome that does not require explicit strategies from coaches and other sport stakeholders the status quo may remain untouched. Moving forward, more efforts are needed to conceptualize and operationalize social justice and social justice life skills, as well as to tailor changes to the system based on what is sustainable on the long-term across cultures.

Keywords: development; youth; life skills; values

Within the context of youth sport, awareness of and attention to social justice issues have been gaining much needed attention around the globe (Camiré et al., 2021). However, to further this social consciousness, there is a need to actively engage youth in advocacy and activism both in practice and through research. Social work as a profession is grounded on the need to foster social justice and challenge social injustice as key ethical guidelines. Coaches, youth sport leaders and other key sport stakeholders should be supported by social workers in their efforts towards making social justice both a concern and practice within youth sport. Therefore, the purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) raise awareness about emergent challenges that undermine social justice in and through sport; (2) provide insights and prompt reflections about what social justice promotion through youth sport entails; and (3) point to future steps to infuse social justice within youth sport. This research note also attempts to continue to develop the discussions initiated by Camiré et al. (2021) concerning social justice life skills.

Emergent Challenges that Undermine Social Justice

Youth sport appears to be a relevant platform to educate individuals, thereby empowering them contribute to a socially just and equitable society (Darnell & Millington, 2019; Gerstein et al., 2021; Peachey et al., 2019). However, in some cases, the mission of sport in promoting social equity has not been successful (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; McCoy, 2020; Newman et al., 2016). For instance, some sport settings are extremely competitive environments, which implicitly – and in some instances, explicitly – reinforce social exclusion, racism, gender stereotyping, and homophobia (Love et al., 2019; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021). These societal issues, which represent critical social challenges, should be viewed as outcomes of sport and education systems and all programming aimed at (at least supposedly) helping youth flourish (Camiré, 2015; Camiré et al., 2021). It is fair to state that, at least, some of the efforts towards creating a more fair and just society through sport have failed because we, as researchers, have struggled attempting to help “... actors have the knowledge, support, and resources to be (and feel) efficacious” (Whitley et al., 2019, p.12).

Within contemporary society, youth sport reflects social unbalances, as well as implicit and explicit racism and discrimination (Petry & Jong, 2022). Further, youth athletes are, in many cases, seen as tools for winning and to quickly achieve social recognition. Colonial values still dominate interactions, social norms and values across youth sport systems (Camiré, 2021). Therefore, activism and social justice are, in some cases, considered less important within the sport culture (Peachey et al., 2019). However, within a market-driven approach, such concepts are, in some cases, used to leverage power relationships and develop a rhetoric that considers sport to be a great platform for everyone, independently of their ethical background, gender identity, among other characteristics. This results in coach education, youth sport and even school curriculums (who deeply impact youth’s values) to be framed around a normalized premise of exclusion that considers social injustice an inevitable consequence of being and existing. Empowering, instead of numbing, youth is needed and approaches to do so are urgent (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2021). The legacy of colonial ways of thinking and experiencing have deep roots in how we frame youth sport, research and all forms of thinking and doing (Camiré, 2021).

Moreover, society faces many social challenges that been widely discussed now within a post-pandemic world, which affects individuals’ freedom of speech and the choices they make. And, in some cases, our contemporary sociopolitical climate does not tolerate those who challenge the status quo and share different viewpoints on politics, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation (Boch, 2020). Taken together, these issues tend to create numerous challenges for those who seek to prepare youth to truly contribute towards social change and become critical, autonomous thinkers, who have a voice in making sure all individuals are included, valued, and able to seek meaning in life (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Going back to the role attributed to sport participation, researchers – including myself – have, on several occasions, stated, at the onset of a new research project, that ‘sport can promote positive developmental outcomes. However, despite the evidence available that supports these claims (Merkel, 2013), we, as researchers and youth sport leaders, may need to pose the following three questions: (1) Is this always a feasible pursuit? (2) Can sport achieve outcomes such as social justice that other environments cannot? (3) And if so, how? To answer these questions and in alignment with the mission of this journal’s inaugural issue, we need to understand if and how social justice can (or even should be) infused within sport programming.

Social Justice Promotion through Youth Sport

Social justice has been the topic of many iterations and investigations (Camiré et al., 2021; Love et al., 2019). Achieving a just and equitable society with individuals that are tolerant, respect the rights and feelings of others, take ownership for their decisions, and embrace the role of helping others – among other important skills – may be achieved with sport-based youth programming (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Such skills that can contribute to social change and make youth active participants in social justice issues have been defined as *social justice life skills* (Camiré et al., 2021). These skills are the ultimate objective of any sport-based youth program that seeks to educate and empower youth contribute to social change. Thus, social justice life skills should be viewed both as a process and an outcome. Concerning the first, social justice life skills may be part of a holistic approach to coaching that includes an explicit social justice focus. For example, coaches may discuss with athletes the importance of tolerance and infuse this social justice life skill in their coaching practice. In relation to the second, social justice may be also envisioned as an outcome reflected in individuals' ability to contribute to a more socially just society now and in the future. Coaches may assess their impact on athletes by understanding how they are becoming (or not) activists and sharing/applying social justice principles across other life domains such as school, family life and interactions with peers outside sport.

Within contemporary society and sport, the need for all stakeholders, including youth sport coaches, to foster social justice has been acknowledged (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). However, how can we foster social justice life skills through the means of sport? Before attempting to share insights concerning this question, it should be noted there are numerous challenges that impact this objective. Therefore, researchers and policymakers, as well as those attempting to use sport as a platform or tool for social justice need to be aware of the status quo. We generally live in a society where competition (in sport and elsewhere) is taken to the extreme. Professional misconduct and unethical behavior from individuals with high responsibilities and social significance (i.e., power and privilege) have become normalized (e.g., O'Brien, 2021; Philippou, 2021). These outcomes reflect the will to attain results at all costs and use resources to satisfy immediate needs with no regards for ethics and values. Sport also reflects the same reality whereas exploitation, as well as physical and psychological abuse, are widespread even amongst world-renowned athletes (e.g., Simone Biles, Kyle Beach). Unfortunately, these issues exist within all sport systems, from Olympic and professional sport to high school athletics and community leagues.

Future Steps to infuse Social Justice within Youth Sport

Such a reality does not mean social justice is unattainable; however, it may help researchers and social justice advocates bear in mind how the (lack of) cultural relevancy of this framework is impacted by the current values, social norms, and failures in the system (i.e., the status quo). As discussed in previous research with regards to taking an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), infusing social justice into youth sport coaches' conceptions about learning and education will take concerted effort (Petry & Jong, 2022). Moreover, if sport systems position social justice as both a process and an outcome in their policy statements, time will be an important aspect to consider. Such systemic change will not likely occur in a short period of time and may require innovative policies (macro-level change) and intentional

practices of key sport stakeholders (micro-level change) to facilitate change throughout sport culture. To make a sustainable change, this paradigm shift must involve all stakeholders, from policymakers and coach educators to sport coaches and key community gatekeepers (Dorsch et al., 2020).

However, yet again, sport systems need to clearly define if social justice is a process and an outcome aligned with their mission, principles and motivations and weigh the positive and negative consequences. For instance, positive consequences of including a social justice approach involve having youth become empowered for helping others either in or outside sport with impact across life domains (long-term objective). In contrast, negative consequences include the fact that infusing a social justice narrative within sport organizations is time-consuming, demanding and may not translate into immediate youth athlete outcomes and fit within the current status quo.

Within each unique sociopolitical sport culture, before discussing social justice as an approach for sport-based youth programming, there is the need to discuss what sport should achieve in the 21st century. For example, in contexts where performance and winning are the main objectives, social justice may be completely unattainable if immediately introduced as the primary goal. For example, if a sport organization values a ‘winning at all costs’ perspective and social justice is presented by researchers simply as a needed objective for youth coaches may see no relevance and meaning in this approach. Researchers and social workers, among other stakeholders, may need to gradually make efforts to change sport organizations’ philosophies and connect social justice with their neoliberal way of thinking and conceptualizing youth sport as a context where coaches are dispensable and cannot lose, and athletes only need to win to succeed. At this stage, efforts may need to be initially directed at helping sport organizations and coaches envision sport as developmental experience that has long-lasting effects on youth participants (Camiré et al., 2021). We need to consider that sport may not foster social justice at the same pace in every context, as there are conflicting realities and pedagogical challenges that may need to be developed before a social justice focus is implemented. To mediate macro and micro-level change, coach education could be pivotal to help disseminate concrete strategies and actionable items derived from policy across the sport system and embed social justice into coaching practices.

Without discussions about these issues that should involve researchers, policymakers and as many stakeholders as possible sport will continue to be positioned as an intrinsically great platform to change society when in fact it is only a clear reflection of the negative outcomes of the system with no real power to change the status quo. Understanding what social justice means to the youth sport system needs to be considered. Moving forward, researchers could help bridge the gap between resistance to social justice and the need to change the youth sport system in a way that prompts coaches to value youth’s developmental needs today.

Final Thoughts

Social justice may need to be positioned as a process variable before being postulated as an outcome one. In other words, supporting coaches’ efforts to teach social justice life skills may need to occur before social justice permeates the broader youth sport system and society in general as a culturally relevant pursuit. Conversely, if policymakers continue to assume social justice is simply as an outcome that does not require explicit strategies the status quo may remain untouched. Moving forward, more efforts are needed to conceptualize and operationalize social

justice and social justice life skills, as well as tailor changes to the system based on what is sustainable on the long-term.

References

- Boch A. (2020). Increasing American political tolerance: A framework excluding hate speech. *Socius*, 6(1), 1-12.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Camiré, M. (2015). Reconciling competition and positive youth development in sport. *STAPS*, 109, 25–39.
- Camiré, M. (2021). A move to rethink life skills as assemblages: A call to post-qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. Advance online publication.
- Camiré, M., Newman, T., Bean, C., & Strachan, L. (2021). Reimagining positive youth development and life skills in sport through a social justice lens. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. Advance online publication. 1-19.
- Darnell, S., & Millington, R. (2019). Social justice, sport, and sociology: A position statement. *Quest*, 71(2), 175-187.
- Gerstein, L. H., Blom, L. C., Banerjee, A., Farello, A., & Crabb, L. (2021). Sport for social change: An action-oriented peace education curriculum. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 27(2), 160–169.
- Gonzalez, M., Kokozos, M., Byrd, C., & McKee, K. (2020). Critical positive youth development: A framework for centering critical consciousness. *Journal of Youth Development*, 15(6), 24–43.
- Hartmann-Tews, I., Menzel, T. & Braumüller, B. (2021). Experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in sports in Germany. *German Journal of Exercise and Sport Research*. Advanced online publication.
- Lee, W., & Cunningham, G. (2019). Moving toward understanding social justice in sport organizations: A study of engagement in social justice advocacy in sport organizations. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 43(3), 245-263.
- Love, A., Deeb, A., & Waller, N. (2019). Social justice, sport and racism: A position statement. *Quest*, 71(2), 227-238.
- McCoy, H. (2020). Black Lives Matter, and yes, you are racist: The parallelism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17, 1-13.
- Merkel, D. (2013). Youth sport: Positive and negative impact on young athletes. *Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine*, 4, 151-160.
- Newman, H., Howells, K., & Fletcher, D. (2016). The dark side of top-level sport: An autobiographic study of depressive experiences in elite sport performers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1-12.
- O'Brien, M. (2021) In the public interest? Political sex scandals and the media in Ireland. *Irish Political Studies*. Advanced online publication.
- Peachey, J., Schulenkorf, N., & Spaaij, R. (2019). Sport for social change: Bridging the theory–practice divide. *Journal of Sport Management*, 33(5), 361-365.
- Petry, K., & Jong, J. (2022). *Education in sport and physical activity: Future directions and global perspectives*. Routledge.

- Philippou, C. (2021). Anti-bribery and corruption in sport mega-events: Stakeholder perspectives. *Sport in Society*. Advanced online publication.
- Whitley, M., Farrell, K., Wolff, E., & Hillyer, S. (2019). Sport for development and peace: Surveying actors in the field. *Journal of Sport for Development*, 7(12), 1-15.
- Whitley, M., Smith, A., Dorsch, T., Bowers, M., & Centeio, E. (2021). Re-envisioning post pandemic youth sport to meet young people's mental, emotional, and social needs. *Translational Journal of the ACSM*, 6, 1-7.



Pandemics and Athletics: How COVID-19 Affected Sport Injury Rehabilitation

Jessica Kiefor

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

Matt Moore

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

Jerry Reynolds

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

Kristin Trainor

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

Purpose: This study sought to better understand the lived experiences of NCAA student-athletes who suffered an injury during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Methods:** The study utilized a descriptive phenomenological approach with focus groups. Researchers interviewed eleven student-athletes that fit the inclusion criteria. Researchers analyzed interview transcriptions for themes. **Results:** Themes included: (1) emotional stress, (2) impact on interpersonal relationships, and (3) delay in recovery. The research team identified subthemes to further expand the concepts illustrated within the main themes. **Conclusions:** This research provides insight to the common reactions of a student-athlete post-injury, interpersonal impacts on a student-athlete from both their injury and COVID-19, rehabilitation changes due to COVID-19, and a perspective from injured student-athletes on the current availability and effectiveness of athletic training and wrap-around mental-health resources. **Applications in Sport:** This information proves valuable for athletic trainers, sport psychologists, sport social workers, and other physical and behavioral health providers working to promote the rehabilitation and well-being of an injured athlete during global pandemics.

Keywords: sport injury, student-athlete, injury rehabilitation, COVID-19, descriptive phenomenology

Sports are not immune to required adjustments of COVID-19. From the cancellations of the 2020 Olympics and cancellation of the NCAA winter and spring championships in March of 2020, the pandemic proved to spare no part of society (Wong et al., 2021). Amidst much fluidity and uncertainty, the world of collegiate athletics still experiences impacts from the pandemic on competition (Hosick, 2020). Beyond practices and games, pandemic restrictions limited or modified a student-athlete's access to necessary resources (Bazett-Jones et al., 2020). This article explores the impact of the pandemic on a student-athlete's access to athletic training services.

With limited face-to-face access to athletic trainers, physical therapists, and other medical personnel, at-home rehabilitation with no or telehealth supervision became common practice for injured student-athletes (Sarto et al., 2020). As a consequence of COVID-19, many in-person appointments shifted to a virtual platform depriving injured student-athletes the necessary support and evaluation of their injury (Al-Jabir et al., 2020). The lack of access to sufficient rehabilitation resources caused disappointment, anger, frustration, and sadness in student-athletes (Bullard, 2020). Research illustrates the numerous negative effects of an injury on a student-athlete (Brewer et al., 2010; Green & Weinberg, 2001; Groot et al., 2018; Koren et al., 2005; Sheinbein, 2016), which magnified in many student-athletes because of the psychosocial repercussions of COVID-19 (Elabiyi, 2020; Gualano et al., 2020; Rubin & Wessely, 2020).

With a vast number of athletic injuries in a year (Williams & Krane, 2015) and the return to life before COVID-19 still unknown (Crouch, 2021), there is a need for research on how sport injury rehabilitation can remain effective and efficient throughout this or future pandemics. This study provides insight to the common reactions of a student-athlete post-injury, interpersonal impacts on a student-athlete from both their injury and COVID-19, rehabilitation changes due to COVID-19, and a perspective from injured student-athletes on the current availability and effectiveness of mental-health resources. Zoellner & Maerker (2006) found qualitative examination allows the researchers to utilize the injured student-athlete perspective in order to form a greater understanding of their experiences. This information provides value for athletic trainers, sport psychologists, sport social workers, and other physical and behavioral health providers working to promote the rehabilitation and well-being of an injured student-athlete during COVID-19.

Method

Descriptive phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology within the human science research paradigm, designed to understand and explain the meaning of human experiences (Fitzpatrick & Watkinson, 2003). Descriptive phenomenology is a widely-used method to explore and understand past experiences of individuals (Christensen et al., 2017). This approach has a history of being used within athletics and sport (Kristiansen et al., 2017; Ryba, 2008). This study followed a logical, systematic, and multiphase methodological approach to capturing reflections of individuals' subjective experiences with COVID-19 and its impact on their sport injury rehabilitation. Specifically, researchers used principles of inductive reasoning, which led to the development of patterns, hypotheses, and theory. The use of phenomenology included gathering information from participants and personal reflections from the researchers (a tenant of descriptive phenomenology).

Study Participants

The current study used criterion sampling to seek current student-athletes within the NCAA that are or were experiencing an injury during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers contacted five Division I universities across the Midwest with a recruitment email. The athletic training staff at each university helped identify participants. Advertisement also took place via social media utilizing a shortened version of the recruitment email.

Twelve participants identified with the study inclusion criteria (e.g., current NCAA athlete, 18 years of age or older, and experiencing or experienced an injury during the COVID-19 pandemic) volunteered for the study. One dropped out before the completion of the study, as they did not show up for the pre-arranged interview. Each student-athlete received a pseudonym to protect their true identity. These student-athletes provided vivid descriptions of their physical injury, their typical rehabilitation process, how COVID-19 affected this process, and any mental and/or behavioral health challenges they noticed related to both COVID-19 and their injury. See Table 1 for participant information.

Table 1

Study Participants

| Pseudonym (Identified Gender) | Age | Race/Ethnicity | Sport |
|-------------------------------|-----|--------------------|----------|
| Olivia (Female) | 20 | Filipino/Caucasian | Softball |
| Emma (Female) | 18 | Caucasian | Softball |
| Ava (Female) | 22 | Caucasian | Tennis |
| Noah (Male) | 19 | Filipino/Caucasian | Football |
| Isabella (Female) | 19 | Caucasian | Softball |
| Mason (Male) | 19 | Caucasian | Tennis |
| Lily (Female) | 20 | Caucasian | Soccer |
| Sophia (Female) | 20 | Hispanic/Caucasian | Softball |
| Lucas (Male) | 19 | Caucasian | Swimming |
| Abby (Female) | 22 | Caucasian | Softball |
| Grace (Female) | 22 | Caucasian | Softball |

Study Procedures

Interview Guide

The semi-structured interviews had ten prompts. Based on previous literature, the researchers designed the questions to better understand the lived experiences of the participants (Ivarsson et al., 2017; Vann et al., 2018). The ten prompts asked participants to: (1) describe their injury and traditional rehabilitation process, (2) discuss challenges with being injured, (3) reflect on interpersonal issues due to their injury, (4) share their support system, (5) reflect on how COVID-19 affected their recovery, (6) compare rehabilitation from pre-COVID19 and

during COVID-19, (7) discuss physical and psychological obstacles due to COVID-19, (8) reflect on the mental and/or behavioral health resources available for injured student-athletes, (9) share differences in their treatment before and after COVID-19, and (10) share recommendations for athletic staff and teammates for supporting an injured student-athlete. The student-athletes could also share any additional comments.

Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interviews with the 11 student-athletes took place via Zoom. Participants joined one of three focus groups. Two focus groups had four participants, and the final focus group had three participants. The interviews began with the researchers reading the informed consent form requiring each participant to provide verbal consent and asking if there were any questions. Because of the group interview format, the participants rotated who would answer the question first. The other participants could build on the previous answer or share their own thoughts. All questions allowed open-ended responses so each participant could expand and disclose any personal experiences. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. Researchers recorded and saved all interviews to the secure Zoom Cloud (through host university, approving institution), which allowed the interviewers to listen attentively to the responses and review the interviews for changes in body language, pauses around certain topics, and transcription purposes. The research team provided copies of the transcripts to focus group participants to ensure member checking.

Thematic Analysis

Following the transcription of the interviews, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the text. The researchers reviewed the narratives and highlighted the core message in each response, eliminating the speech disfluencies, “small talk”, and other irrelevant dialogue (Lemke, 2012). The detailed approach of listening to and reading the transcriptions allowed the researchers to have a systematic process for identifying and analyzing emerging themes. It was possible for a sentence to contain more than one theme, so the researchers considered each phrase, statement, or sentence in isolation in order to not misunderstand the meaning of a participant’s experience (Fitzpatrick & Watkinson, 2003).

The research team coded potential inductive themes based on the transcriptions. Researchers organized themes into an Excel document. Researchers used inductive coding when there is little known about the present research subject and a there is a need for heuristic or exploratory approach (Laverty, 2003). Inductive coding also allows for themes to emerge from the participants’ responses (Fereday, & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The researchers coded the findings into meaning units (Laverty, 2003), ranging from a single word to a longer phrase to capture notable ideas. Once the researchers reviewed the overall data, they established initial codes from the meaning units. Researchers used categorization to generate final themes from the codes (Guest et al., 2012).

The researchers created explicit subthemes to further examine patterns and provide clarity to the participants’ responses. The researchers categorized quotes that diverged slightly from the main themes. These quotes led to the development of subthemes (Sundler et al., 2019).

Throughout the thematic analysis process, the researchers debated to reach agreements on the descriptions and interpretations of the participants’ experiences, a method coined peer

debriefing. This method also assisted the researchers in avoiding confirmation bias. Along with peer debriefing, the researchers used triangulation to promote the quality control of this study (Krysiak & Finn, 2013). The research team consisted of one tenured faculty member, two pre-tenured faculty members, and an undergraduate psychology student. All members of the research team are active within the sporting community. The vast experience in both research and sport supports increased quality control of the data process. The research team has experience in college coaching (5 years), varsity high school coaching (10 years), youth sport coaching (10 years), and three members of the research team competed as collegiate athletes.

Results

This section identifies the emerging themes from the analysis of the transcripts. The researchers trust participants' voices reflect the themes and portray each student-athlete's experience with COVID-19 and the impact on their sport injury rehabilitation. The researchers identified three emerging themes from this study: (1) emotional stress, (2) impact on interpersonal relationships, and (3) delay in recovery. Subthemes further expanded the concepts illustrated within the main themes. The researchers explored the meaning of each theme through quotations from the participant interviews.

Emotional Stress

All 11 participants expressed emotional distress stemming from their injury, COVID-19, or a combination of the two. The most common feelings were uncertainty, fear of re-traumatization, and identity loss.

Uncertainty

The most common emotional response the participants expressed was uncertainty. Olivia expressed her uncertainty originating from "the unknowns of time – times of when I am supposed to be hitting, times of when I am supposed to run, jump, all that – it is all up in the air." Due to COVID-19, Olivia did not have access to doctors or her athletic trainer, causing her to feel unsettled. Noah also expressed uncertainty over his athletic ability, stating, "You do not know where you stand versus where you were, and it can get really tough." Obstructions in athletic ability is a scare for many student-athletes, especially when their timeframe to play is short. Mason said, "It is scary when you are on a team and you know you only have four years to compete. Having uncertainty about your care messes with you"

Inconsistencies in the rehabilitation process can also cause uncertainty, leaving the student-athlete unaware of the outlook for their future athletic career. Ava stated, "A lot of rehab is subjective. So, my trainer will do things that my doctor in Indianapolis does not approve of and... there was just this constant contradicting." Without reassurance from medical personnel and a coherent rehabilitation plan, anxiety may begin to form within the student-athlete. Sophia was never given a confident answer concerning her injury due to inconclusive MRI scans, leaving her in a state of worry concerning what the injury may be. Sophia shared, "Last year, my friend passed away from cancer on her spine. It was super

sudden, just came out of nowhere. Things like that would pop into my mind. The fear of the unknown is real.”

Re-traumatization

Three student-athletes specifically highlighted stress over the injury reoccurring. Emma explained the mental battle of preparing for return-to-play and “if [the injury] is going to happen again.” Ava described the hardest challenge of being injured is imitating the movement that caused the injury the first time. She stated, “I think the hardest part is moving to the right or moving to the left... just being fearful that I am going to do it again.” Another participant’s anxiety over re-traumatization was so significant it caused anxiety dreams. Noah explained, “I will have dreams that I re-hurt it because that is how much it worries me.”

Identity Loss

Being a student-athlete formed a significant part of each participants’ identity. Lily questioned, “What does that do to you as a person if you worked really hard, but you just cannot come back to where you were?” Lily particularly stated sustaining an injury can cause a student-athlete to question who they are as a person. Noah also mentioned experiencing some loss and separation due to his injury, stating, “Athletes can feel forgotten when they lose a role on the team and feel reduced to an injured reserve player.” Olivia explained, “I had a starting position last year, and I am like, damn, did I just lose it due to this injury?”

Furthermore, student-athletes reported feelings of separation. Grace stated, “It can be hard when you are used to just doing something every day, and then it has to stop all of a sudden.” Lucas added, “Watching everyone else kind of do what you want to be able to do is definitely super hard.” Abby’s injury kept her physically separated from her teammates, and she said, “I spent a whole year present, around the team, but not actively engaged with people... being there but not actually being out there.”

Impact on Interpersonal Relationships

All 11 student-athletes reported a negative impact on their interpersonal relationships due to both their injury and COVID-19. The student-athletes described communication deficits and conflict among their teammates. They also talked about challenges with their coaches and families.

Lack of Communication

All 11 participants expressed frustration with communication issues concerning their injury and rehabilitation. Lucas had a difficult time receiving a clear answer on his injury, leaving himself and others in a state of uncertainty. Lucas explained, “It has been really hard, because there has been so much back and forth to what is even going on with my injury, and you are not able to convey that with your teammates or coaches.” Abby had difficulty communicating with her teammates as well, but on a more personal level. Abby

shared, “I remember reaching out to people when they were away on tournaments to try and check in, and nobody wanted to talk to me about softball.”

Isabella was upset over the lack of communication sharing. She stated, “None of my coaches said anything or reached out... I had to text my trainer multiple times to get them to respond.” Isabella later added, “When they do not respond or people do not reach out, it feels like they really just do not care about you as a person.” Olivia also felt isolated, stating, “I was going through a lot of hard stuff mentally, trying to get through my recovery process. It was difficult not hearing from [my teammates] or having that extra support.”

Teammate Conflict

Ava shared concerns about the reactions received from her teammates, “I was terrified that my teammates were going to think I was faking it.” Ava later added, “When I found out I tore my ACL, as sad and as heartbreaking that it was... I kind of have validation now... this is a true injury... [My teammates] do not have permission to talk behind my back.” Ava’s fear of her teammates’ reaction is rooted in some experiences other participants shared. Emma stated, “I had some [teammates] saying I was faking it and doing it for attention, and they were kind of mad at me because I was not coming to practice on time, and I was in the training room rehabbing.” Grace and her other injured teammates also experienced conflict on their team, adding, “I had a few teammates that were kind of going behind our backs and saying that we were not working as hard, and we were not putting in as much.”

Hoping to avoid the backlash, Isabella felt she had to push through her injury. She said, “It put a lot of tension on me trying to prove that I was a better athlete than I was showing.” Lucas shared his relationships with certain teammates were impacted due to interpersonal conflict,

It’s easy to see from an outside perspective of they just think you are basically slacking off and just making stuff up and you are not really trying your hardest, and that definitely impacted a couple of the ways that I interact with some of my teammates.

Delay in Recovery

All 11 participants expressed they experienced some sort of delay in their recovery and felt less prepared than they believed they would have if COVID-19 did not affect their rehabilitation. Lily shared, “It has been almost six months that I have been dealing with the injury. It was supposed to be three months.” Emma agreed with the delay in her recovery, “I am still kind of stuck in the same place I was nine months ago.” Olivia’s delay caused her to feel “behind on where [she] should be as an athlete.” The most common reasons for delayed recovery identified were COVID-19 restrictions, virtual barriers, and lack of access to training and behavioral and/or mental health services.

COVID-19 Restrictions

COVID-19 sent many states into a lockdown period, including stay-at-home orders, curfews, and business closures. However, nationwide lockdowns and stricter policies placed strain on injured student-athletes seeking rehabilitation. Noah said, “When March came, we closed down, I was not seeing anybody. That really set me back because all of a sudden, I had to do everything on my own.” COVID-19 also implemented quarantine procedures, typically requiring a 14-day isolation period (8). Abby experienced stress with this policy, “[The doctors] said if you are coming in from out of town, you have to self-quarantine for two weeks, and I cannot drive to (Major City) and self-quarantine for two weeks just to get in for one appointment.”

Olivia also faced a tough situation. Her surgery was delayed for weeks, and when there was finally an opportunity, she had to take extra steps.

I had a two-week notice [of my surgery options], so I had to get a COVID test... had to quarantine 14 days before I could go get surgery... that was very stressful on what places were offering COVID testing because it was still new.

Virtual Barrier

Many student-athletes struggled with the social distancing implemented by different state and local health departments. With the cancellation of NCAA sport seasons and closures of universities across the nation, many student-athletes went home without hands-on rehabilitation from their athletic trainers. Without being able to see their trainers in person, many student-athletes reported they received a text message or email containing their rehabilitation exercises. Noah said, “Getting a sheet or text of things you are supposed to do is not the same.” Lily agreed with Noah’s frustration, adding, “It is different when you are messaging with someone versus them actually seeing you in person.” Olivia’s doctor moved all appointments virtually, blocking the opportunity for her doctor to examine her recovery and release her back to play. Olivia said, “Everything was online for how the doctors [saw me], so he was like, ‘I am not going to fully know until I see you’.”

Lily, along with five other student-athletes, identified accountability as a problem stemming from virtual rehabilitation. Lily shared her exercises were sent to her on a word document. Other student-athletes shared the same experience, whether it be a word document, text message, email, etc. Lily said, “I did not really have anyone holding me accountable.” Mason also shared, “I did not have my trainer saying, ‘Come at this time.’ You have to do it on your own.” Without having scheduled appointments and a trainer supervising the rehabilitation, many student-athletes found it difficult to complete their exercises on time, consistently, and correctly.

Lack of Access

All 11 student-athletes experienced a lack of access to some sort of resource. Due to the restraints of COVID-19, many student-athletes lost access to trainers, doctors, equipment, and mental and/or behavioral support. Noah said, “I do not know that I ever recovered the way that I would have if I was on my normal [rehabilitation] schedule.” Lily

also felt deprived of her trainer, “At the time where I needed to be at the trainer the most, I could not.” Lily lacked the support she needed to feel confident in her rehabilitation. She added, “It was hard not being able to really see anyone for so long and not hearing, ‘Oh, you are making progress, you are looking good, doing better’.”

Beyond athletic trainers, many student-athletes faced challenges with seeing the orthopedic or other medical doctors regarding their injuries. Lucas claimed, “It was about two and a half months before I really had any kind of contact with any kind of medical personnel.” Abby also experienced a struggle with this, “The hip institute was shut down for a while when we were trying to get in earlier this year, and now they are seeing surgery-needed-only patients.” Emma also wanted to meet with her school’s sports psychologist, but never received any response to her emails. She said, “It is really hard to contact her now since everything is virtually.”

The lack of access to resources created many feelings of confusion and defeat for the student-athletes. Emma reported being unmotivated to complete her rehabilitation, explaining, “[I was] coming home to just bands and I had to use a backpack filled with books to do the weight.” Olivia was unsure how to proceed with her rehabilitation due to the lack of supervision from her trainer. She said, “I would feel pain, but I did not know if I could push the envelope, to keep going... because I did not have somebody watching me.” Lily added on to the lack of supervision, adding the lack of therapy caused feelings of failure. She said, “I would come home feeling defeated, and how am I ever supposed to play in a game if I cannot get into therapy, and I cannot get better?”

Discussion

Thematic Analysis Review

This study highlighted themes that represent the experiences of injured student-athletes impacted by COVID-19. These experiences overlapped with previous research concerning sport injury rehabilitation and also found new themes specific to COVID-19. First, all 11 student-athletes experienced emotional distress. Participants felt uncertain of their rehabilitation process due to the injury itself, COVID-19, or a combination of the two. Participants also disclosed fears of re-traumatization. The fear of reinjury is at the highest immediately following the injury, and generally lessens throughout the rehabilitation process (Hsu et al., 2017). However, without addressing the psychological barrier of reinjury, the rehabilitation process and return to sport can experience delays (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010). Finally, participants suffered feelings of identity loss and separation from their sport and/or teammates. Social identity theory explains that one views themselves based on the groups they belong to (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Sustaining an injury can threaten a student-athlete’s identity (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013), resulting in negative emotional and psychological repercussions (Brewer et al., 2010; Green & Weinberg, 2001). Due to this fear of losing a part of who they are, student-athletes experience great psychological stress tied to their athletic identity and role after an injury (Weinberg et al., 2013). Feelings of separation from a student-athlete’s sport and teammates may also precede or happen simultaneously with feelings of identity loss (Smith & Hardin, 2018). The sudden disruption in routine can lead to feelings of loss, and athletes even reported delusions due to the intense focus on athletics in response to no longer being able to participate (Lally, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004).

Second, participants experienced interpersonal-relationship struggles. All 11 student-athletes reported communication issues with their teammates, coaches, and/or athletic trainers regarding their injury. The lack of communication stemmed from both the injury itself and the addition of COVID-19. Due to COVID-19, student-athletes all over the country returned home away from their teammates, coaches, and athletic trainers (at various points in time). Self-completion theory explains when a person's self-concept feels threatened, they try to seek additional social recognition tying to that identity (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Due to COVID-19, student-athletes with injuries now had to rehabilitate on their own, without the consistent, in-person support they would typically receive if they were able to still recover at their school. This left many of the participants feeling alone, separated, and forgotten. Participants also reported teammate conflict from their injury. When a student-athlete sustains an injury, the possibility of a "negative reaction from their teammates" (Mallard, 2017, p. 8) can deter them from reporting the severity of it. Student-athletes explained fears of their teammates believing their injury was fake and/or talking negatively about their injury and rehabilitation process. These fears led some student-athletes to avoid reporting their injury to their athletic trainer, and some student-athletes reported a lack of team cohesion due to the conflict.

Finally, all 11 participants reported a delay in their recovery due to COVID-19 causing them to feel less prepared. Atalan (2020) found lockdowns significantly reduced the spread of COVID-19. However, COVID-19 implemented many state and national restrictions that affected the availability of injury or physical rehabilitation. Due to these restrictions, surgeries were delayed, physical therapy was postponed, and patients had to take extra precautions such as COVID-19 testing and self-quarantines. COVID-19 also moved many medical appointments and sessions to a virtual platform. Full medical clearance is required for return to play (Kraemer et al., 2009), and many doctors and physicians limited their appointments based on the severity of the injury. The absence of medical clearance lengthened many student-athletes' return-to-play timeline. The deficit of hands-on therapy and in-person instruction also left many student-athletes feeling confused, defeated, and unmotivated. The virtual rehabilitation caused accountability issues for many student-athletes and delayed their recovery and release to play. Lastly, all 11 participants reported a lack of access to some sort of resources they felt were vital to their rehabilitation. The relative deprivation theory explains that one feels deprived and deficient compared to their own past or other persons/groups accompanied by feelings of anger, resentment, and dissatisfaction (Smith et al., 2011). Without access to their athletic trainer, proper equipment, and medical personnel, student-athletes felt even more confused and uncertain of their rehabilitation process.

At the conclusion of each interview, participants shared recommendations regarding supporting an injured student-athlete. The responses included validating the student-athlete, adding more mental-health resources, and eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health. Many student-athletes reported feeling forgotten or as if their physical health was the only important aspect in their recovery. The participants discussed the importance of having unconditional support from their teammates, coaches, and athletic trainers and wanting more awareness among others of the physical and mental stress that comes with a sports injury.

Limitations and Future Research

The first limitation of this study is the findings rely on self-reports from the student-athletes. Sleijpen et al. (2016) found self-reported data does not always reflect real

transformation. Another limitation is the use of focus groups versus individualized interviews. Focus groups allowed for quicker gathering of information, but it may not be representative of those that do not participate or share as much as the rest of the group (Hennink et al., 2019; Queirós et al., 2017). Finally, the last limitation is the possibility of research bias. The researchers have extensive experience with athletics which may have affected the data analysis (Anderson, 2010).

Future Research

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect daily life, future research should explore how attitudes toward COVID-19 (or future pandemics) and rehabilitation progress. Restrictions are beginning to lift with the assistance of the COVID-19 vaccines becoming readily available, but social distancing guidelines and required mask-wearing remain in many areas. Future research should also explore feelings of relief from injured student-athletes due to COVID-19. Four student-athletes reported optimism from COVID-19. Because of the restrictions put in place, all student-athletes, injured or not, were forced to temporarily stop their training. Four student-athletes felt a burden taken off their shoulders knowing they had extra time to recover and that their teammates also experienced lack of access to different resources needed to continue preparing for their upcoming seasons. These findings can help better train mental health professionals and athletic trainers working with injured student-athletes. This study highlighted key experiences injured student-athletes experience (i.e., identity loss, lack of communication, etc.) and new challenges from COVID-19 (i.e., lack of access, virtual barrier, etc.). Understanding injured student-athletes' perspectives and struggles can lead to more effective intervention strategies and prepare professionals for future pandemics or global challenges.

Conclusion

Student-athletes may experience and react to injuries in many different ways. With higher risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation after injury (Koren et al., 2005; Sheinbein, 2016), it is imperative for athletic trainers, coaches, medical personnel, sport psychologists, and sport social workers to understand injured student-athletes' experiences and develop appropriate intervention strategies. With the addition of COVID-19, communication and access to rehabilitation resources were restricted, causing more distress and delay in the student-athletes' rehabilitation process.

This study allowed for a greater understanding of how injured student-athletes are navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and how their rehabilitation is impacting their psychosocial well-being. Those working with student-athletes must be willing to learn, develop, and implement appropriate support strategies and resources for injured student-athletes to help them overcome the physical and mental stress of sport injury rehabilitation and understand how those feelings can intensify during a pandemic. This research may also translate to other global challenges such as natural disasters.

References

- Al-Jabir, A., Kerwan, A., Nicola, M., Alsafi, Z., Khan, M., Sohrabi, C., O'Neill, N., Iosifidis, C., Griffin, M., Mathew, G., & Agha, R. (2020). Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on surgical practice. *International Journal of Surgery*, 79(1), 168–179.
- Anderson, C. (2010). Presenting and evaluating qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 74(8), 141.
- Atalan, A. (2020). Is the lockdown important to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic? Effects on psychology, environment and economy-perspective. *Annals of Medicine & Surgery*, 56, 38–42.
- Bazett-Jones, D. M., Garcia, M. C., Taylor-Haas, J. A., Long, J. T., Rauh, M. J., Paterno, M. V., & Ford, K. R. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions on training habits, injury, and care seeking behavior in youth long-distance runners. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 2(1), 586141.
- Brewer, B. W., Cornelius, A. E., Stephan, Y., & Van Raalte, J. (2010). Self-protective changes in athletic identity following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 11(1), 1–5.
- Bullard, J. B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on the well-being of division III student-athletes. *The Sport Journal*, 22, online.
- Christensen, M., Welch, A., & Barr, J. (2017). Husserlian descriptive phenomenology: A review of intentionality, reduction and the natural attitude. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 7(8), 113–118.
- Crouch, M. (2021). When will the pandemic end and life return to normal? *American Association of Retired Persons*. <https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2021/when-will-covid-end.html>.
- Elabiyi, M. O., Adenola, O. J., & Hasan, A. (2020). Overview of COVID-19 and way forward. *Electronic Research Journal of Engineering, Computer and Applied Sciences*, 2(1), 28–36.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92.
- Fitzpatrick, D. A., & Watkinson, J. E. (2003). The lived experience of physical awkwardness: Adult's retrospective views. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 20(3), 279–298.
- Green, S. L., & Weinberg, R. S. (2001). Relationships among athletic identity, coping skills, social support, and the psychological impact of injury in recreational participants. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 13(1), 40–59.
- Groot, A. L. D., Weaver, A. G., Brown, S. N., & Hall, E. E. (2018). Social support provided to injured student-athletes. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 11(1), 168–188.
- Gualano, M. R., Moro, G. L., Voglino, G., Bert, F., & Siliquini, R. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 lockdown on mental health and sleep disturbances in Italy. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(13), 4779.
- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). *Themes and codes. Applied thematic analysis*. Sage Publishing.
- Heird, E. B., & Steinfeldt, J. A. (2013). An interpersonal psychotherapy approach to counseling student athletes: Clinical implications of athletic identity. *Journal of College Counseling*, 16(2), 143–157.

- Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Weber, M. B. (2019). What influences saturation? Estimating sample sizes in focus group research. *Qualitative Health Research, 29*(10), 1483–1496.
- Hosick, M. B. (2020). DI board of directors approves plan for holding fall championships in spring. *National Collegiate Athletic Association*. <https://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/news/di-board-directors-approves-plan-holding-fall-championships-spring>.
- Hsu, C. J., Meierbachtol, A., George, S. Z., & Chmielewski, T. L. (2017). Fear of reinjury in athletes. *Sports Health, 9*(2), 162–167.
- Ivarsson, A., Tranaeus, U., Johnson, U., & Stenling, A. (2017). Negative psychological responses of injury and rehabilitation adherence effect on return to play in competitive athletes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Sports Medicine, 8*(1), 27–32.
- Koren, D., Norman, D., Ayala, C., Berman, J., & Klein, E. M. (2005). Increased PTSD risk with combat-related injury: A matched comparison study of injured and uninjured soldiers experiencing the same combat events. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 162*(2), 276–282.
- Kraemer, W., Denegar, C., Flanagan, S. (2009). Recovery from injury in sport: Considerations in the transition from medical care to performance care. *Sports Health, 1*(5), 392–395.
- Kristiansen, J. B., Larsson, I., & MacFarlane, N. (2017). Elite professional soccer players' experience of injury prevention. *Cogent Medicine, 4*(1), online.
- Krysik, J., & Finn, J. (2013). *Research for effective social work practice*. Routledge.
- Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 8*(1), 85–99.
- Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(3), 21–35.
- Lemke, J. L. (2012). Analyzing verbal data: Principles, methods, and problems. In K. Tobin & B. Fraser *International handbook of science education* (pp. 1471–1484). Springer Publishing.
- Lotysz, G. J., & Short, S. E. (2004). "What ever happened to...." the effects of career termination from the National Football League. *Athletic Insight: Online Journal of Sport Psychology, 6*(3), online.
- Mallard, Z. (2017). What factors affect an athlete's injury reporting decisions. *Fisher Digital Publications, 1–44*.
- Queirós, A., Faria, D., & Almeida, F. (2017). Strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative research methods. *European Journal of Education Studies, 3*(9), 369–387.
- Rubin G. J., & Wessely, S. (2020). The psychological effects of quarantining a city. *British Medical Journal, 368*, m313.
- Ryba, T. V. (2008). Researching children in sport: Methodological reflections. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 20*(3), 334–348.
- Sarto, F., Impellizzeri, F. M., Spörri, J., Porcelli, S., Olmo, J., Requena, B., Suarez-Arrones, L., Arundale, A., Bilsborough, J., Buchheit, M., Clubb, J., Coutts, A., Nabhan, D., Torres-Ronda, L., Mendez-Villanueva, A., Mujika, I., Maffiuletti, N. A., & Franchi, M. V. (2020). Impact of Potential Physiological Changes due to COVID-19 Home Confinement on Athlete Health Protection in Elite Sports: a Call for Awareness in Sports Programming. *Sports Medicine, 50*(8), 1417–1419.

- Sheinbein, S. (2016). Psychological effects of injury on the athlete: A recommendation for psychological intervention. *American Medical Athletic Association Journal*, 29(3), 8–10.
- Sleijpen, M., Haagen, J., Mooren, T., & Kleber, R. J. (2016). Growing from experience: An exploratory study of posttraumatic growth in adolescent refugees. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 7(1), 28698.
- Smith, A. B., & Hardin, R. (2018). Female student-athletes' transition out of collegiate competition. *Journal of Amateur Sport*, 4(3), 61–86.
- Smith, H. J., Pettigrew, T. F., Pippin, G. M., Bialosiewicz, S. (2011). Relative deprivation: A theoretical and meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 16(3), 203–232.
- Sundler, A. J., Lindberg, E., Nilsson, C., & Palmer, L. (2019). Qualitative thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology. *Nursing Open*, 6(3), 733–739.
- Vann, S. E, Moore, M. A., Freiburger, K., & Johnson, H. (2018). The end is not the injury: Posttraumatic Growth after sport injuries. *Journal of Amateur Sport*, 4(1), 87–102.
- Weinberg, R., Vernau, D., & Horn, T. (2013). Playing through pain and injury: Psychosocial considerations. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 7(1), 41–59.
- Wicklund, R. A., & Gollwitzer, P. M. (1981). Symbolic self-completion, attempted influence, and self-deprecation. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 2(2), 89–114.
- Wiese-Bjornstal, D. M. (2010). Psychology and socioculture affect injury risk, response, and recovery in high-intensity athletes: A consensus statement. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 20(2), 103–111.
- Williams, J. M., & Krane, V. (2015) *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Wong, I. A., Lin, S., Lin, L., & Liao, R. (2021). Triple grief cycle of cancelled events: The emotional crisis aftermath. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 33(7), 2314–2336.
- Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D., & Lavallee, D. (2004). Career transitions in sport: European perspectives. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5(1), 7–20.
- Zoellner, T., & Maerker, A. (2006). Posttraumatic growth in clinical psychology: A critical review and introduction of a two-component model. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26(5), 626–653.



Social Work's Role in Athletic Recruitment: New Opportunities for the Profession

Marc Felizzi

School of Social Work, Millersville University

Brandon St. Croix

Eastern Health

Karen Rice

School of Social Work, Millersville University

The authors conducted a preliminary study, which asked if social worker support could aid elite level hockey players during the recruitment process to higher levels of play. The intent was to determine the potential need for professional social workers in sports, and particularly in areas where athletes and their families may face critical decisions regarding the future. Respondents answered questions about the recruiting process, what difficulties or successes they met, and if a social worker could have made the process more constructive and positive for the athlete. Twenty-one current and former hockey players participated, and their responses, collected through convenience sampling, regarding their experiences during the recruitment process make up this study. The research population included former collegiate or professional hockey players recruited to play at college, Major Jr. A, or professional leagues. All participants agreed that partnering with a someone in a helping capacity, such as a social worker, would have helped them navigate the various pitfalls and obstacles of the recruitment process, and would have been valuable allies and supports during their decision-making period. Implications for practice as well as suggestions for future study are offered for review.

Keywords: athletic recruitment, hockey, social work

The choice to attend college or to play professionally can be a complicated decision for an adolescent athlete. Recruitment can be emotionally upsetting for the player and their family. There are few studies which address the potential issues that can occur during athletic recruitment. Fewer still address such issues in hockey recruitment. This study examined the

utility of social workers in athletic programs, in order to assist the athlete with decisions such as determining whether to attend college or play professionally.

The authors were interested in the experiences of the respondents during recruitment to a higher level of play in ice hockey. A higher level of play is clearly the “next level” of athletic competition. Edwards (2012) utilized the term “transitioning” to define a player who was seeking to play at a more sophisticated level, or with an “advanced club, team or squad” (p 14). The literature relates how “elite athletes” are often recruited or drafted to play at a higher level than their current program (Lorenz et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, a higher level of play is a tier, or level to where the player becomes recruited or drafted to participate in a more rigorous, expert, elite, or professional level of play.

Despite the athletic confidence an adolescent hockey player may display, making a choice to play professionally or attend college can be difficult and life changing. One respondent stated “Yes, I was stressed. But I would have been more stressed if I didn’t pursue my goal of playing pro/getting a scholarship”. Athletes who make such life changing decisions could clearly need a support such as a social worker, to help them navigate the potential concerns and questions that may occur during recruitment. If the athlete has few supports, or little family stability, or if socio-economic pressures influence decisions, the support a professional, such as a social worker offers, could be invaluable to the athlete. In light of the potential of emotional concerns that may arise from moving away from home to play a sport at an early age, the awareness of the need to address such issues, especially in the athletic arena, has become more prevalent in the last 10 years (Gill, 2008, 2014; Moore, 2016).

Beyond these examples, there are other areas where social workers could assist young athletes. These areas include career counseling, drug and alcohol issues, homesickness, resource access, psychoeducation regarding mental health, career development and transitions, injuries, and any area where the player needs support (Gill, 2008).

Review of the Literature

Athletic Recruitment

The body of literature which addresses the recruitment process in university athletics, and ice hockey in particular is rather sparse. Much of the literature is focused on issues from the recruiters’ and the university’s perspective, legal issues, how to recruit the student athlete who is a “best fit” to their program, or the recruitment of international student athletes (Abby-Pinegar, 2011; Huffman et al., 2016; McCaw, 2014; Montgomery, 2015; Stephens, 2010).

Since the late 1980s, college hockey in the United States has grown to over 540 club and varsity university and college teams divided between men's and women's programs. Canadian college hockey is split between smaller colleges and larger universities. The Canadian college and university hockey programs are under the auspices of Canadian Inter-University Sport (CIS) which oversees over 100 teams including women and men's programs (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a; National Collegiate Athletic Association 2020b; Canadian Inter-University Sport, 2020a ; American Collegiate Hockey Association, 2020).

Junior Hockey Recruitment

American and Canadian hockey programs recruit players globally, and college and university programs compete for athletes with elite leagues, such as the National Hockey League, European leagues and other professional entities. The recruitment process from high school to these higher levels of play can be difficult and confusing for players and families alike (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015). Decision making can be impacted by the NCAA's eligibility rule; once a teen draftee of a Canadian Hockey League Major Junior A team signs a contract, he or she will lose American college eligibility, as the NCAA considers players at the Junior A level to be professionals. (Edwards, 2012).

Hockey players may eschew college in order to participate in higher levels of play (Edwards, 2012; Wright et al., 2019). Players who have an elite skill set can potentially be recruited or noticed as early as the age of 12 in order to be drafted by a midget team at age 14 (Edwards, 2012). To that end, in order to stock elite teams, players, in search of a road or path to the highest levels of play, may leave home in their early teens in order to pursue their hockey dreams. One of the study's respondents noted that he was recruited, from his home in Newfoundland, to play midget hockey in British Columbia, at the age of 14. He moved across the country, to start his journey playing midget, then Junior hockey, to eventually becoming an NHL draftee.

While players may end up far from home, supports for athletes are built into most Junior hockey programs in north America. Hockey players recruited to play at the Major Junior A or B levels in the US, Canada and Europe often are assigned by their teams to live with billet families, who serve as surrogates and are a major support for players (Edwards, 2012; Wright et al., 2019). These families assist in the acclimation process to a new community, support the hockey player as they pursue their secondary or collegiate degrees, and serve as liaisons between the player and the team (Wright et al., 2019).

College/University Recruitment

Schaeperkoetter et al. (2015) wrote that external influences, such as college recruiters, and the resulting anticipated external environment (academic or athletic setting) was more influential in the student-athlete's decision-making process, rather than family influence. Baker and colleagues (2014) addressed the socio-cultural issues within communities that hindered or facilitated hockey recruitment to higher levels and concluded that community size and access to social supports, increased the odds of playing the sport at the highest professional level.

Given the impact recruiters may have on an athlete's decision, the NCAA expressly forbids member universities, colleges and their representatives from recruiting high school sophomores and below. As noted previously, Canadian Major Jr. A clubs' recruit players as young as 12 years of age (Collegehockeyinc.com, 2020; Edwards, 2012).

Pressuring a 12-year-old to choose a sport for life is, in a sense, restricting a young person to an avocation at an inappropriately early age. As Bob Chichester, former athletics director, the University of California, Irvine said, "My concern is we're reaching out to younger and younger kids, and are they in the best position to decide where they want to spend some of the most important years of their life? We should take a closer look at the appropriate time-frame for contacts and decision making" (Terlep, 2014, p. 1). Accordingly, there are those who feel high school age players may be feeling undue pressure to decide what they should do for the rest

of their lives. Chris Petrucelli, former women's soccer coach, at the University of Texas, Austin said, "The big thing I'd love to have is more access--more time with the kids to figure out if it's a good match. Most kids are making up their minds in their junior year, but we're not allowed to call them before July of their senior year. That means students are making decisions without enough information" (Terlep, 2014, p. 1).

For recruited athletes, the added pressure is to not only perform at a higher level, but to represent their institution or team not as a student, but as a commodity or an asset. Highly recruited teenage athletes may come away from the recruitment process feeling entitled or emotionally upset (Yannity & Edmonson, 2011). These experiences indicate a need for support during recruitment.

Social Workers and Athletic Recruitment

Several researchers have promoted the use of social workers in athletic settings by assisting with such topics as decision making processes, mental health, navigating university life, developing social supports, as well as dealing with the pressures of recruiting (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2022; Attwood, 2016; Gill, 2014; Moore, 2016; Zillmer, 2016). Research has examined the utility of social workers to assess athletes for mental health or substance abuse issues and to provide education on social issues such as dating violence, sexual assault, or career planning (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Felizzi, 2017; Gill, 2014; Gill, 2008; McCarthy, 2017; Moore, 2016a; Moore, 2016b; Teasley & Gill, 2015). Studies also included investigation into post injury rehabilitation, concussion management and return to competition and the need for coaches, counselors, and social workers to develop awareness of the athletes' emotional needs during the recovery process (Bennett et al., 2016; McGrath, 2010; Neal, 2017; Putukian, 2016).

In 2014, the University of Michigan was awarded a \$50,000 research grant to create Athlete's Connected, a mental health program intended to address the emotional needs of student athletes by utilizing social workers and graduate level social work students (Attwood, 2016). Social workers are involved with Athletes Connected and provide counseling, psychoeducation, mental health support, and assistance to incoming, recruited, student athletes (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2020).

Student athletes, in order to make informed decisions about their collegiate and athletic careers, need information, not only about the university, team, coaches, and academics they are about to select, they also need to be aware of life circumstances and the culture that await them. Whether they are an 18-year-old, leaving home for the first time to attend school thousands of miles from home, or are a 14-year-old junior player billeting with a family on another coast, they have to deal with not only the pressure of making a team, but the burden of staying ahead of their studies, navigating new social networks, and building support systems far from home (Barden et al., 2013).

Additionally, the recruiting process can add pressure to the young athlete by having to justify why the university or team spent time and energy recruiting them. There is added pressure to not only perform at an elevated level, but to represent their institution or team not as a student, but as a commodity or an asset. Highly recruited teenage athletes will come away from the process feeling entitled or emotionally upset (Yannity & Edmonson, 2011).

Psychosocial Risk Factors in Recruitment

During the athletic recruitment process, mental health risk factors may be encountered by athletes. Dean and Rowan (2014) noted that athletes may be affected by such concerns or issues as the pressure to perform, the burden to hide or play through physical injuries, undiagnosed mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders, poor support systems, educational or learning disabilities and pressure to keep up grades during the recruitment process. Additionally, athletes who have been recruited to higher levels often feel the pressure of performing well for their family, school, and community (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020; Dean & Rowan, 2014).

For the recruited athlete, anything that would potentially diminish the athlete in the eyes of the coach is to be avoided. Depending upon the perspective of the coach, seeking mental health treatment may lead the coach to think the player is “weak” and unable to cope with the pressures of the sport (Lopez & Levy, 2013). The “suck it up” or “walk it off” mentality can lead athletes to ignore emotional pain, as they might a nagging physical injury, in order to stay in the game. This mentality is often cultivated at the youth levels of athletic competition and carries through the athlete’s career, which may lead to self-denial of emotional pain, and in turn, a reluctance to seek help. (Moore, 2017). Additionally, athletes may internalize the anticipated reactions of others if they seek help and may create lowered self-esteem about their perceived inability to “suck it up” and deal with emotional issues on their own (Chow et al., 2021; Leimer et al., 2014).

Appropriate behavioral development requires adolescents to individuate, and create their own personas, values, and personalities, most often with their biological or adoptive families. For hockey players who live far from their families and communities of origin, this critical stage of human development often occurs in the presence of others, such as Junior players with billet families, with whom the player may not feel comfortable or secure. If an adolescent has access to a strong support system made up of family members, extended family networks, peers, mentors (or social workers), teachers, and others, often times, that young person will continue along their life path with a knowledge of how to ask for help or guidance, and most critically, who they can speak with in difficult times (Christie & Viner, 2005; Reynolds & Crea, 2014).

Without proper supports, the player could easily become overwhelmed, depressed, anxious, homesick, and may have trouble concentrating. They may doubt their choice to move from home and start to question their mental toughness. As a result, their performance in critical areas; athletically, socially, academically, and emotionally, may suffer. College level players often do not have a mentoring adult to discuss their emotional states with, especially someone who is not part of the team. For Junior players, billet families may be supportive and quite involved with the team, this may not replace the emotional stability, and self-confidence the player had while in their home community. One of the study’s respondents stated “They [my family and friends] supported me but it was obviously tough. Moving away at the age of 15 is hard on any parent as well as you are leaving your friends behind”.

Despite the emotional and psychosocial risks recruited athletes face in making their decision to play at a higher level, most athletes choose the program or university based on the relationship they have with the recruiter or the coach who is trying to convince them to join their team (McCaw, 2014). A social worker, collaborating with the athlete and their family, could mitigate the risk of making the wrong decision or career choice by serving as a mentor to the athlete, and as a support to the family.

Schaeperkoetter et al. (2015) promoted the use of family system theory as an intervention to assist families in the recruitment process. Family systems theory advocates for the understanding of family dynamics, roles, familial structures, patterns of communication, boundaries within family members, and boundaries between the family and outside entities. Professional social workers are trained in systems theory and its' application and utilizing these family- based skills and interventions would appear to be a practical application for assisting the athlete during the recruitment process (Freeman, 2018).

Methodology

A preliminary study was conducted to capture the perspectives of current and former hockey players regarding their experience of being recruited or trying out for a higher-level team. Both qualitative and quantitative questions were included in the 27-question device, which is included in Appendix A. Approval to conduct the study received Millersville University Institutional Review Board approval in May 2017.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to recruit respondents across Canada and the United States. The researchers sent 26 surveys to contacts across the United States and Canada. The first two authors have been involved in coaching and/or playing hockey at various levels in Canada and the United States and ex-teammates or acquaintances from the game were asked to take part in the survey. To expand the sample size, snowball sampling was also utilized. Respondents were asked to refer current or ex-teammates, who in turned referred other potential respondents until saturation in responses was acquired, which resulted in a final sample size of 21. Inclusion criteria for the study was 1) Recruiting experiences, 2) Whether or not the respondent tried out for a team which played at a higher level than his or her current team. For example, the respondent may have not been recruited to play at a college or a junior program however, if they tried out for such a team, they were included in the study.

The researchers attempted to minimize research bias by triangulating or reviewing the questions with each other. Unclear responses on the questionnaire initiated a follow up email by the authors to clarify participants' answers.

Procedure

The survey including 27 open ended and multiple-choice questions was emailed to those recruited to participate between June and August 2017. The questions were used to pilot the preliminary study, and were created to capture recruiting experiences, both positive and negative, demographics, and comments regarding the respondents' experiences. The survey may be found in Appendix A. The surveys were accessed through Qualtrics Survey (Qualtrics, 2017) software, and completed surveys were password protected and could only be accessed by the researchers. Besides asking the respondents' demographic questions such as age, highest level of education, gender, and whether or not they were recruited to play the game at a higher level, qualitative questions asked included "How long have you been playing (or played) hockey?" and "Were you ever recruited to play at a higher level?" Further, open-ended questions were asked about the participants' experience with recruiting, such as "Did you have support from family or friends to

move to the next level? (Please explain),” and “At any time during the recruiting or decision-making process, did you feel under undue stress or emotional strain (please explain)?”

Respondents were asked if they had or could have used support during the recruiting process. This was framed through questions such as “At any time in the process, would it have been beneficial to have a third party, such as a therapist or social worker to help you work through your decision?” Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their own situations within the recruitment process, and what they liked and/or did not like during the period they were courted by a university or professional league. Respondents were asked to discuss what advice they would give to others who are entering the recruitment process.

Data Analysis

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was completed on the qualitative questions. Using these a priori themes, content analysis was employed as it allowed the uncovering of the most frequently reported responses related to feelings associated with the recruitment process and perceptions of a third party making the decision-making process less stressful. All three researchers individually performed first level coding. The third author identified patterns among the first level codes to define the common themes for each of the two areas of inquiry. By all researchers partaking in the analysis of the data, trustworthiness was ensured (Padgett, 2008) as it allowed for the researchers to consult when any discrepancies occurred, which in this case, did not occur.

Findings

The respondents in this survey were from the United States and Canada. Questionnaires were emailed to 26 participants, and 21 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 81%. The age range for the respondents was 19 years to 41 years with a mean age of 26.41 years ($SD = 6.91$). Of the 21 respondents, 19 (90%) identified as male. Of the 21 respondents, 90% ($n = 19$), were recruited to a higher level of play, and the majority of the respondents ($n = 20$, 95%), started playing organized club or team hockey at an average age of five. Of the 21 respondents, 76% ($n = 16$) are still playing hockey, from senior amateur leagues to university level, to professional hockey. Respondents also were recruited from a number of levels, with nine of the 21 respondents (43%) recruited from high school hockey programs, while 12 (57%) were recruited or selected via draft from Canadian Hockey League Major Junior A, Canadian, or American University programs. Respondents were asked about the highest level of hockey played. A higher level of play is defined as a competition level such as college, elite, or professional programs. Respondents ($n = 5$, 21%) also played at “other” levels, which include semi-professional and US College Club hockey programs. The highest level of play for a majority of respondents ($n = 11$, 54%) was Canadian Major Jr. A, NCAA, or Canadian University programs. Out of the 21 respondents, 2 (10%) played in the highest-level professional leagues, the National and American Hockey Leagues. The demographic findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Summary of Demographic Data

| Demographic | <i>n</i> | % |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Sex | | |
| Male | 19 | 90% |
| Female | 2 | 10% |
| Age First Played Hockey | | |
| 0-5 years | 20 | 95 |
| Above 5 years | 1 | 5 |
| Still Playing | | |
| Yes | 16 | 76 |
| No | 5 | 24 |
| Level Recruited | | |
| High School | 9 | 43 |
| Jr. A/B/University | 12 | 57 |
| Highest Level of Play | | |
| High School | 1 | 5 |
| Junior A | 2 | 10 |
| Major Junior A | 4 | 20 |
| NCAA | 3 | 14 |
| Canadian University | 4 | 20 |
| Professionally | 2 | 10 |
| Other | 5 | 21 |
| Age | <i>M</i> 26.41 | <i>SD</i> 6.91 |

Four common themes emerged related to the respondents' responses regarding the recruitment process. The themes were Positive Support from Family and Friends, Physical and Emotional Reactions, Influence of Inducements, and Missed Opportunities for Discussion. Each theme will be further explored, below. Respondents also shared their perception of the role of a third party in assisting them with recruitment processes.

Positive Support from Family and Friends

Support systems, such as family and friends, were important, and reported by all participants, in their decisions to play at higher levels. Of the 21 respondents, 19 (90%) reported their family and friends were supportive or encouraging about their decision to play at a higher level. The most common statement reported was that family and friends were excited for the respondents to play at the next level, and happy that the players had an opportunity to continue to

“chase their dream” to play hockey at a higher level. Respondents noted that their family and supports were happy for the players, but sad to see them leave their hometowns. A number reported that they were appreciative of the families’ encouragement, and this supported them in playing well, and helped to increase their excitement over continuing to play the game. For example, one respondent said, “They were very supportive of my dreams. My extended family had some very successful hockey players over the years, which kind of created a norm for playing this level of hockey. My family were my number one fans and were also realistic, so they always encouraged me to give it my all, no matter what I was doing.” Another shared, “Everyone was very proud of me and happy for me because they know it was what I wanted. A couple of my good friends were sad at the same time just because I would be far away from home, and we wouldn’t be able to see each other.”

Physical and Emotional Reactions

Respondents were asked if they felt undue stress or emotional strain, such as excessive worry or anxiety, somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, changes in appetite, changes in sleeping habits, or irritability and excessive anger during the recruiting or decision-making process. Of the 21 respondents, 11 (52%) reported they felt no such strain or worry during the process. Participants reported they knew they were not going to make a career out of hockey and used the game to help them earn a college degree. Ten respondents (48%) did report suffering emotional discomfort, and three respondents (14%) reported anguishing over which school to attend, when recruited by universities. As two respondents shared, “I was very stressed for months, but once I decided on a school, I was officially happy.” “A lot of stress and anxiety. I was recruited to Harvard and Dartmouth and to give up an Ivy League education was tough.” Respondents said they struggled with fitting in with the team or campus, not making the starting lineup, or uncertainty what their future in hockey and university was going to be when their college program folded.

Influence of Inducements

Inducements to play at a higher level, be they in the form of signing bonuses, scholarships, and financial aid for college, played a role in the recruitment process according to eleven of the 21 (52.8%) participants. Academics and what the university could provide regarding courses of study, as well as campus life were the main foci of discussion for the majority of respondents. “General conversation, scholarships, and good things about the school and community,” were important influencing factors shared by one participant. For those recruited to play professionally, an opportunity to make money and join a well-structured program were the topics of the process. “How much money in scholarships I would be receiving,” was a crucial factor as articulated by one of the respondents. When respondents were asked to reflect on what the most important topics of the recruitment process, the most recurring theme was the opportunity to play at an institution of higher education ($n = 10$, 48%), followed by a positive team atmosphere and clear expectations regarding their own performance ($n = 9$, 43%), a chance to make money playing hockey ($n = 6$, 29%), the opportunity to elevate their own level of play ($n = 5$, 24%), and a balance of education and “comfortability” within the team ($n = 3$, 14%).

Missed Opportunities for Discussion

The participants also had the opportunity to reflect on topics that they wished recruiters had asked them during the recruitment process. The most recurring theme, whether by academic or professional teams, was that how playing at the next level could positively affect their life ($n = 3$, 14%). The opportunity to play at the university level was the next most recurring theme ($n = 2$, 10%), along with a promise of increased playing time ($n = 2$, 10%). One respondent answered that their team offered an opportunity to increase their own financial literacy and become more aware of how to “handle money.”

Almost half ($n = 10$, 48%) of the respondents reported a lack of discussion of post-hockey career options and/or assistance with alternative career planning and development. Two examples shared that support this missed opportunity are: “What would help advance me as a person rather as a player,” and “I wish they discussed life after hockey more. And the actual business side of things. Once you are on a team, you are just a number and an asset that they could care less about and will dispose of when they see fit.”

Role of Third Party in Decision-Making Process

Participants in the study were asked if at any time during the recruiting process, it would have been beneficial to have a third party, such as a therapist or a social worker to help them work through their decision. The comments and answers were split among the 21 respondents, with five (24%) respondents agreeing that a third party would have been helpful, and five not agreeing. However, 11 of the 21 (52%) respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, which may have been indicative of an unfamiliarity of the roles of a third party in the recruitment process.

Respondents were asked if they did have a social workers’ support in the recruitment process, would it have been helpful. Of the five respondents who agreed that having a third party, such as a social worker, could have helped during the decision-making process, they believe the individual could’ve helped process the recruitment experience, relate to the experiences they were going through, assist in weighing the pros and cons of the various choice players had, and reduce overall stress and worry. Examples of respondents’ comments included, “To keep my mind on track and to help not to worry so much about everything,” “How to weigh the pros and cons,” and “In these decisions you have a lot of people “helping” but I think they have their own motives. Therefore, a third party to help guide and deal with it is important. What is more important is they completely understand the process. If they do not appreciate how important it is, then they would be no help.”

Discussion

The study’s respondents were not aware that supports, in the form of a social worker, mentor or advisor were available, it would be critical to educate athletes who intend to pursue their dream of playing their sport at a higher level, of the availability of what a third-party support could offer them in during recruitment. Employing the results of this study could add another role for a sport social worker - assisting the client during the often grueling and emotionally wearing recruitment period.

Consider the plight of the respondent who chose Jr. A hockey over scholarships to Ivy League universities. His decision may have been different, had he discussed the options

available, as well as the impact of his decision, with a sport focused social worker. One respondent noted “In these decisions you have a lot of people "helping" but I think they have their own motives. Therefore, a third party to help guide and deal with it is important. What's more important is they completely understand the process [of recruiting]”.

Similarly, a social worker can assist the athlete when they face challenging times in their career, such as the aftermath of an injury. Social workers can aid athletes when time demands affect them, when they are perplexed over coaching moves that impact playing time or concern over their roles on the team, during bouts of homesickness, or when a player has questions or concerns about post-hockey life. Participants in this study reported that emotional concerns, such as irritability and depression, were present during their playing career. One respondent stated “There's stress from demands from the team and school. Mainly a time constraint and trying to balance those”.

Regarding career issues and what to do after their playing career was finished, a participant said “I wish they discussed life after hockey more. And the actual business side of things. Once you are on a team, you are just a number and an asset that they could care less about and will dispose of when they see fit”. Another respondent said “No, there was not [a discussion of post hockey career]. I would have liked to have some direction in what to pursue and what my skills can help with in terms of job searching after. Obviously with playing hockey you have little work experience that's not hockey related”. To cope with the pressures of being recruited, one participant stated that he began to use alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with the demands of recruitment. In these situations, the presence of a social worker connected to the team or athletic program would have provided an appropriate support or outlet for these players, as well as a safe space to talk through the pressures and demands of recruitment.

While the belief that young, athletic, and active people are often immune to mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, Attwood (2017) referenced a Drexel University study that noted the rates of depression among college level student-athletes are comparable to rates in the general college population. The researcher went on to state that these rates of depression “highlight the need for increased mental health screening for athletes as part of standard sports medicine care” (p. 10). The study’s respondents noted they suffered with anxiety, sleeplessness, depressive symptoms during the recruitment process, and their playing time. One participant stated they suffered from the following during the recruitment process: “Stress, depression, anxiety, excessive irritability, lack of sleep. Lots really”. The opportunity to access confidential and supportive aid from a social worker could have potentially ameliorated these issues.

While coaches oversee the well-being of their team, one must realize that all coaches are not mental health specialists. To that end, a professional social worker could be the liaison that a team could utilize to educate coaches on mental health awareness, as well as promoting a positive approach to services for athletes. This would be a critical step in creating an awareness of the need for social workers in athletic settings.

One of social work’s underpinnings is collaboration with other professions, such as education, medicine, psychology, and the justice system (Weinstein et al., 2003). Social workers who look to work with athletic programs will need to educate and collaborate with stakeholders and show how they can work in partnership with coaches and teams to assist athletes. Territorial concerns must be addressed, and the social worker will have to work to prove to athletic program administrators that they are there to assist athletes and their teams, not to work against the team, coaches, managers, or directors. Social workers in athletics must build rapport with the athlete and his or her program so they can effectively collaborate and effect change (St. Croix, 2022).

A systemic approach to working with athletic programs appears indicated, as family systems theory is applicable to working with groups and organizations, as these entities are subsystems that are often impacted by society and the larger systems within (Hepworth et al., 2018; Simmons University, 2022). This approach by social workers with athletic programs would involve the worker accessing and collaborating with all systems to ensure the worker would become a trusted member of the program.

Emotional issues were experienced during recruitment by the study's respondent. Approximately half, or 48% of the study participants reported experiencing emotional discomfort over which school or program to select. This could be addressed by a social worker who aids the recruited athlete. Respondents noted they struggled with fitting in with the team or campus, and one noted they suffered from emotional issues when their college program folded, and their future in hockey and university was in jeopardy. One participant said that during the entire recruitment process, he never asked anyone for advice. The respondent said "...I was young and didn't know what questions to ask so I should have been better prepared." Again, the involvement of a social worker in this instance could have offered a source of support throughout the recruitment process, offering options, and talking through the decisions necessary during recruitment.

Implications for Practice

This study reflects the findings of researchers who promote the inclusion of social workers in sport programs (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008; McCarthy, 2016; Moore, 2016; NCAA-c, 2020; Schyett et al., 2016). However, this study takes a further step by specifying where and how social workers can affect athlete's and student-athletes' lives in a supportive manner. A third party, such as a sport focused social worker, could have been helpful during both recruitment and their careers according to the respondents. Participants said that it would have been helpful to talk to someone who "had been" there, or who had playing experience, or who had gone through the recruitment process.

Regarding elite hockey in north America, the inclusion of a social worker in college, professional or junior hockey programs would be beneficial to allow athletes to access resources such as counseling or mentorship, would enable players to discuss sensitive issues with an informed professional who is not a coach, or someone who controls his or her playing time (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015).

Limitations of Study

The data was gathered from a convenience sample of 21 respondents, from Canada and the United States. A more representative sample could be taken from one team of recruited athletes in a university or professional program. Nevertheless, the respondents shared their own thoughts on being recruited. While not generalizable to the entire population of recruited athletes in the U.S. and Canada, it serves as a template for future studies.

Also, given two of the author's combined 50 years of experiences as players, coaches, referees or administrators at the youth, high school and elite levels of hockey, there were concerns regarding research bias, regarding recruiting practices, players' experiences, and issues with support systems. An awareness of such biases was considered in the planning and commission of the study, and questions were created in an attempt to avoid leading the respondent. Also, all researchers had an awareness of the inherent bias in convenience and

snowball sampling. Additionally, in the future, in order to mitigate the effects of such bias, utilizing different data collection methods (emailed, telephone, virtual and mail methods) may be indicated (Chen et al., 2021).

Future Studies

While this study focused on issues with recruitment, research into this topic may want to explore a greater number of respondents and look to “embed” social work services within an athletic program, or secondary school, ostensibly to assist athletes during the recruitment process. Additionally, besides working in schools, social workers could work with universities or professional teams to support recruited athletes and answer any questions as they make their decisions to take part at higher levels.

The authors would be remiss if they did not mention the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the world during the preparation of this manuscript. Athletes around the world were impacted as organized sports from youth levels through the professional ranks have been shut down or curtailed as a result of the pandemic. Social Workers in clinical settings have worked through the issues that were worsened by COVID-19, such as extreme anxiety, depression, socio-economic issues, personal and family security and health concerns. Athletes are at risk for the emotional effects of COVID-19, as their ability to perform and practice their sport has been affected. Athletes who hope to be recruited for higher levels of play, who find they are barred from practicing, qualifying, or performing, may face the emotional issues that arise from having their sport impacted as a result of the pandemic (Schinke et al., 2020). Athletes who are unexpectedly inactive, or lacking goals and motivation, are prone to suffer from significant emotional and psychological stress and may be at risk for mental health issues (Schinke et al., 2020). A study of close to 6,000 NCAA student athletes, across various sports, conducted by Petrie et al. (2020) found that student athletes, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, suffered from such emotional concerns as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and changes in appetite. As the largest providers of mental health services in north America (National Association of Social Workers, 2020), social workers in athletic settings can assist athletes in working through these issues and can help the athlete by developing alternative and appropriate positive coping mechanism.

References

- Abby-Pinegar, E., (2010). The need for a global amateurism standard: International student- athlete issues and controversies. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 17(2), 341- 365.
- Alliance of Social Workers in Sports. (2020). *Our mission*. www.aswis.org.
- American Collegiate Hockey Association. (2020). *About ACHA*. <http://achahockey.org/view/achahockey/about-the-acha>.
- Attwood, E. (2016). Brain-trust: Addressing student-athletes’ mental health. *Athletic Business*, 5, 10-11.
- Baker, J, Shuiskiy, K, & Schorer, J. (2014). Does size of one’s community affect likelihood of being drafted into the NHL? Analysis of 25 years of data. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 32(16), 1570-1575.

- Barden, J., Bluhm, D., Mitchell, T., & Lee, T. (2013). Hometown proximity, coaching change, and the success of college basketball recruits. *Journal of Sport Management*, 2013, 27, 230-246.
- Bennett, H. R., Czech, D., Harris, B., & Todd, S. (2016). Perceptions of coping with an injury in sport at the NCAA Division I level: Perceptual continuity between student-athletes and their athletic trainers. *Clinical Kinesiology*, (online edition), 39-43.
- Canadian Hockey League. (2021). *About the CHL*. www.chl.ca
- Canadian Inter-University Sport. (2020). *Men's ice hockey*. <https://usports.ca/en/sports/hockey/m>.
- Canadian Inter-University Sport. (2020). *Women's ice hockey*. <https://usports.ca/en/sports/hockey/w>.
- Chen, S.-W., Keglovits, M., Devine, M., & Stark, S. (2021). Sociodemographic differences in respondent preferences for survey formats: Sampling bias and potential threats to external validity. *Archives of Rehabilitation Research and Clinical Translation*.
- Chow, G., Bird, M., Gabana, N., Cooper, B., & Becker, M. (2021) A program to reduce stigma Toward mental illness and promote mental health literacy and help-seeking in National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I student-athletes. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, 15, 185–205.
- Christie, D., & Viner, R. (2005) Adolescent Development. *British Medical Journal*, 330(746), 301-304.
- Collegehockeyinc.com. (2020). NCAA college hockey vs. CHL major junior. www.collegehockeyinc.com.
- Czekanski, W. A., & Barnhill, C. R. (2015). Recruiting the student-athlete: An examination of the college decision process. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 9(3), 133-144.
- Cutler, B., & Dwyer, B. (2020). Student-athlete perceptions of stress, support, and seeking mental health services. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 13, 206-226.
- Dean, C., & Rowan, D. (2014). The social worker's role in serving vulnerable athletes. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 28(2), 219-227.
- Edwards, J. R. J. (2012). *Recruiting and retaining Canadian minor hockey players by local youth club hockey organizations, Canada's governing hockey organizations, major junior, and intercollegiate hockey organizations: Exploring Canada's Elite level hockey development system*. University of Alberta.
- Felizzi, M. (2017). Clinical social work and coaching: The similarities that foster collaboration. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 2017 Special Issue, 145-151.
- Freeman, D. (2018). Using family circles to increase competency and confidence in social work. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 21(4-5), 438-453.
- Gill, E. (2008). Mental health in college athletics: It's time for social work to get in the game. *Social Work*, 53(1), 85-88.
- Gill, E. (2014). Integrating collegiate sports into social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 50(2), 305-321.
- Hepworth, D., Rooney, R., Rooney, G., & Strom-Gottfried, K. (2018). *Direct social work practice: Theory and skills*. Cengage.
- Huffman, L., Navarro, K., & Cooper, C. (2016). College choice factors of FBS football player. *Journal of Applied Sport Management*, 8(4), 67-88.

- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Leimer, A., Leon, R., & Shelley, K. (2014). Stigmas and stereotypes: Counseling services for student-athletes. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 8(2), 121–135.
- Lorenz, D., Reiman, N., Lehecka, B., & Naylor, A. (2013). What performance characteristics determine elite versus nonelite athletes in the same sport? *Sport Health*, 5(6), 542-547.
- McCarthy, C., (2016). Take proactive steps to provide mental health support for student athletes. *Disability Compliance for Higher Education*, 21(8), 1-3.
- McCaw, I. (2014). A critical review and synthesis of student-athlete college choice factors: Recruiting effectiveness in NCAA sports. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*. 9(6), 1287-1288.
- Montgomery, J. (2015). New NCAA Division I academic eligibility rules apply to today's high school juniors. *Texas Coach*, 59(8), 26-29.
- Moore, M. A. (2016). Taking a timeout to ensure well-being: Social work involvement in college sports. *Social Work*, 61(3), 267-269.
- Moore, M. A. (2017). Stepping outside of their comfort zone: perceptions of seeking behavioral health services amongst college athletes. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 2017 Special Issue, 130-144.
- National Association of Social Workers, (2022). *About social workers*. www.socialworkers.org.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020a). *Men's ice hockey*. <http://www.ncaa.org/sports/mens-ice-hockey>.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020b). *Women's ice hockey*. <http://www.ncaa.org/sports/mens-ice-hockey>.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020c). *NCAA Sport Science Institute mental Health*. <http://www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/mental-health>.
- Neal, T. (2017). Ethical issues in concussion management. *International Journal of Athletic Therapy & Training*, 22(1), 24-32.
- Padgett, D. K. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Petrie, T., Moore, E.W., Palmateer, T., & Slavin, L. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 on college student athletes' health, performance, and psychological well-being: A report on baseline data*. University of North Texas Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence.
- Putukian, M. (2016). The psychological response to injury in student athletes: A narrative review with a focus on mental health. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 50(3), 145-148.
- Qualtrics Software. (2017). *Software products*. www.qualtrics.com/core-xm/survey-software.
- Reynolds, A. & Crea, T. (2016). Household stress and adolescent behaviors in urban families: The mediating roles of parent mental health and social supports. *Child and Family Social Work*, (21), 568–580.
- Schaepkoetter, C. C., Bass, J. R., & Girton, B. S. (2015). Student-athlete school selection: A family systems theory. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 8, 266-286.
- Schinke, R., Papaioannau, A., Henriksen, K., Si, G., Zuang, L., & Haberl, P. (2020). Sport psychology services to high performance athletes during COVID-19. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. 18(3), 269-272.
- Schyett, A., Dean, C., & Zeitlin, L. (2016). Strength and motivation: What college athletes bring to social work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 36(3), 312-325

- Simmons University (2022). *Social work theories*.
<https://online.simmons.edu/blog/theories-used-social-work-practice/>.
- St. Croix, B. (2022). Social workers stepping into the field. *Connecting Voices*, 28(1), 18.
- Stephens, J. (2010). A game within a game: An ethnographic study of culture and student-athlete recruitment at a Division I university. University of Texas, Austin, TX.
- Terlep, S. (2014, July 31). Colleges may seek antitrust exemption for NCAA. *Wall Street Journal* (Online).
- University of Michigan. (2022). *Social work and sport association*.
<https://maizepages.umich.edu/organization/swsa>
- Weinstein, J., Whittington, C., & Leiba, T. Eds. (2003). *Collaboration in social work practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.



Commentary: Athletics and Disabilities Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Dena Werner

Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University

Youth sports create opportunities for children to be active, to form friendships, and to learn essential life skills. Playing sports teaches children endurance, stamina, and accountability. Athletics also help children to develop confidence, to enhance moral and physical character, and to learn executive functioning and emotion regulation skills. Yet, despite the overarching benefits of athletics, children with physical disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from athletic opportunities. They are excluded from private sports teams, minor leagues, extracurricular, and interscholastic athletic opportunities. These acts of exclusion create additional barriers for children living with disabilities by worsening their internal emotional struggles and wrongly confirming their misgivings of being productive members of society. This article explores the influence of the McFadden vs. Howard County Public School System, emphasizing the impact that exclusion from athletic opportunities has on children living with physical disabilities. It outlines key issues and provides actionable recommendations to promote a more inclusive environment where all children can have equal access to athletic opportunities.

Keywords: youth sports, athletics, interscholastic opportunities, disabilities

Youth sports were created as opportunities for children to be active, to form friendships, and to learn essential life skills. Playing sports teaches children endurance, stamina, and accountability. Athletics create an opening for children to develop confidence, enhance moral and physical character, and learn executive functioning and emotion regulation skills (Pearce, 2021; CDC, 2021). Yet, despite the overarching benefits of athletics, children with physical disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from athletic opportunities. They are excluded from private sports teams, minor leagues, extracurricular, and interscholastic athletic opportunities (Moran & Block, 2010; Lankhorst et al., 2015; Carol et al., 2021; Pearce, 2021). These acts of exclusion create additional barriers for these children by heightening their sense of shame and wrongly confirming their doubts of belonging. This article highlights the impact that the exclusion from athletic opportunities has on children with physical disabilities. It outlines key issues and provides actionable recommendations to promote a more inclusive environment where all children can have equal access to athletic opportunities.

How Exclusion from Athletics Impacts Children with Disabilities

Children with physical disabilities who are excluded from sports are simultaneously deprived of core developmental needs. To develop into healthy, functioning adults, children need to engage in opportunities that stimulate growth and challenge their character (Pearce, 2021; CDC, 2021). Moreover, children need healthy outlets to learn about success, failure, and the importance of human relationships. In fact, leading developmental and psychoanalytical theorists such as John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott, Melanie Klein, and Erik Erikson, assert that childhood development and human relationships are the cornerstones of a successful life (Turner, 2017). Discriminating against children with disabilities from participating in athletic pursuits only seems to disrupt the process of healthy development.

To provide children with an equal opportunity for healthy development, the discrimination against students with physical disabilities needs to be addressed (Williams, 2014). Students across the country continue to be excluded from extracurricular and interscholastic athletic programs. They are shamed, rejected, and deprived of opportunities that promote basic core development. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) outlines that in the 2018-2019 academic year, 15% of children with “other impairments” requested special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). These students maintain limited strength capacities due to chronic or acute health illnesses, such as cancer, epilepsy, asthma, tuberculosis, heart conditions, nephritis, and sickle cell anemia (NCES, 2020). It is true that this percentage does not encapsulate the total amount of children with physical disabilities across the country, nor does it highlight discriminatory action; however, it does provide a glimpse into some of the challenges that these children endure on an emotional, physical, and academic level. Even more importantly, it informs the public of the urgent need for intervention and advocacy on behalf of these children.

Children with physical disabilities are less likely to engage in sports in comparison to their able-bodied peers (Carroll et al., 2021). In addition to the limited number of opportunities, these children encounter discriminatory behaviors that challenge their self-esteem, thereby causing them to further withdraw from sports (Pearce, 2021). Indeed, children who appear on the playing field are often marginalized by their coaches and teammates, which inadvertently reinforces their feelings of social isolation. The unintended consequences of exclusion are longstanding, as they are not only detrimental to the child’s development, but also to the functioning of their families and communities. The research shows that family is an integral source of support in the young athlete’s life, but in face of discriminatory action, many parents feel an increased sense of helplessness and hesitate to advocate for their children (Hellstedt, 2005; Pearce, 2021). This only heightens the children’s shame and sense of powerlessness, further interrupting the family system (Hellstedt, 2005). Pearce (2021) further explains, “The exclusion of people with disability from sporting opportunities affects their feelings of value and worth, and the rest of societies’ attitude to their treatment” (pg. 75). Discriminatory behaviors are deemed acceptable by communities over time, and the lack of response on a local and state level is both a cause and effect of this destructive attitude.

Foundations for A Disability-Inclusive Society

Despite the enactment of federal policies that address issues of discrimination, such as The American with Disabilities Act (ADA), The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), and

the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), there is a lack of response on a state and local level. This need is heightened since the IDEA does not consider participation in athletics an issue (Williams, 2014). Yet, the fact that the ADA is successful in generating awareness, equality, and in providing support to adult athletes in overcoming barriers to sports involvement, informs the public that change is possible for children as well (ADA, 1990). In fact, Tatyana McFadden, an individual with Cerebral Palsy, used these historical policies as evidence in her fight for equality (McFadden & Walker, 2016). McFadden was a young girl when she wanted to pursue athletics in her Howard County Elementary school in Maryland. However, due to her physical impairments, she was denied access to the interscholastic athletic programs (McFadden & Walker, 2016). McFadden refused to be held back by the injustices of the system and therefore filed a lawsuit against the Howard County Public School System.

Despite the numerous setbacks that McFadden encountered throughout the process; she fought until justice was served, and it was in June of 2008 when the Maryland Legislature passed the Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities. The act states that the educational country boards are required to develop policies that promote inclusion, opportunities for students to engage in extra-curricular activities and interscholastic athletic programs, and to submit an annual report that details the incorporated programs, prospective plans, and the number of students participating in these programs (Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). To ensure the implementation of these requirements, the state boards are responsible to monitor the compliance of the county boards (Maryland General Assembly, 2008).

Analysis of The Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities

The Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities is the only state legislature nationwide that addresses the ongoing discrimination that children with disabilities experience in their athletic pursuits. The policy successfully promotes inclusion and requires students with disabilities are given the opportunity to participate in interscholastic athletic programs. Through the promotion of inclusion, all students have an equal chance to have fun, to form friendships, and to develop the critical skills needed for healthy childhood development. McFadden's success serves as proof that this policy is working, in fact, she was recently named the "world's greatest Paralympic marathon legend" (Disability Rights Maryland, 2018). In the absence of her advocacy and the subsequent policy provision, it would have been nearly impossible for her to develop the skills needed to attain her life goals.

The policy also successfully defines numerous important terms such as "Adapted Program", "Allied Sports or unified programs", "Mainstream athletic program", and "Mainstream physical educational program" (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). The delineation of these terms ensures there is a uniformed understanding of the policy requirements, thereby increasing the probability of compliance. Yet, despite these strengths, there are weaknesses to this policy. The policy states that the educational systems are required to make "reasonable accommodations" for those students with disabilities (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). However, there is no delineate definition of what that term means or entails. In fact, trusting the educational system to make judgements based on their intuitions could create space for increased biases, stereotypes, and acts of discrimination. The policy further states that county boards shall provide "Evidence indicating that the interests and abilities of students with disabilities have been fully and effectively accommodated by the county board's implemented programs." (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). While this seems like a reasonable goal, it is unclear as to what

the words “fully and effectively accommodated” connote (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). It is hard to quantify the compliance of behaviors that lack clear, definite measurements.

Sectoral Actions and Recommendations for Future Policy

It appears that the need for policy implementation on a state and local level is of paramount importance. The passage of the Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities shows the public that students with disabilities can be provided with equal athletic opportunities in a safe, effective way. It also highlights the impact that discriminatory behaviors have on children with physical disabilities, as it is well understood that while McFadden is an individual, she represents as a member of a larger population - athletes with disabilities. In order to meet the needs of this vulnerable population it is suggested that state and local legislatures convene to discuss the implementation of educational policies, policy makers incorporate clearly defined terms when formulating bill texts, and that policy makers adopt the notion of collecting annual reports from educational county boards. This procedure ensures that educational leaders remain accountable and compliant with the law. It also provides the state boards with a means to measure the effectiveness of the policy and to identify if there is further need for corrective action or revision.

In conjunction to the suggested proposals on a policy level, actionable recommendation to ensure equality in sports include but are not limited to:

- Educating children about the benefits of inclusion in the classroom and on the playing field.
- Promoting diversity on an educational, familial, and communal level.
- Developing professional and parental workshops to better inform parents, educators, coaches, and community members about the determinants of exclusion on development.
- Establishing community-based organizations that focus on education and empowerment.
- Creating programs that foster inclusion for children with all forms of disabilities.

Conclusion

Athletics is an essential component of youth development and excluding the participation of a population constitutes discriminatory behavior. State legislatures need to take responsibility for the intolerable treatment that children with physical disabilities endure in their quest to participate in athletics. The passage of the Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities needs to serve as a model that equality and justice is attainable. It is thereby recommended that policy makers investigate and consider the implementation of educational policies so all children can have an equal and fair opportunity of healthy development.

References

- Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C sec. 12101 et seq. (1990).
<https://ada.gov/pubs/adastatue08.htm>.
- Carroll, P., Witten, K., & Duff, C. (2021). “How can we make it work for you?” Enabling sporting assemblages for disabled young people. *Social Science & Medicine*, 288, 113213.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, March 17). *Infographic: Benefits of school-based physical activity*.
https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/school_pa_benefits.htm.
- Disability Rights Maryland. (2018, October 5). *DRM goes the distance*.
<https://disabilityrightsmd.org/drm-goes-the-distance/>.
- Hellstedt, J. (2005). Invisible players: A family systems model. *Clinics in Sports Medicine*, 24(4), 899–928.
- Lankhorst, K., van der Ende-Kastelijn, K., de Groot, J., Zwinkels, M., Verschuren, O., Backx, F., Visser-Meily, A., & Takken, T. (2015). Health in adapted youth sports study (hays): Health effects of sports participation in children and adolescents with a chronic disease or physical disability. *Springer Plus*, 4(1).
- McFadden, T., & Walker, T. (2016). *Tatyana McFadden: Ya sama! Moments from my life*. Inspired Edge Publications.
- Moran, T. E., & Block, M. E. (2010). Barriers to participation of children with disabilities in youth sports. *Teaching Exceptional Children Plus*, 6(3), 2-13.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2020). *Students with disabilities*.
https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp.
- Pearce, S. (2021). The fundamental nature of sport: Disability, discrimination, and sport in *Holzmueller v. Illinois High School Association*. *The International Sports Law Journal*, 21(1–2), 74–93.
- The Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities, HB 1411 sec. 465. (2008).
<https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Search/Legislation?target=/2008rs/billfile/HB1411.htm>
- Turner, Francis J. (2017). *Social work treatment: Interlocking theoretical approaches* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Williams, M. L. (2014, July 7). NFHS. *Accommodating disabled students into athletic programs*.
www.nfhs.org/articles/accommodating-disabled-students-into-athletic-programs/.



Practice Note: Using Yoga for Emotional Regulation in Intermediate School Teenagers

Nafees Alam

Department of Social Work, Boise State University

Background: This paper examines techniques used in yoga, including breathing techniques, various forms of meditation and physical postures that can impact youth diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) learning to regulate their emotions to enhance their academic performance. **Methods:** The intervention was administered to teens at an intermediate public school for six weeks. Seventeen participants were chosen by mental health counselors and worked together with a yoga facilitator to better serve teens struggling with emotional regulation. **Results:** Pre- and post-tests show that meditation was the overall preferred technique chosen by students as a method to aid with emotional regulation. The intervention proved to be a step in the right direction. **Conclusion:** Moving forward in assisting students labeled with emotional and behavioral disorders including ADHD and ODD, it is imperative for educators and caregivers to be educated in childhood experiences as the leading cause of EBD. Simple techniques can have a great impact in helping them heal and live more fulfilling lives.

Keywords: yoga, meditation, education, emotional regulation, program evaluation

The campaign to teach yoga and meditation to intermediate school teenagers for the purpose of emotional regulation began as a proposal to find a catalyst for change within the community. The concept was brought to the attention of a mental health counselor at the intermediate school, one of two mental health counselors within the school working with children who primarily experience emotional and behavioral issues regularly. The facilitator had experience working with these vulnerable populations while volunteering for a non-profit organization a several years ago called the 'NYC Yoga Project,' teaching yoga to underserved New Yorkers as their mission statement indicates. The intervention facilitator taught yoga and meditation to teens (average age 12.36) with emotional issues while volunteering for the NYC Yoga Project in low-income neighborhoods. The student participants targeted for this yoga program were labeled with EBD, the umbrella under which lie diagnoses including ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Mood Dysregulation Disorder. A high percentage of students with EBD drop out of school and within five years, 78% of them end up in prison while 48%

of students with EBD who do *not* drop out of school still ending up in prison (Martin & Wienke, 1998), creating a need to intervene for the purpose of better outcomes.

The leaders of the intermediate school who were present during the interview process were the principal, assistant principal, dean, and mental health counselors. Each school leader had compiled their lists of five to ten students whom they felt would benefit from yoga and meditation. Three students appeared on all of the compiled lists, while five others appeared multiple times. Students who appeared on all of the lists were defined as the most problematic students, struggling with behavioral issues diagnosed through their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) (fifteen students), conduct disorder (CD) (twelve students), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (nine students), three of the more prominent disruptive behavior disorders in childhood and adolescence. According to Ghosh and Sinha (2012, p. 1), these disorders affect “approximately 1 – 15% of all school-age children, constituting a major proportion of referrals to mental health clinics.” Using yoga techniques, social workers worked with students of the intermediate school in efforts to improve symptoms of hyperactivity and disruptive behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

Social workers employed conflict theory and empowerment theory to get a holistic approach of students’ backgrounds and current marginalized status. The educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities that arise from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity, as coordinators of this campaign, social workers believed that the fulfillment of one’s education is closely linked to social class. According to Chernoff (2013, p.146), conflict theorists state that “schools are a primary and crucial site of social reproduction. Class conflict, racial stratification, and other social inequalities are maintained through various sorting and legitimizing mechanisms within and among schools.” Students of low socioeconomic status are generally not afforded the same opportunities as students of higher status, no matter how great their academic ability or desire to learn. Social workers worked with students to counteract their feelings of powerlessness through the facilitated yoga program.

It was imperative for school faculty to empower the students involved in both activities in order to fairly evaluate progress, the yoga facilitator used empowerment theory to build on students’ strengths and competencies instead of their deficits. By creating a safe and collaborative environment with roles and responsibilities, students were able to focus on self-empowerment and growth. According to Hariprasad et al. (2013), instructional yoga and empowerment techniques positively impact emotional regulation and self-efficacy with students that have behavioral issues. These techniques can further their level of motivation toward academic success.

Methodology and Data Collection Techniques

The principal of the intermediate school, after consultation with her leadership team, makes the final decision on all matters. The initial interview was held in the principal’s office with school leaders and the yoga facilitator, all speaking on behalf of the proposed intervention. The observed culture of the administration indicated that decisions were made as a team, with no staff member left out. The impression was that staff felt comfortable voicing their opinions and feelings with the principal and everyone appeared to be heard and respected. Each leader was

very familiar with potential student participants' behavioral and emotional histories given their experience working with these students in the past. The yoga intervention facilitator felt at ease and assured that the school leaders supported this campaign.

The major allies of the pilot yoga program were the leaders of the school. Once established that leaders were in full support of the campaign to teach yoga and meditation, the details of how this program would be funded was handled next. The party who became both ally and opposition was the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) union representative, who works directly with the intermediate school, handling all of the paperwork and funding details for the yoga and meditation program in addition to delivering the facilitator's invoices to funders, 'Community Center for Learning.' Initially, the UFT representative met with the mental health counselor and the yoga facilitator to learn about the program's intended goals, including who the program aimed to serve and why it was necessary, with the intention of providing the information to the funders. She expressed that the funders would need trackable data of the program's success and worthiness of funding in order to remain implemented after the six week trial period. The UFT representative told the facilitator that another program would have to be cut for this yoga program to take place, making data vital for justification. Attendance would also be tracked to see if student participants had better attendance on the days they had yoga and meditation class.

Although the program was approved by the principal and school leaders, beginning November 1, 2018, it did not launch until January 28, 2019. A background check is a requirement to be eligible to be inside of a public school and the yoga facilitator was scheduled to be fingerprinted on October 25, 2018. However, when she arrived to get fingerprinted, she learned that her social security number was incorrectly entered by the UFT representative, resulting in this setback. The yoga facilitator needed to be 're-nominated' for the position by The New York City Department of Education, which took some time.

It was essential to receive feedback from student participants in order to learn what they found beneficial and if the intervention was, in fact, yielding positive outcomes. To determine this information, a pre- and post-test survey was developed through the input of academic professionals. The mental health counselor was notified and received approval from the principal to administer the surveys to the participants.

When the program started, another unforeseen obstacle was the environment where the classes would be held. Due to lack of space in the school, the first six weeks of yoga and meditation classes were held in a regular vacant classroom. The yoga facilitator's schedule was Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, three 45-minute periods per day. Only one of those days did the full session take place in one room for more than one period, all other days, she moved around the school to various classrooms on different floors while carrying approximately eight yoga mats. The facilitator needed to move desks around at the beginning of each class and end the sessions a few minutes early to straighten up and move desks back to the original setup. With periods being 45 minutes long, by the time students arrived and settled in it sometimes only allowed for 30-minute sessions, a clear limitation. Another obstacle the program faced were the teachers whose classrooms were being used, many times lingering around their classroom well after their period had concluded, causing sessions to start late. On one occasion, before one of the sessions were to begin, the yoga facilitator had to ask if a teacher who had been lingering could kindly leave so she could begin the yoga and meditation session, creating some tension between the teacher and the yoga facilitator.

The obstacle of payment for services remained another concern throughout the campaign. The amount to be paid was agreed upon by the principal, yoga facilitator, and Community Center for Learning. The facilitator was instructed to create an invoice each month to receive payment, along with the attendance sheet, then deliver both documents to the UFT representative on the first of each month. Five weeks passed without payment after the facilitator delivered her first invoice to the UFT representative. She inquired with the UFT representative, who informed her that she had regretfully delivered the invoice two weeks after the facilitator had dropped it off to her (invoices usually take up to four weeks before payment is rendered). This situation created some conflict between the yoga facilitator and the UFT representative as the UFT representative had difficulties with travel, a clear limitation. The yoga facilitator had to advocate for herself and express the importance of her role at the school and why she expects payments to be on time moving forward. Following this conversation, all future payments were on time.

There were some minor issues during the beginning of the 6-week program, as the UFT representative had stated, encouraging the yoga facilitator to obtain a tax ID and file what would be known as ‘Yoga for Resilience’ as a business so the Department of Education would fund it moving forward instead of the United Federation of Teachers funders, ‘Community Center for Learning.’ During the fifth week, knowing the pilot program was coming to an end, the facilitator learned that the principal had requested she continue for another six weeks based on the feedback she received from student participants, thereafter carrying the program through to the end of the school year with the program being funded again through the ‘Community Center for Learning,’ which was contrary to what the UFT representative had exclaimed.

Strategies and styles of approach were altered based on student participants’ needs along the way. Initially, the ‘prescription’ was to teach yoga poses and incorporate meditation. The mental health counselor expressed those certain poses could be challenging, thus helping participants regulate their emotions while holding such poses, a common reason many people practice yoga. The yoga facilitator remained skeptical about this approach, ultimately realizing that her style of teaching needed to be tailored to each individual in order to satisfy the goal of emotional regulation and relaxation. Since beginning with yoga postures would not work, a visualization meditation technique was employed, requiring participants to lie on their backs, close their eyes and listen to the facilitator’s voice as she guides through the relaxation technique.

A hybrid intervention was used with the students at the intermediate school. The intervention consisted of a combination of yoga postures, meditation, yoga nidra (yoga sleep), visualization meditation, and breathing techniques (pranayama). The first week was spent going over what the meaning of yoga is and why this intervention was chosen, along with the benefits it can have on participants. Terminology was discussed and questions were always encouraged. During the second and third week, simple traditional yoga postures were introduced, including Sun Salutations and balancing postures like Tree Pose. Meditation was consistently practiced with all classes throughout the six weeks, anywhere from 3 to 10 minutes, guided or in silence. When meditation was guided, participants would lie on their backs with their eyes closed, or sitting up cross legged, then guided through a mindful meditation that brings awareness to the body by doing a full body scan intended to acknowledge presence and calm the nervous system by focusing on sensations in the body. Partner poses like the Dancer’s Pose were also introduced to foster positive connections between students. Students were encouraged to offer suggestions for music each week and express what they wanted to do for the sessions.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed from the aforementioned pre- and post-test questionnaires. During both the pre-test and the post-test, students answered four multiple-choice questions. One of the chief advantages to questionnaires is that they are a “useful background screening tool in providing assessment information on clients in a simplified manner without requiring long interviews” (Jordan & Franklin, 2016, p.63). The questionnaires assessed how students were feeling and their thoughts on what was most useful.

Seventeen students participated in the intervention; the average age of the students was 12.36. During the pre-test, six students reported feelings of both happiness and sadness. Four students reported they were feeling joy and five students reported they were excited to be in yoga. Twelve students reported they felt calm and only four students reported to be tired. One student reported to be feeling disappointed and none of the students reported to feeling angry. In reviewing the post-test, there was an increase in happiness levels to 59% from 35.29%. Levels of joy increased for five students, with their disappointment levels diminished to zero. There were no statistically significant changes in energy levels, though 8 students reported feeling full of energy towards the end of the intervention.

82.35% of the students reported that they needed meditation during the pre-test. Five students reported that they were looking forward to deep breathing exercises and six students reported that they were looking forward to doing yoga. 58% of students reported that they liked yoga during the post-test. 47% of students reported they enjoyed yoga and deep breathing exercises equally.

76.47% of students reported that they used meditation during the week to make themselves feel better. 35% of students reported that they began practicing yoga at home, while 41.17% of students reported that they began practicing deep breathing exercises. One student reported not using any of the activities learned. 70.58% of the students reported that they feel confident using meditation as needed. 35.29% of students reported that they will be practicing yoga poses and deep breathing exercises moving forward. All seventeen students reported that they look forward to attending sessions.

Discussion and Recommendations

In order to benefit and support students in continual behavioral and emotional regulation and development, it would be best for educators and caregivers to have some understanding of how experiences impacts the brain, thereafter learning techniques geared toward the healing process, including meditation, mirroring positive behaviors, and breathing techniques in the classroom. The student participants targeted for this yoga program were labeled with EBD, the umbrella under which lie diagnoses including ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Mood Dysregulation Disorder. Being labeled with childhood trauma can often lead to these diagnoses (Van der Kolk, 2014). Students are spending too much time in classrooms with teachers who lack the necessary resources to understand them. One study found that disruptive students receive a higher amount of negative attention from teachers, who pay more attention to inappropriate behavior over appropriate behavior (Rubow et al., 2019). Another study found that a high percentage of students with EBD drop out of school and within five years, 78% of them end up in prison while 48% of students with EBD who do *not* drop out of school still ending up in prison (Martin & Wienke, 1998). Education is imperative for teachers, school staff and

caregivers to understand the childhood experiences and how to treat it properly, yoga is just one of the many approaches to emotional regulation in intermediate school teenagers.

References

- Chernoff, C. (2013). Conflict theory of education. *Sociology of Education: An A-to-Z Guide*.
- Ghosh, S., & Sinha, M. (2012). ADHD, ODD, and CD: Do they belong to a common psychopathological spectrum? A Case Series. *Case reports in psychiatry, 2012*
- Hariprasad, V. R., Arasappa, R., Varambally, S., Srinath, S., & Gangadhar, B. N. (2013). Feasibility and efficacy of yoga as an add-on intervention in attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder: An exploratory study. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 55*(Suppl 3), S379.
- Jordan, C., & Franklin, C. (2016). *Clinical assessment for social workers: Quantitative and qualitative methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Martin, S. M., & Wienke, W. D. (1998). Using cutting edge technology to prepare teachers to work with children and youth who have emotional/behavioral disorders. *Education & Treatment of Children, 385-395*.
- Rubow, C. C., Noel, C. R., & Wehby, J. H. (2019). Effects of noncontingent attention on the behavior of students with emotional/behavioral disorders and staff in alternative settings. *Education & Treatment of Children, 42*(2), 201–223.
- Van der Kolk, B. A. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Penguin Books.



Commentary: Ending Human Trafficking in Sport - A Playbook for Forward Progress

Matt Moore

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

Stacy Kratz

University of Southern California Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work

Lorin Tredinnick

Kean University Athletic Department

Morgan Thatcher

School of Kinesiology, Ball State University

Lerina Bright

Mission 89

Human trafficking is an abhorrent crime that impacts an estimated 25 million people globally through labor or commercial sexual exploitation (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022). The primary tactics used by perpetrators include force, fraud, and coercion (Talbot & Suzuki, 2021). Survivors of human trafficking face deprivation of basic entitlements, freedom, human rights, and a limiting ability to achieve a meaningful life (Helton, 2016). Human trafficking receives attention from global leaders as one of the most crucial international social justice issues of our time (Schwarz, 2019; Talbot & Suzuki, 2021). Leaders recognize the need for prevention, intervention, postvention, and prosecution related to horrific acts of human trafficking (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022).

While there is a lack of awareness of human trafficking among the general population, there has been growing interest among helping professionals, including law enforcement (Mapp et al., 2016), health care providers (McAmis et al., 2021), and social workers (Enrile, 2018; Welch-Brewer et al., 2021). Understanding and identifying the red flags of human trafficking are crucial for those helping professionals working on the front lines, as they may encounter victims

or survivors in their case load and recognize the need to connect them to necessary resources (Enrile, 2018). Despite efforts to increase identification and awareness of human trafficking, many individuals are largely unaware of the connection between sport and human trafficking (Mission 89, 2022).

Human trafficking of athletes was recognized by the U.S. Department of State (2020) Trafficking in Persons Report and issued a call for nationwide and international public awareness campaigns. Many aspiring athletes are lured into human trafficking with the false promise of playing for a professional team, which may involve crossing state and national borders. If they are not selected to move to the next level, they could face exploitation (Ume-Ezeoke, 2018), including different forms of human trafficking (Ruggie, 2016). For example, soccer scouts bought tickets for young African men (many under 18) promising a career in sport; however, many of these men were forced into prostitution and deprived their basic human rights (Wigmore, 2015). Cuban men often pay *lancheros* (boatmen) to smuggle them out of Cuba with the hope to play professional baseball in the United States (DeGregorio, 2021). In return, these Cuban prospects may be forced into debt bondage, where they have to work off their debt to pay back the smugglers. In each of these scenarios, athletes experienced exploitation, deception, and risk of trauma. Furthermore, sex trafficking and global sporting events have a history of interconnectedness (Finkel & Finkel, 2014; Lamela, 2013). During the Super Bowl, host cities like New Orleans and Miami saw an estimated 10,000 individuals trafficked for sex (Mogulesu, 2014). Similar concerns exist with the World Cup, where countries like Brazil, Germany, and South Africa made predictions that 40,000 women and children would experience sex trafficking (Carrier-Moisán, 2019; Lamela, 2013). Although research is mixed as to whether sex trafficking increases during major sporting events (Perrin, 2007; Latonero et al., 2011; Deering & Shannon, 2012), large sporting events cause moral panics around sex trafficking as concerns rise about the rights and freedoms of community members. To ensure the end of human trafficking of athletes and the full prosecution against traffickers, Swiss-based non-governmental organization Mission 89 formed in 2017 (Mission 89, 2022).

Mission 89 is one of the few organizations that focuses exclusively on addressing human trafficking of athletes. The goal of Mission 89 reflects goals of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2022) and the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Mission 89 (2022) aims to mitigate human trafficking of athletes through research, education, and the implementation of mandatory regulations to keep sports organizations accountable for the safety and well-being of communities. With successful educational initiatives and research project proposals underway across continents, including the popular #NotInOurGame social media campaign and a qualitative research project underway in South Africa interviewing survivors, Mission 89 has sought to amplify their efforts through global partnerships to raise awareness of human trafficking of athletes with organizations such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (Kratz & Rosado, 2022).

Social workers, in particular, are at the forefront of the anti-trafficking movement (Enrile, 2018; Healy, 2015). Due to their commitment to the ethics and values of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2022) social workers specialize in practice settings serving vulnerable groups (Welch-Brewer et al., 2021). Social workers ensure access to education on social injustices, help individuals address biopsychosocial challenges, and practice from a lens of cultural inclusivity (NASW, 2022). While social workers have a rich history of working with survivors of human trafficking (De Shalit et al., 2021), there is limited knowledge available about the role of social workers in addressing human trafficking of athletes. This

commentary outlines the need for sport social workers to expand their practice to include heightened efforts to combat human trafficking.

The Role of Sport Social Workers

Sport Social Work is a subfield of social work that promotes social justice and social change by focusing on the unique needs of athletes at both an individual and environmental level. Sport social workers promote the health and well-being of athletes through direct practice, community organizing, advocacy, policy development, education, and research (Moore & Gummelt, 2018). A sport social worker achieves this focus through the competencies of the social work profession and through adherence to the values and ethics of the social work profession (Kratz & Rosado, 2022; Moore et al., 2018). Given the roles and responsibilities of a sport social worker, they present as strong partners with the global initiatives of Mission 89 (2022), the United Nations, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2022). The below playbook provides targeted initiatives sport social workers can take to battle human trafficking in sport. These plays also support the policy platform of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS, 2022).

Offensive Plays

- Enhance education and outreach efforts, including for at-risk sport populations (e.g., youth athletes, athletes from countries with a low-to-middle income residency status).
- Provide training for coaches and recruiters in the athletic community on recognizing signs of human trafficking of athletes by building the capacity to prevent the increase of sport trafficking (e.g., lead task forces at major sporting events).
- Enhance sport-coordinated responses to human trafficking of athletes (e.g., work with sport governing bodies like Federation Internationale de Football Association, National Football League, National Basketball Association, United States Olympic Committee, and Major League Baseball).
- Strengthen efforts to identify, prevent, and address human trafficking of athletes (e.g., undertake domestic and international efforts in conjunction with sport organizations, governmental entities, and social service agencies).
- Identify and engage with survivors in a survivor-centric, trauma-informed, and culturally competent manner (e.g., work with licensed clinical social workers).
- Support survivor-informed interventions to improve service delivery and inform survivor assistance policy decisions (e.g., client-centered, empowerment, and strength-based approaches).
- Conduct research to further study the phenomenon of human trafficking of athletes and identify best practices for working with survivors (e.g., use qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods)
- Increase access to social services for survivors of human trafficking of athletes to increase short- and long-term stability (e.g., focus on ecological and systems perspectives).

Defensive Plays

- Support coordination among law enforcement to increase accountability for human trafficking of athletes (e.g., social welfare policy and legislative advocacy).
- Enhance efforts to bring perpetrators to justice by deploying a broad range of tools (e.g., financial sanctions and prosecution).
- Deepen our understanding of human trafficking of athletes (e.g., collaborative partnerships between Mission 89 and ASWIS).
- Enhance information sharing to inform a strategic outcome (e.g., research initiatives such as program and impact evaluations).
- Strengthen international anti-trafficking efforts through external partnerships, including with both private and public sectors.
- Advocate for organizational and governmental policies that better protect athletes from exploitation and funding to support survivors of sport trafficking.
- Raising awareness and leading sensitization activities (campaigns).

Conclusion

Sport social workers play a unique role advocating and protecting the wellbeing of athletes across the lifespan. To that end, ASWIS, as the representative body of social workers in sport, supports policies and all forms of direct practice and advocacy efforts that promote social justice, address the physical, mental and emotional impacts of human trafficking of athletes, and protect the greater community and environment in which athletes compete and live nationally and globally. This proposed playbook will be useful to sport social workers to better identify and address human trafficking in sport....

References

- Alliance of Social Workers in Sports. (2022). *Policy platform*. <https://www.aswis.org/policyplatform>.
- Deering, K., & Shannon, K. (2012). Fears of an influx of sex workers to major sporting events are unfounded. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 345(1), e5845.
- Carrier-Moisan, M. E. (2019). A red card against sex tourism: Sex panics, public emotions, and the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. *Feminist Formations*, 31(2), 125-154.
- DeGregorio, V. (2021). Reversing progress: The trafficking of Cuban baseball players continues after cancellation of MLB-FCB Agreement 103. *St. Louis University Law Journal*, 26(2), 381-399.
- De Shalit, A., van der Meulen, E., & Guta, A. (2021). Social service responses to human trafficking: The making of a public health problem. *Culture, Health, & Sexuality*, 23(12), 1717-1732.
- Enrile, A. (2018). *Ending human trafficking and modern day slavery: Freedom's journey*. Sage.
- Finkel, M. L., & Finkel, R. (2014). The 'dirty downside' of global sporting events: Focus on human trafficking for sexual exploitation. *Public Health*, 129, 17-22.

- Healy, L. (2015). Exploring the history of social work as a human rights profession. *International Federation of Social Workers*.
<http://ifsw.org/publications/human-rights/the-centrality-of-human-rights-to-social-work/exploring-the-history-of-social-work-as-a-human-rights-profession/>
- Helton, M. (2016). Human trafficking: How a joint task force between health care providers and law enforcement can assist with identify victims and prosecuting traffickers. *Health Matrix*, 26(1), 433-473.
- Kratz, S. & Rosado, S. (2022). Sport social work. *Social Worker's Desk Reference*. 4th ed. Oxford University Press.
- Lamela, N. (2013). Soccer, samba, and sex: Preventing human trafficking from attending Brazil's World Cup and Olympics. *International Law News*, 42(4), 15-17.
- Latonero, M., Berhane, G., Hernandez, A., Mohebi, T. & Movius, L. (2011). Human trafficking online: The role of social networking sites and online classifieds. *Social Science Research Network –SSRN*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2045851>
- Mapp, S., Hornung, E., D'Almeida, M., & Juhnke, J. (2016). Local law enforcement officers' knowledge of human trafficking: Ability to define, identify, and assist. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2(4), 329–342.
- McAmis, M. A., McCarthy, E., Cama, C., Fogarasi, M., Thomas, L., Feinn, R., & Rivera-Godreau, I. (2021). Assessing healthcare provider knowledge of human trafficking. *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, 78(4), S57–S58.
- Mission 89. (2022). *About us*. <https://mission89.org/about-us/>.
- Mogulesu, K. (2014). The Super Bowl of sex trafficking. *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/opinion/the-super-bowl-of-sex-trafficking.html>.
- Moore, M. A., Ballesteros, J., Hanen, C. (2018). The role of social work values in promoting the functioning and well-being of athletes. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 15(2), 48-61.
- Moore, M. A., & Gummelt, G. (2018). *Sport social work: Promoting the functioning and well-being of college and professional athletes*. Cognella.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2022). *Code of ethics*.
<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>.
- Perrin, B. (2007). *Faster, higher, stronger: Preventing human trafficking at the 2010 Olympics*. http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/futuregroup_1007.pdf.
- Ruggie, J.G. (2016). *FIFA and human rights: For the game. For the world*.
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/programs/crri/research/reports/report68>
- Schwarz, C. (2019). Human trafficking and meaning making: The role of definitions in anti-trafficking frontline work. *Social Service Review*, 93(3), 484-523.
- Talbot, E. P., & Suzuki, Y. E. (2021). Human trafficking: First responders in health care. *Social Work and Christianity*, 48(4), 349-367.
- Ume-Ezeoke, N. J. (2018). Playing for keeps: Human trafficking under the guise of football. *Harvard International Review*, 39(1), 23-27.
- United Nations. (1948). *Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2022). *Human trafficking*.
<https://www.dhs.gov/topics/human-trafficking>.
- U.S. Department of State. (2020). *Trafficking in persons report*.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

- Welch-Brewer, C., Nsonwu, M., Busch-Armendariz, N., Heffron, L. C. (2021). Perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes about human trafficking questionnaire: Extending its utility with social work students. *Social Work Research*, 45(4), 257-268.
- Wigmore, T. (2015). The myth of the “lost boys.” *New Statesman*, 144(5290), 16.



Sports, the Great Equalizer: Influencing Future Sports Professionals View of Disabilities: Sports Professionals View of Disabilities

Tracy A. Trachsler
Cazenovia College

Mary Handley
Cazenovia College

Human services, social work, and sport have shared goals of improving the quality and the meaning of life for individuals. Educating college-aged students about the intersection of the goals of sports and the goals of social work is one intervention to help influence positive change in our culture. This study represents one example of an intervention to affect change within college students who are taking a sport sociology class within the sport management program. These college students participated in sporting activities with participants with disabilities on a college campus. At the end of the activities, the students were asked to critically reflect upon their experience specifically related to their sociological understanding of the experience of individuals with disabilities in sport. The data was analyzed with respect to the concept of the other. The results of this study provide insights for exposing future sport professionals to diverse populations. The results also reinforce the goals of social work to develop and enhance a more inclusive world for people with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusion, sport management, applied learning

The benefits of sport, across populations, have been noted in research not only for physical wellbeing but social, mental, and emotional wellbeing, as well. For individuals with disabilities the research is no different (Baran et al., 2013; Crawford et al., 2015; Dinomais et al., 2003; Murphy & Carbone, 2008; Özer et al., 2012; Special Olympics, n.d.; Weiss et. al, 2003). However, one significant difference between individuals with disabilities and those without disabilities are the barriers to participation in sporting activities (Arbour-Nicitopoulos, et al., 2021; Coakley, 2017). The fallacy of sport as the great equalizer persists (Carpenter, 2000; Hartmann, 2000; Lawson, 1979; Lindsey, 2002), and without intentional, strategic efforts to encourage participation with historically marginalized groups, the goal of increasing opportunities and access to the benefits of sport is left unrealized. The following study offers one example of higher education providing an experience for reflection for students in the sport management class who are future sport professionals and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Inclusion in Sports

Previous research is limited regarding disability sports in sport management literature (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014). Coakley (2017) stated that, historically, "... people with particular physical and intellectual impairments were denied access to sport participation because it was believed that vigorous activity would overexcite them and be dangerous for them and for others around them" (p. 292-293). Those and similar beliefs underlie systemic exclusion of individuals with disabilities from mainstream sporting experiences (Abbott, & McConkey, 2006; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Siperstein et al., 2003). The dominant ableist ideology identifies individuals with disabilities as the other and therefore inferior (Coakley, 2017; Fine, 1994; Schwalbe et al., 2000). The unique characteristics and abilities of individuals with disabilities do not align with the socially accepted understanding of normal and are viewed as abnormalities requiring unique considerations. Thus, access and opportunities in sport for individuals with disabilities primarily exist in limited and segregated spheres from mainstream sports (Coakley, 2017; Special Olympics, n.d.), and concurrently, the experiences were not studied with as much frequency as other experiences (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014).

The Special Olympics and Paralympics have been the primary vehicles for sport delivery to these populations (Coakley, 2017); but the criticism was that these programs provide for sport engagement only in limited intervals. Additional criticisms of sport programming for individuals with disabilities include lack of accessible facilities, insufficiently trained instructors, and incorporation of participants/instructors that engage often had negative attitudes or stereotypes of individuals with disabilities (Coakley, 2017; McGarty & Melville, 2018). The short-term impact of programming, while meaningful, did not transition well into long-term change. There was little to shape understanding, change public opinion, or stimulate additional inclusive initiatives. The participants still faced barriers to participation when they left the competitive sphere of these events (Coakley, 2017).

Unified Sports emerged as a model to address the structural issues of continual sport programming implemented by the Special Olympics that aimed to pick up where the Olympic programming stopped. The goal was to partner individuals who were "able" with individuals with disabilities in three sporting contexts – competitive, developmental, and recreational (Haas, 2012). The Unified Sports model intentionally brought integrated sports programs to local communities with the mission to remedy the identified structural barriers to participation

© 2022 Trachsler, Handley. Distributed under [CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

SSWJ 2. Find Issues at OpenJournals.bsu.edu/SportSocialWorkJournal and SSWJ.org

(Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al. 2021). Within the recreational sphere, there was no requirement for age and ability matching, but as the competitive level increases, the provisions for matching age and ability change. Haas (2012) wrote, “In all three models, social inclusion is promoted through a shared sports experience for people with and without intellectual disabilities” (p. 15). Over 4,500 primary schools have Unified Sports programs across the United States. Additionally, 215 American colleges and universities offer Special Olympics College Clubs according to the Special Olympics (2018). More than 1.4 million people participate in this type of programming. Sullivan and Glidden (2014) noted that with increased interactions between people with and without disabilities, comfort level of those without disabilities increased. The research consistently demonstrates that after engaging in such inclusive opportunities understanding shifts, acceptance shifts, and mutual benefits – social, emotional, and physical are gained by all parties (Special Olympics, n.d.). Di Palma, Raiola, and Tafuri also concluded that, “disabled athletes reach a level of self-esteem and autonomy significantly higher than those who do not practice sports, which significantly ease social inclusion and, as a result, ‘economic’ inclusion” (2016, p. 792). Thus, even if revenue generation is the primary motivator in the sport business model for the sport professionals, accessible sport opportunities for individuals with disabilities can be a revenue generator across industries and sectors. Yet, outside of Unified Sports, “... most people in the empire of the normal have no experience interacting with people with intellectual disabilities who have not had opportunities to participate in everyday activities.

To create those opportunities in sports requires a level of awareness and support that remains rare in most social worlds” (Coakley, 2017, p. 324). Higher education sport management programs can provide a platform to develop intentional learning opportunities structured to raise awareness for future sports professionals and administrators to consider the viability of inclusive sport opportunities (Shapiro et al., 2012) while diminishing othering. Additionally, research supports social workers and other human services professionals to engage in sport as a meaningful approach for those in need of social, emotional, or behavioral intervention (Lawson, 2005; Newman et al., 2021).

The aim of this study was to provide an additive (DePauw & Goc Karp, 1994) intentional interactive experience that partnered future sport management professionals, in the “empire of the normal” (Coakley, 2017, p. 324), with individuals with disabilities using the context of sport as an opportunity for critical reflection on marginalization as it relates to othering. The students in the sport management class would assess and evaluate and reflect on marginalizing as it relates to othering.

Theoretical Framework

Examining these issues through different perspectives and theoretical framework is critical to the understanding of the short- and long-term impacts. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and Instructional Strategies, Othering, and Critical Reflection were utilized to develop the research methods and analyze the results.

Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and Instructional Strategies

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theories have been utilized in understanding the way individuals learn and construct meaning (Woolfolk, 1995). Learning happens when a less knowledgeable individual can interact with a more knowledgeable individual. Through imitative experiences,

direct instruction, and collaborative learning, the less knowledgeable individuals take in and process information into their schema, ultimately resulting in learning.

Vygotsky was a proponent for assisted learning (Woolfolk, 1995). Via assisted learning, activities are guided, and learners are provided appropriate individualized supports. The more knowledgeable other recognizes the challenges and roadblocks to success and adapts instruction and activities accordingly to help the less knowledgeable other experience success at each step of the process. Extensions for tasks are noted and provided as appropriate to each individual learner. Extensions up are provided when the task becomes rote, and extensions down are provided when the tasks are too hard (Woolfolk, 1995). Within this interactive approach, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is accessible. According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is an area in which success can be achieved with the appropriate assistance.

Otherring

Otherring has been defined, sociologically, as an action through which groups or individuals create a separation between us and them and come to define them as different and/or inferior (Fine, 1994; Schwalbe et al., 2000; Jensen, 2011). Schwalbe et al. (2000) noted that otherring is a way to define, “different as deficit” (p. 423). According to Powel and Menendian (2016), there is significant research to suggest that otherring is both a physiological and psychological phenomenon which has allowed humans to process and make sense of their world. The issue lies in that the “us” and “them” categories are socially constructed; and, via social construction we come to understand – both unconsciously and consciously – which categories are valued. Those that are valued receive the attention, support, respect, and resource they require. Those that fall into the category of the other have a history of being marginalized.

While applying otherring to higher education, VanderPyl (2017) addressed the concept in a case study matching paroled juvenile offenders with a class of university students. Additionally, VanderPyl (2017) sought to combat the perception that juvenile offenders were not necessarily, “‘bad’ kids or ‘super predators’ or even delinquents” (p. 16). The strategic partnership between the university students and the parolees encouraged a collaboration in which an understanding of both parties was deepened with the hopes of inspiring social change with two populations that did not have regular opportunities to interact.

In addition, otherring is discussed in a number of professional arenas including social work and counseling (Chambon, 2013; Krumer–Nevo, 2002). The significant of researching and discussing the Other cannot be overlooked in the professional fields that work with the other every day, and for the purpose of this paper, people with disabilities as the other.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection has been referred to as, “challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 4). Data is taken in, interpreted, and then either accepted into one’s schema or rejected. Engaging in this process can lead to a possible paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970) and shape the way individuals understand and engage with the world in the future. Sociocultural distortions, based upon ideologies, heavily shape schema from youth through adulthood and critical reflection provides an opportunity in which the presuppositions can be challenged (Mezirow, 1990). The research has clearly identified that participation in these activities is not enough to promote change. For long term change and acceptance to occur, the

students in the sport management class will need to reflect on their experiences in a deliberate guided manner with the support of the Sport Management faculty.

Methods

Creating the Partnership

To frame the context of this study and understand the relationship for creation of the partnership, the Sport Management faculty recognized the opportunity for experiential learning on this small, liberal-arts college campus in the northeast region as the Human Services program offered an inclusion program with participants with disabilities. A collaborative discussion took place between a faculty member in Human Services (HS) and the researcher in Sport Management at this institution with approximately 750 students, overall. HS works closely with the community of adults with disabilities in the region. Over many years of programming, HS noted that general sporting activities were very well received by the participants in the Inclusion Program of which there were between four and 40 members per day. HS approached the researcher with the idea to have students in the sport management class, approximately 50 in the sport management program – the more knowledgeable others in this case – participate in sporting sessions with the participants with disabilities as part of the regularly scheduled weekly programming. It was deemed most appropriate to incorporate these experiences as applied learning activities within a class.

The 300-level sport sociology class provided the most appropriate environment and context in which to introduce the relevant material and provide the applied learning opportunity. Within the framework of the class, issues relevant to the marginalization of the “others” within sport were examined, and discussions regarding measures that; (a) have been taken, and that (b) can continue to be taken to influence change became strategic discussion points for each topic. Specifically, at least one class per week or more, depending upon student need, was spent reading and discussing the sociological underpinnings of the marginalization of various groups from sport opportunities thus providing the perfect opportunity for integrating the initiative.

Case Study Design

The qualitative, instrumental case-study was utilized to examine well-established theories within this specific course experience (Saldana, 2013). The case study methodology was appropriate as the primary researcher began the process with the concepts of othering and sought to examine it within a bound experience. The case study was embedded within the upper-level college course to address the intended learning outcomes of the course alongside the research outcomes relative to the theoretical frameworks (Yin, 2017). The documents used to assess and evaluate the outcomes were reviewed by experts in Human Services and Special Education for purposes of content validity.

Sport Management Class Students

The students (N = 25) were actively enrolled in the 300-level undergraduate class in the sport management program. The study received IRB internal approval prior to soliciting participants. All students needed to complete the project for a grade as part of the course

requirements, and 25 volunteered to participate in the study while acknowledging that they understood they were free to opt out or withdraw from the research project, specifically, at any time. The majority of the students were seniors (n=15) and juniors (n=9) and in the Sport Management program (n=11). Business Management, Accounting, Photography, Sport Management/Accounting double major, and Biology were other majors represented in the cohort. Additionally, the majority of students in the class self-identified as white (n=21) and male (n=17). Of the total number of participants, 12 individuals noted they had previous experiences interacting in/with/through sport with individuals with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities was operationally defined through class lecture and discussions that took place during the teacher-centered part of the project. Still, most (n=16) noted that experiences with said population were rare, if non-existent. Even though the course was considered an upper-level course, most noted this was their first experience with specific content in sport sociology.

Participants with Disabilities

The participants with disabilities in the Inclusion Program were from a variety of backgrounds and demographics. Personal communication with Dr. M. Handley (personal communication, June 27, 2018) described the individuals with disabilities. The adults who participated in the group had a range of ages and abilities. The ages ranged from 20 to 58 years with some living at home and others living in a residential program through an agency. The disabilities included: autism, intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, seizure disorder, blindness, Down syndrome and neurologic [sic] disorders. The participants were attending the inclusion program on the college campus prior to attending the sports activities.

Pilot of the Concept

A preliminary version of the plan was put in place to test the feasibility of programming within the course timeline for the semester. Students in the sport sociology class were broken into small groups and asked to “develop sport activities” that lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. They were introduced to their academic counterpart, a student serving as an assistant to the HS faculty with experience with the Inclusion Program and disabilities. This HS student could help them with ideas for appropriate activities for this population and would liaise to coordinate logistics with the participants with disabilities. The primary researcher assessed areas of strengths and weaknesses in content knowledge and structure for future iterations of the project. Four groups of students ran a total of four sessions with the participants. With consideration for ZPD, notes were taken about additional prerequisite knowledge required and structuring the in-class, homework, reading, and activities for the college students, as well as logistical structuring for the sport activities themselves. Informal assessments were done with the college students to gather preliminary feedback on both the structure of the collaborative experience and their understanding of the purpose of the experience. Internal data was collected and used to shape the framework for the project and the study.

Implementation of the Applied Learning Experience

The theory of ZPD was again considered in shaping the educational experience for the students in the sport management class. The teaching methods for the sport management class

progressed from teacher-centered instruction, from the more knowledgeable other (Woolfolk, 1995), to student-centered learning over three class periods to ensure the students grasped relevant content knowledge. The introduction of all class topics on marginalized sport populations begins with a lecture on the social and cultural experiences of the historically marginalized group, in this case, the individual with disabilities. Special attention was paid to historical underpinnings and remaining sociological barriers to participation thus addressing the phenomenon of othering in sport. For homework, students had to find a news article and explain the connections between the article and the theory and content discussed in class. Those who felt comfortable with the theory and content were invited to talk about their articles and/or their personal experiences.

After presenting important theory and content in class, and connecting with the material for homework, the students were engaged in a small-group class activity to research the mission and structure of organizations and that encourage sport participation of individuals with disabilities. Then, they came together and assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the options as a class. Finally, the students were asked to synthesize a model which would better fit the needs of the marginalized community and evaluate what it would take to create such a model. Through this process, they noted the systems influencing participation, or lack thereof. Once a basic understanding was established, the reflection and stimulus for change was introduced. Each student was asked if and how many times they have had the opportunity to interact (in sport) with an individual with disabilities.

Another class period was devoted to connecting the faculty liaison of the Inclusion Program with the class to explain the purpose and role of the college in providing opportunities for engagement with individuals with disabilities. The HS faculty coordinates the weekly inclusion program and has specific, detailed knowledge related to the participants with disabilities in the inclusion program. HS faculty also answered any questions the students in the sport management class had about individuals with disabilities, in general, and provided additional insights about the participants with disabilities, specifically. After this session to deepen understanding of the program and participants, specific expectations and instruction were discussed.

One more class was devoted to discussing the theory of ZPD for application to their projects, and information on appropriate scaffolding. The students in the sport management class that were broken into groups of three or four utilized class time to collaborate and ask questions to shape an hour-long sport session. Additional time outside of class was necessary to complete the group projects and get them up to professional and academic standards.

Once the activities were created, activity sessions were coordinated with the schedule of the Inclusion Program and the participants with disabilities. Each of the sport students in the groups was required to have a role during the activity. Minimally, three of the roles had to be active participation in the sport activity while one was to be an observer taking memos and observation notes about the experience for the purposes of enhancing critical reflections. In total, there were six individual sessions scheduled over five days within a single week in October. The sessions were held in at either a morning or noon hour and each lasted for an hour. The number of participants ranged from four to approximately 40 and some self-selected to participate for varying lengths of time. Many of the participants with disabilities participated in more than one session because of their level commitment to the program. The activities were held in campus facilities in which all were familiar to all involved.

After the session, the members of each of the sport management groups were to share observation notes and write a critical reflection paper on the experience. Specific prompts for the critical reflection were included to address othering as well as the sociological issues discussed earlier in class lectures and through readings. A sample question asked, “How has this experience shaped your group’s understanding of ability-related sport experiences?” Students were also asked to consider how the experience addressed the needs of the participants with disabilities relative to sport engagement and participation.

Data Analysis

Data was systematically collected and triangulated from multiple sources to construct themes. First, informal oral feedback was collected from the human services liaison, students in the sport management class, and the participants with disabilities and put into written record by the researcher throughout the semester in which the study took place. Then, formal critical reflections were submitted by students in the sport management class. Finally, observation notes from the researcher were written and analyzed. The data points were reviewed and coded using an inductive coding process to generate themes for deeper analysis. Printouts of all the materials were made and key words were identified and highlighted during the initial review. The researcher then ensured intra-rater reliability in coding by reviewing the materials again using clean printouts. Consistent codes were maintained, and inconsistent examples were examined again and determined, within the specific context, whether they applied.

Findings

The purpose of this case study was to assess and evaluate the critical reflections of an intentional initiative integrated with students in the sport management class and participants with disabilities relative to othering. The findings represent three themes that emerged consistently after analyzing the data relative to othering: teaching to vs. playing with, contagious joy, and future thinking.

Teaching to vs. Playing with

Within the sessions, the most notable difference in interaction was in the approach the students in the sport management class took with implementation of the activities. Those groups that used words like “teach”, “clinic”, “session”, kept a very rigid, structured format and applied scaffolding in a very strategic and individual-focused manner. The interaction within these sessions was more instrumental to skill development and task completion. Listed within the goals for the activities, the majority noted skill development and skill knowledge as important outcomes. This approach organically created a context for othering. Within their reflections, the students in the sport management class identified their skills as superior and their role was to help the less knowledgeable other become better. They did not engage in the activities readily as participants but held more firmly to the role of coach/teacher dispensing knowledge. The students were able to identify lack of access and opportunity to participate in sport as likely factors in the lack of skill development and not a lack of interest or effort, but they took it as their responsibility to “help normalize them” (Student A). Another student wrote that the more opportunities and access “they” had to sport would allow them to “get better and be like us”.

The students in the sport management class, encompassing a mix of those with experience and those without experience with the participant population, who applied their scaffolding earlier in the activity to adjust task difficulty deviated to (a) more free play activities, and/or (b) more common playground-type activities (ex. cornhole, basketball P.I.G.) engaged in more interpersonal interactions. This fostered less instances of othering and more shared experiences. They played with and competed with the participants with disabilities. Conversations included more sport jargon and they utilized sport as a common topic of interest. One student, for example, was noted talking about the National Football League and various players on the teams with one of the individuals with disabilities. Additionally, competition became a uniting force. For example, within a half hour of the first session, a “guys versus girls” cornhole match was organically arranged in which the emphasis became not letting the “girls” beat the “guys”. The shared objective encouraged intragroup belonging. The integration of students in the sport management class and participants with disabilities was clear, conversation wasn’t task-, skill-, or goal-oriented, and all played various rounds together.

Contagious Joy

The students in the sport management class frequently identified moments of joy within the experience. “Fun,” “happiness,” and “enjoyment” were noted during the coding process in the responses. One of the primary expressions of joy was the observation of joy in the participants with whom they interacted. One student observer noted the following experience with an adult using a wheelchair and a HS student:

[HS] was explaining to XXX how one of her students was going to help him hold the bat, so he could have a chance to try the station. I happened to glance up at just the right moment to notice that XXX immediately after the explanation looked up with the biggest smile I have ever seen on someone’s face. I perceived this giant smile as this was the first time XXX has had the opportunity to participate in an activity involving batting practice.

The observation of the smile on participant XXX’s face was mentioned in the critical reflections of the other students in the sport management class in that group. Students in other groups had similar experiences of observing expressions – body language and oral expressions – linked to joy. Observations of smiles, laughs, cheers, and high fives were common and led to the articulation that sport experiences can be joyful experiences for everyone. In addition to noting joy in the participants, students also expressed joy. One student observed, “Also, notice a mood change in us – the happier they are the happier we are.”

Last, students in the sport management class reflected in the meaning of the joyful experience to their own lives.

I was happy to be able to take part in this activity because in a way it motivated me to push through a tough time... playing soccer for the college. I wasn’t playing as much as I was the year before, and seeing these individuals work hard and had such desire to succeed at the stations made me work harder in my practices with soccer. This [sic] activities with the individuals helped me a lot and was able to play more games with my team.

Another wrote,

Hearing them all say how they learned teamwork or how fun basketball can be really just melted my heart because it brought back how enjoyable basketball is for me and I was just so happy I was able to share that with them.

Future thinking

Overall, the critical reflections noted positive elements of this experience. A consistent note on the formal papers was a wish for more opportunities like this in the future. The majority, both those with and without previous sport experience with the population, reflected that it would have led to improved interpersonal relationships as well as improved sport skill development. Suggestions ranged from adding more sessions to this specific class to pursuing alignment with a formal organization within the college (Special Olympics affiliation or Sport Management Club initiative) through which regular programming could take place. A sport management student wrote,

“In the future, I would personally love to help out at events such as this one because I think it is important that everyone gets to participate in sports. If I become someone that eventually has social power or influence one day I would love to sponsor or create an event in my hometown that is similar to this activity.”

Discussion and Limitations

Within this class-aligned experience, students in the sport management class were able to acknowledge if and how the lack of experience with the population led to a desire to do more with the population in the future. Acknowledging deficit and lack of knowledge about the participant population within personal schema was a critical element upon which to build additional opportunities for engagement and integration to continue to shift the schema aligning with Mezirow (1990) and the value of critical reflection for encouraging change. While there were instances of othering, they were more evident when the students in the sport management class felt compelled to teach sport skills rather than focus on free play, viewing the different as a deficit (Schwalbe et al., 2000)—in this case, sport skills. Such a structure led to task-oriented behaviors versus person-oriented behaviors. Overall, the experience was noted as an enjoyable one that brought forth positive emotions and encouraged students to think about future opportunities. The biggest challenge faced by the students in the sport management class was not really knowing what to expect athletically due partly to the limited experience with individuals with disabilities, in general, and this group, specifically, before the sessions. This was not dissimilar to the findings of Sullivan and Glidden (2014). As interactions increased between groups, comfort level increased. As noted, the lack of physical sport skill was, in part, due to systemic (sociological) and organizational issues (formal sport offerings) (Coakley, 2017), and the students were made the connection that additional opportunities could help both improve interpersonal relationships and sport skills. The students in the sport management class were also encouraged by the fact that the individuals with disabilities held a similar interest level for sports and enjoyed sports in the same ways that they did. Finding common ground is critical for attitude change (Sullivan and Glidden, 2014).

While the implementation of the single interactive experience was important, it was not enough and only contributed to awareness of an issue (DePauw & Goc Karp, 1994). Noting the lack of diversity in sport management, the lack of diversity in curriculum (Brooks & Althouse, 2007; Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008), and the lack of programming an intentional pedagogical strategy to dispel othering, more must happen to discourage othering and encourage belonging not just regarding disabilities, but in other areas of historical marginalization and at the intersections. Being able to consistently implement programming within the ZPD is important to shape understanding and nurture change.

An overarching concern that remains is the transferability of this experience to allied experiences in sport. Many students in the sport management class noted that the growth potential existed in adding opportunities for physical activities to current sport structures/models. Not many sports management students noted opportunities for engagement with individuals with disabilities within their desired sport career paths like ticket sales, marketing and promotions, sponsorships, and sport agency. Aligning with the research of Di Palma, Raiola, and Tafuri (2016) is the recognition that sport experiences for individuals with disabilities can generate business-related benefits for organizations as it addresses another consumer group not typically addressed. One student; however, did write:

This activity has also changed my mind about the Inclusive students in the dining [sic] hall during lunch time, I used to get easily annoyed with them during lunch. I am a very timely person and have very little patients [sic] at times especially if I have somewhere to be, so getting in line behind someone who is trying to get their own lunch but clearly needs help and will not accept the help used to bother me. However, after working with these students, I understand why they do not want the help making their own plate and find myself patiently waiting in line behind them while they slowly help themselves. These students just want to be able to do something as simple as make their own plate without assistance.

Such statements reflect a level of understanding that grows through repeated opportunities for engagement and are promising in relation to extending the experience, developing additional programming, and transferring awareness of the experiences of individuals with disabilities within other contexts.

Conclusion

Future research should extend both the frequency and duration of this experience along with diversification of the engagement experiences and the methods of assessment and evaluation. A longitudinal-case study with the current sport management cohort could be of interest to assess continued consideration for participants with disabilities as it extends to life experiences (the permanence of othering) for the remainder of their college years and beyond. Understanding the human condition and human experience through this lens can help to reduce instances of othering and help encourage belonging. Institutions of higher education that have sport management programs can expose students to diverse populations and be intentional in integrating inclusive content and practices to inspire greater awareness and belonging.

There is growing literature regarding ways that social work, counseling, and human services can use sport more effectively as a change agent for inclusion and making a difference

in people's lives, including athletes, people with disabilities and college students (Kelly, 2011; Moore, et al., 2018; Beasley, et al., 2021). If sport is not currently the great equalizer, can we do more in the hopes that it could be one day?

References

- Abbott, S., & McConkey, R. (2006). The barriers to social inclusion as perceived by people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 10*(3), 275-287.
- Arbour-Nicitopoulos, K., Bruno, N., Orr, K., O'Rourke, R., Wright, V., Renwick, R., ... & Noronha, J. (2021). Quality of participation experiences in Special Olympics sports programs. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly, 1*(aop), 1-20.
- Baran, F., Aktop, A., Özer, D., Nalbant, S., Ađlamıř, E., Barak, S., & Hutzler, Y. (2013). The effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports Soccer training program on anthropometry, physical fitness and skilled performance in Special Olympics soccer athletes and non-disabled partners. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 34*(1), 695-709.
- Beasley, L, Newman, T. & Harden, R. (2021). Applying social work values to practice in sport: Perspectives of licensed social workers employed in collegiate athletics. *Archives of Social Work, 21*(4). 1212-1228.
- Brooks, D. D. & Althouse, R. C. (2007). Diversity and social justice in college sports: Sport management and the student athletes. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology
- Carpenter, L. J. (2000). *Legal concepts in sport: A primer*. Urbana, IL: Sagamore.
- Chambon, A. (2013). Recognising the Other, understanding the Other: A brief history of social work and Otherness. *Nordic Social Work Research, 3*(2), 120-129.
- Coakley, J. (2017). Age and ability. In J. Coakley (Eds.). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies* (pp. 291-334). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Crawford, C., Burns, J., & Fernie, B. A. (2015). Psychosocial impact of involvement in the Special Olympics. *Research in developmental disabilities, 45*, 93-102.
- DePauw, K.P., & Goc Karp, G. (1994). Integrating knowledge of disability throughout the physical education curricula: An infusion approach. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly, 11*, 3-13.
- Di Palma, D., Raiola, G., & Tafuri, D. (2016). Disability and Sport Management: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Physical Education and Sport, 16*(3), 785-793.
- Dinomais, M., Gambart, G., Bruneau, A., Bontoux, L., Deries, X., Tessiot, C., & Richard, I. (2010). Social functioning and self-esteem in young people with disabilities participating in adapted competitive sport. *Neuropediatrics, 41*(2), 49-54.
- Donnelly, P., & Coakley, J. J. (2002). *The role of recreation in promoting social inclusion*. Toronto: Laidlaw Foundation.
- Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens. *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Haas, K. (2012). Special Olympics: An emerging player in the sport for development field. Brown University: Special Olympics, Inc.
- Hartmann, D. (2000). Rethinking the relationships between sport and race in American culture: Golden ghettos and contested terrain. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 17*(3), 229-253.
- Jensen, S. (2011). Othering, identity formation and agency. *Qualitative Studies, 2*(2), 63-78. <https://doi.org/10.7146/qs.v2i2.5510>

- Jones, D. F., Brooks, D. D., & Mak, J. Y. (2008). Examining sport management programs in the United States. *Sport Management Review*, 11(1), 77-91.
- Kelly, L. (2011). 'Social inclusion' through sports-based interventions? *Critical Social Policy*, 31(1), 126-150.
- Krumer-Nevo, M (2002). The arena of othering: A life-story study with women living in poverty and social marginality. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3), 303-318.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Lawson, H. A. (1979). Physical education and sport in the Black community: The hidden perspective. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 48(2), 187-195.
- Lawson, H. (2005) Empowering people, facilitating community development, and contributing to sustainable development: The social work of sport, exercise, and physical education programs. *Sport, Education and Society*, 10(1), 135-160. doi: 10.1080/1357332052000308800
- Lindsey, E. (2002). Notes from the sports desk: Reflections on race, class and gender in British sports journalism. In B. Carrington & I. McDonald (Eds.), *'Race', Sport and British Society* (pp. 188-198). New York, NY: Routledge.
- McGarty, A. M., & Melville, C. A. (2018). Parental perceptions of facilitators and barriers to physical activity for children with intellectual disabilities: A mixed methods systematic review. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 73, 40-57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2017.12.007>
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Moore, M., Ballesteros, J., & Hansen, C. (2018). The role of social work values in promoting the functioning and well-being of athletes. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 12(2), 48-61.
- Murphy, N. A., & Carbone, P. S. (2008). Promoting the participation of children with disabilities in sports, recreation, and physical activities. *Pediatrics*, 121(5), 1057-1061.
- Newman, T; Magier, E.; Okamoto, K; Kimiecik, C.; Shute, L. ; Geasley, L., & Tucker, A. (2021). Social work in sport: Playmakers in the athletic arena. *Journal of Social Work*, 22(3), 692-714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173211009743>
- Özer, D., Baran, F., Aktop, A., Nalbant, S., Ađlamıř, E., & Hutzler, Y. (2012). Effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disability. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 33(1), 229-239.
- Powel, j. a. & Menendian, S. (2016). The problem of othering: Towards inclusiveness and belonging. *Othering & Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern*, (1), 14-39.
- Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Siperstein, G. N., Norins, J., Corbin, S., & Shriver, T. (2003). Multinational study of attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.
- Schwalbe, M., Holden, D., Schrock, D., Godwin, S., Thompson, S., & Wolkomir, M. (2000). Generic processes in the reproduction of inequality: An interactionist analysis. *Social Forces*, 79(2), 419-452.
- Shapiro, D. R., & Pitts, B. G. (2014). What little do we know: Content analysis of disability sport in sport management literature. *Journal of Sport Management*, 28(6), 657-671.

- Shapiro, D. R., Pitts, B., Hums, M. A., & Calloway, J. (2012). Infusing disability sport into the sport management curriculum. *Choregia: Sport Management International Journal*, 8(1), 101-118.
- Special Olympics (n.d.). *Special Olympics research overview*. Retrieved from <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/research/Special-Olympics-Research-Overview.pdf#nameddest=Key%20Findings:%20Special%20Olympics%20Unified%20Sports%20Research>
- Sullivan, E., & Masters Glidden, L. (2014). Changing attitudes toward disabilities through Unified Sports. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, 52(5), 367-378.
- VanderPyl, T. (2017). Combatting othering and inspiring hope: A unique approach to teaching about juvenile justice. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 1-20. doi:10.1080/10511253.2017.1419270
- Weiss, J., Diamond, T., Demark, J., & Lovald, B. (2003). Involvement in Special Olympics and its relations to self-concept and actual competency in participants with developmental disabilities. *Developmental Disabilities*, 24(4), 281-305.
- Woolfolk, A. E. (1995). Cognitive development and language. In A. Woolfolk (Eds.), *Educational psychology* (6 ed, pp. 43-56). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



Self-Defense Training to Reduce the Fear of Violence Among Women and Girls

Giovanna Follo

Wright State University – Lake Campus

Community contributes to the experience of fear and risk of violence within a girl's and woman's lived reality. Girls and women also try to navigate an internalized gendered body discourse that deems them not capable of self-protection. The purpose of this research was twofold. First, this research describes self-defense as a navigating tool to mitigating gender violence expectations in daily lives filling a gap in self-defense literature for women's self-empowerment. Second, this research begins an understanding of how empowered self-defense could address the fear of high-risk environments and increase confidence. The study took place in Tijuana, Mexico, in 2017. The post-self-defense seminar questionnaires indicated that all the women understood the risk of violence and the types of violence encountered. Ninety-eight percent of the participants stated they would use real-life techniques in potential confrontations. This improved capability of using techniques can reduce perceived fear of violence by this group of women and girls in Tijuana, Mexico.

Keywords: violence risk reduction, self-defense, physical feminism, social context, reflexive narrative

Mexico is depicted as one of the most violent countries for women. "In January 2019, an average of 10 women were murdered every day" (Wattenbarger, 2019, para. 4). Wattenbarger (2019) refers to this as femicide. Femicide is the killing of women because they are women. Romero and Hernandez (2008), analyzing violence against women, reported that those under the age of 15 had a high risk of dying from assault. Homicides occur primarily between the ages of 20 and 34 and are attacked by strikes, weapons, and strangulation. Understanding the social context of women in terms of fear and risk of violence can sway how a self-defense seminar can be adapted to increase participants' physical and mental well-being. In addition, the literature on gendered violence in Mexico predominantly focuses on the sex trades (Katsulis et al., 2010; Katsulis et al., 2015), border communities (Tellez, 2008), and women who seek work at maquiladoras (factories) (Livingston, 2004).

Calderon et al. (2019) reported organized crime and violence in Mexico through 2018. The authors are associated with Justice in Mexico based in San Diego. The program has been compiling data and analyzing trends for the past ten years. The report indicates an increase in violent crime, homicide, and victims through 2018. The program suggests that organized crime is a significant contributor and localized to certain areas. Finally, Tijuana was placed in the top ten most violent municipalities in 2018 (Calderon et al., 2019). The authors of the report indicate a continued crisis in terms of risk of violence and that, to improve community security, the government needs to address this issue.

The evidence points to Mexico being a high-risk area of violence against women. Violence against women can be connected to the machismo culture in Mexico (Wattenbarger, 2019). A patriarchal society where women and girls have less power, privilege, and opportunities than men (Mendoza et al., 2021). The literature indicates that self-defense is an efficacious approach that enhances women's self-confidence and can decrease the possibility of incidents of violence toward them (Senn et al., 2015). The purpose of this research is to understand the fear and risk of violence among girls and women in Tijuana, Mexico, and the potential for a self-defense course to reduce these feelings and perceptions. This study furthers previous research by extending and connecting the potential impact of self-defense in its social context, specifically within this perceived high-risk Mexican community. Research conducted by Hollander (2010, 2014), Senn et al. (2015), Brecklin and Middendorf (2014), Cermele (2004), and Orchanski et al. (2008) reported on women in university and college-based courses. Though I do not diminish the potential risk on higher education campuses in Canada and the United States, this research is unique in exploring more vulnerable populations. I did not approach the elite of Mexican society but the everyday women and girls in the Tijuana community where the seminars took place. Therefore, this research addresses the limitations of previous research where the risk or potential risk of violence is higher. I have brought a set of skills to an extremely unique socioeconomic demographic, not seen in the previous literature, that may potentially reduce perceived risk.

The research gained institutional review board approval at Wright State University (IRB #06147). The internal research fund at Wright State University – Lake Campus, the regional campus, was able to provide support for travel to Tijuana. All other expenses were self-funded.

Physical Feminism

Gendered discourse, for this article, will focus on the language, representations, and socio-historical images that have represented the female body as incompetent and weak. Also,

physical feminism will be defined as an approach that empowers the female body and challenges gender norms (Shelby, 2020). Dowling (2000) describes this gendered body as "frozen." She suggests that the frailty myth creates a restricted body where females are labeled weak and incapable. This perception of the female body is used as a form of social control. Self-defense training can challenge this perception of the gendered body and the discourse that supports it. The benefit of this challenge is that *thawing* the body empowers women. Thawing refers to the body becoming unrestricted. Furthermore, self-defense is for everyday life as it fosters changes in women's relationships with their bodies in such a way as to decrease their fears of violence (Rentschler, 1999), potentially reducing risk.

According to Cahill (2009), self-defense challenges gender role assumptions. It situates rape in a social and political context that empowers women within that context by contending that "feminist self-defense classes seek to denaturalize the threat of sexual violence" (370). Still, Brecklin (2008) suggests that outcomes associated with assertiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy eliminate fear, while Hollander (2010) contends feminist self-defense (FSD or Empowered Self-Defense, ESD) training increases self-confidence, reduces fear, and empowers women. The ESD approach compliments physical feminism. It is used to disrupt dominant gendered discourse and put the body into action (Channon, 2018). ESD is not necessarily focused on martial arts training but on empowerment. Power is experienced through girls' and women's voices and bodies (Jordan and Mossman, 2021). McCaughey (1998) argues that self-defense "confounds the script of the helpless female victim and the unstoppable male attacker; she is refusing the sex-class status that the attack attempts to impose" (p. 296), hence challenging gender ideology. The value of ESD is its ability to redefine what women can and cannot do. It encourages female participants to understand that they do not have to be victims. In turn, this may reduce the tendency to self-blame and enable them to become empowered through physical self-protection. These approaches and perspectives are essential in addressing violence against women in a patriarchal society such as Mexico, where stereotypical gender norms exist.

Aaltonen (2012) offers self-defense as a practical way of resisting gender ideology and victimization. McCaughey (1998) indicates that rape culture accepts men's violence against women as usual and women's resistance to this violence as unnatural. Society envisions a male body that is aggressive, strong, and dominant and a female body that is passive, weak, and submissive. Self-defense challenges this body discourse and, in turn, challenges rape culture. Gendered bodies are understood as socially constructed and, therefore, malleable. Here lies the efficacy of self-defense to reduce the fear and risk of violence.

Hollander (2010) presents three reasons for women's participation in a feminist self-defense course: women have heard positive testimonials, women want a more assertive, confident, and capable self, and women fear being caught in a violent situation. Women who have experienced assault tend to gravitate to self-defense programs. Findings by Brecklin and Ullman (2004) indicate that survivors of assault pursue training, including those who had experienced severe attacks. In addition, Brecklin's (2004) extensive analysis of 3,187 students from a national survey indicated that some women who participated in self-defense courses had experienced childhood or adulthood victimization. Past experiences seem to spur women to take self-defense courses, perhaps because of the programs' potential to help women recover from the effects of violence in their lives.

Physical feminism (McCaughy, 1998) enables women to increase or improve self-defense skills, body empowerment, self-confidence, and physical and mental health. However, the lived reality of women's and girls' lives are complicated. Though the research within the self-

defense movement indicates empowerment, self-defense is more than just attending seminars and classes; it must be placed within the women's and girls' social context. Self-defense provides a tool for an embodiment that can be used to navigate the lived reality for women and girls, in this case, in Tijuana, Mexico.

The Body and Trauma

Research has consistently found a correlation between the experience of abuse as a child and unhealthy behaviors during adulthood (Monnat & Chandler, 2015). One explanation for the association is that the body holds trauma within it. For example, the body produces adrenaline and cortisol that help it respond to impending danger, creating the fight or flight response (Forkey, 2018). David et al. (2006) discussed the longevity of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in their study of the impact of self-defense intervention on women who had experienced military sexual trauma. This study was a small quantitative study with a sample of 10 women. While small and uncontrolled, the findings suggested that the self-defense treatment increased self-confidence and provided relief to symptoms of PTSD. Also referring to the trauma/body connection, D'Andrea et al. (2011) suggested that chronic environmental exposure alongside mental distress will have health consequences. This distress can be similar to the constant exposure to violence. Meditation (Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017) in terms of mindfulness and yoga (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2020) have been used as a treatment for adverse childhood experiences (ACES), providing additional support for interventions targeting the body. Here, the mindfulness practice in meditation and yoga could increase self-awareness and reduce stress. The study reported here continues the investigation into the impact of chronic stress related to the potential for violence on the everyday lived reality that women and girls face in Tijuana, Mexico.

Methods

Research Design and Procedures

Using a feminist paradigm, specifically a physical feminist and empowered self-defense approach, the purpose of this research study was to explore the fear and risk of violence as a lived reality of women and girls that resided in Tijuana, Mexico. Self-defense colleagues in San Diego and Tijuana organized two seminars at their facility and another with teachers at a private educational academy.

There are many approaches that can be taken when conducting qualitative research. I have chosen to follow the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) model put forward by Braun and Clarke (2020). Here, the reflexive model embraces the values and subjectivity of the researcher within the qualitative process. In doing so, the researcher continually revisits codes and interpretation and follows research rigor by creating transparency through examining decision-making, planning, and bias at each stage of the process. Due to the nature of this exploratory research, codes referring to observation are then developed into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Themes are shared meanings of the participants that can be fully reflected upon in the discussion where the larger meaning of the findings as they relate to the perception of risk within the community. Therefore, the codes generate the themes. The institutional review board approval of a single

researcher suggests that the study proved to follow methodological rigor.

My role in this research was multifaceted. First, I applied reflexive narrative as transparency and rationale for various decision-making (Johnson et al., 2020). Mindful of transparency, I firmly believe that self-defense training can be a vehicle for addressing gender norms. Self-defense can be used to embody a woman or girl, and this embodiment can affect other aspects of one's life. In doing so, McCaughey's (1998) physical feminism exemplifies how women and girls becoming their protectors is key to empowering women. Therefore, complementary to this perspective is using an empowered self-defense approach when teaching self-defense to women (Channon, 2018). The seminars included both discussing gender and violence and physically practicing techniques.

The balance of instructor/researcher is complex and requires navigating the seminars carefully.

However, this dual role was advantageous. As the researcher, I was able to tour the area and observe the social context of the lived reality of the female participants. This understanding added to my role as a self-defense instructor. These observations could help confirm the interpretations of the survey and place observations in a social context. As a result, I adjusted the self-defense seminars to be more relevant to what I had seen and through conversations outside the seminars. Unfortunately, in understanding the social context through the observations and key informants, I was not able to interview or complete more extensive, detailed observations during the seminars.

The participant-observer role allowed me to discover the nuances that might not have emerged otherwise by observing people within their lived reality (Takyi, 2015). In addition, the participant-observer role allowed me to place myself within the research in a self-reflexive place (Reed-Danahay, 2017). Here, the language, behavior, and actions (Berthelsen et al., 2016) are examined and shared. For this reason, I feel that, as the participant observer, I was beginning to understand the physical and social environment that created a high-risk area. For example, when two key informants and I went to a food truck, I noticed complete darkness. There were no streetlights. It was hard to see around me. It made me uncomfortable. I felt the fear that at any moment some person could have attacked me.

The purpose of the seminars was to teach physical defense strategies through scenario based self-defense. At the beginning of the seminar, I presented my role as an instructor. Once the seminar was completed, I introduced myself as the researcher, where I asked, with the help of my key informants, if they would like to participate in a research study. This helped the participants disconnect their participation in the seminar from the research. If participants attended both seminars, they would only complete the questionnaire once.

Participants

The sample was self-selective. Two seminars were promoted for the Tijuana community, and one seminar was conducted at a private school academy. The women and girls who attended these events chose to come assuming they were interested in learning self-defense. "Seminar" for this research is defined as a time allotted to participants who want to learn non-physical and physical self-defense strategies. Each seminar will have a discussion and physical practice piece. A key informant and a self-defense instructor promoted the seminars to the community. The seminars were open for girls and women 12 years of age and older. As the seminar instructor, I was asked if younger girls could participate. I chose to let them participate. I chose to do this because of previous discussions with a key informant and an understanding of the high-risk

environment in which they lived. The seminar at the private academy was open to all female teachers and was arranged by a key informant. Upon completing the seminars, the girls and women were asked to participate in the research by voluntarily completing surveys.

A total of 40 females participated. Participants ranged from 8 to 52 years of age. Of note, some participants at the seminars may have belonged to the Tae Kwon Do club where the seminars took place. A male demonstration partner would aid in demonstrating the effectiveness of the techniques on larger and stronger attackers. In addition, as the seminar was open to girls under 18 years of age, the guardian would have the choice to remain. As an illustration, the father of a girl, age 10, remained with his daughter. Additionally, male students from other classes at the facility were used as block pad holders for the women. Two age groups emerged. The first group was under the age of 18. The nine participants in this group ranged from 8-13 years of age, with an average of 10.89 years. One of the participants had come with her father, who stayed to watch. Three of the participants in this age group had previously taken some type of self-defense. Six participants had no self-defense experience.

The second group comprised 31 women over 18 years of age who attended either the public seminar or the private academy. Twenty participants attended the public seminar. Of this group, the participants ranged from 18-52 years of age with an average of 36.55 years. Specifically, nine women were 40 and over, five were between 30-39, and six were under 29. Eleven participants were teachers at a private school and between 27-48 years of age. The average age was 35 years. The occupations included an educator, psychologist, florist, housekeeper, architect, accountant, student, physiotherapist, and periodontist. Approximately 71% of the women (22) stated they had no self-defense experience.

Data Collection

In my review of the literature, the authors did not detail their survey construction and several had used existing scales. I was not trying to replicate existing research but took an organic approach focusing on parts that seemed to be missing in the literature. This research was exploring the space within the literature that was missing. In creating the survey for this research, I drew my attention to the perception of risk of violence within the community and techniques that were taught within these programs, and their applicability to the community. This intention did not focus on the ability to replicate but on the organic evolution of a program intended to connect with the social context of the participants.

A questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions was used to collect data on various aspects of self-defense. In addition, to better understand the social context of Tijuana in terms of risk of violence, key informants, photos, and observations were used. Upon completion of the seminar, a post-seminar survey questionnaire (translated and back-translated into Spanish) was administered to participants who expressed interest in being part of the research. The survey was given in the training facility. Confidentiality was assured as the researcher was the sole individual who collected the surveys. The surveys did not request any names. I also ensured that the participants were spaced to avoid viewing each other's responses. After participants completed a consent form, they could then complete the questionnaire. Participants under 18 who expressed interest were given assent forms, parents completed their consent form, and the participant completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire focused on the risk of violence, perceptions of violence, experience with violence, and immediate perceptions of the self-defense program. Little was mentioned regarding

specific techniques used and how the participants perceived those techniques within the literature. Were these scenarios and accompanying techniques something they would experience in their lived reality? The findings focus on participant responses to the following questions:

- Please describe any experiences you have had with violence.
- Were the self-defense situations realistic?
- Were the techniques easy to learn?
- Do you feel you will be able to perform the technique in a real-life situation?

As an instructor, I am concerned that techniques relevant to a student's world can be applied, and the techniques are easy to learn.

Autoethnographic Narratives

Autoethnography uses personal experience to interpret group practices and the environment (Adams & Harrmann, 2020). Critical self-reflexivity is used to draw a connection between the self and culture. Here, this methodology proves an integral part of developing the self-defense seminars to reflect the risk of violence that could be potentially experienced. Autoethnography can be used with other forms of data collection (Adams & Herrmann, 2020), as it will be used in this research to support survey findings. The autoethnographic narratives provide a contextual grounding for the survey findings. These developed from environmental observations and discussions with participants and informants.

As the instructor of the seminars, I was limited in making complete observational notes. To gain contextual understanding, I decided memoing after a class or at the end of the day was the best option. Therefore, these memos will be presented as autoethnographic narratives to begin the exploratory contextual understanding of the risk of violence in these women's lives. These memos centered around seminars, conversations, and notable observations of the space surrounding the training facility and the local area. I was careful not to do any extensive notetaking during conversations or in front of participants. Therefore, memoing was done at the end of the day or the interaction. Generally, participants could communicate their thoughts during the seminar and discussions afterward; however, key informants and others in the class, familiar with English, were used as translators. I was not fluent in Latin Spanish and wanted to understand what others were communicating. In collaboration with memoing and photos, key informants were used to provide support or help to understand the risk of violence within Tijuana.

Coding

The analysis utilized structural coding. Structural coding is question-based, meaning that the question is used as an initial label. For example, specific questions were asked to address participants' experiences with violence within this research. Once this initial coding was completed, the codes were re-organized to create more concise codes. Finally, the codes generated themes that were supported by autoethnographic narrative.

The Empowered Self-Defense (ESD) Approach addresses gender and violence and incorporates physical defense strategies within a social context. ESD addresses gender norms and then discovers how to begin to change the gendered socialization of women practically. This

practicality is important within Tijuana as issues of femicide (Garza, 2020) and gender norms (Mendoza, 2021; Cohen et al. 2021; Dansereau et al., 2017) are prominent within a machismo society such as Mexico. In Jordan and Mossman's (2021) discussion of feminist self-defense (FSD), self-defense skills are used to increase confidence and attitudes, allowing the skills to be put into action. The mind and body are addressed simultaneously. For example, the mind can be addressed by understanding how women's and girls' bodies are frozen (Dowling, 2000) simultaneously the body is taught how to use its voice or strike.

The Smartsafe program was used as the baseline for an ESD approach. The program relies on reality-based techniques situated within a specific scenario. It was essential to teach the participants how to adapt these techniques as the scenario changed. As the confrontation changed, the participants could use their new self-defense tools as the situation dictated. Smartsafe presents techniques and knowledge on a self-defense continuum. The continuum progresses from non-physical avoidance techniques to physical techniques that require women to engage, inflict pain, and leave. Violence is placed within a gendered social context which allows psychological barriers that prohibit many women from feeling they have the ability or power to "fight" back to be approached. Noteworthy within the terminology of Smartsafe is the use of "target" instead of "victim." This term begins the work of moving away from the victim role, suggesting vulnerability and incapability. The target indicates a position that has agency. In Dowling's terms, this terminology works toward thawing the female body and realizing that women and girls can protect themselves.

Smartsafe is usually a 10-week program, which would consist of one to one and a half hours of training per week. Ideally, the Smartsafe program would be used as a 10-week program, however, the program was adapted for two to two- and half-hour seminars. The program does not need to be sequential and can be adapted according to the population. As a practicing martial artist and certified Smartsafe instructor, I have come to understand that self-defense seminars should reflect the community in which it is being delivered. Program adaption was based on observations and key informant conversations most applicable to the participants, my previous self-defense teaching and training, and my past 30 years within the field. I also stated within the seminars that if there were situations that the participants wanted to address, we could adapt. To reduce fear and risk of violence among the specific participants, I needed to use scenarios typical within their community. It was important to address authenticity as part of the research rigor. Here authenticity is transactional, and relationship-based. I wanted the participants to trust me and ensure that my concern addressed the community's needs. Rigor also applies to the decision-making, safe-guarding, and thorough consideration at each step as has been explained. Smartsafe is not a program focused on generalizability, but it is a living organism that evolves with its participants. It is a program that is interactive and adaptable according to the community in which it serves.

Smartsafe addresses situations that include knife defense, gun disarm, strikes, and ground survival, several of which were addressed in the seminars. Content may have differed depending on the seminar. Examples of scenarios that were addressed include: being bear-hugged from behind and being dragged into a car (abduction), having a knife to the back of the ribs as the attacker directs the target to either get money or something else, having the attacker put a rope around the target's neck from behind, being choked on the ground with the attacker in between the target's legs, and learning how to strike.

Findings

Survey findings will be presented with autoethnographic narratives as represented in Table 1. The participants answered questions about the types of violence they have experienced. While 21 of the 31 (68%) women participants indicated experiencing violence, none of the participants under 18 years of age reported previous experiences of violence. It is likely that more women could have experienced violence but were not prepared to disclose it within the study context. The seminars were open and not survivor-specific, which may have contributed to a reticence to disclose. Written responses indicated that, though the girls under 18 did not experience violence, two were concerned that it would happen to them.

Comments supported this survey finding during a children's only seminar at the academy. The comments were related to potential abduction and bullying. Several children presented a scenario where someone would call a child and state that a family member was abducted and then ask for a ransom. The family member was not abducted, but this was a scare tactic to exploit the child. The young children were also concerned about multiple attackers where a group would attack a child. These observations could indicate a high fear of violence as voiced by the community residents who participated in the research and through comments and conversations.

Table 1
Survey Results with Reflexive Narrative

| Category | Participant Response | Reflexive Narrative |
|--|---|---|
| Forms of violence experienced. | Sixty-eight percent stated they had experienced some violence. | As I spoke with women in the community and in the seminars, at least three women stated a knife used to the back of the ribs to get money was common. |
| Situations addressed in seminar realistic. | Ninety percent stated they thought the situations were realistic. | This was a positive response as it can suggest that the seminar was relevant within the participants' lived experience. |
| Use techniques in real situation. | Ninety-eight percent stated they would be able to use the techniques in their lived world | These responses are positive as it suggests the techniques can be used, with little training, in their everyday lives. |
| Immediate reactions to self-defense seminar. | Adjectives such as secure, self-confidence, safer and stronger were used. | These reactions are similar to other research in the area and is a positive indicator of how a self-defense program can influence self-perception. |

The women wrote about experiencing several forms of violence: harassment, family violence, abduction, verbal abuse, partner violence, assault, robbery, threats of violence, and environmental threats. For example, a 23-year-old recounts her experience as follows, "[I] was

deprived of freedom for four hours in [my] own car" while another stated that "my family has suffered threats through phone call[s], we have had friends who have been extorted and who have been kidnapped." Therefore, all the groups seemed to indicate a fear of violence within the community. Several of the women at the seminar seemed to feel free to describe their experiences of assault. One participant's history of abuse began as a young child, although she was hesitant to label it rape. Another had experienced three attempted assaults. She had resisted and seemed very proud that her resistance had staved off the assaults. Violence was also experienced with the use of weapons. An informant stated that it was common to be held by a knife to the side back ribs and asked for money. Participants at both seminar locations highlighted this scenario, indicating that they had personally experienced violence where a weapon had been used. The risk of violence as described by these participants in Tijuana should be considered in understanding the context of participating in a self-defense seminar or any other public health initiative which addresses the fear of violence. As the literature indicates, women join self-defense seminars because of past experiences.

Ninety percent of the participants perceived the situations to be realistic. Eighty percent of the participants believed that the physical techniques were easy to learn. Being able to apply the techniques and have the confidence afterward increased a sense of self-awareness and capability as expressed by this woman, "this gave me in two hours a confidence that I did not have or I did not know what I could have to defend myself against an attack regardless of the size of the other person." This self-reflection contributes to the positive experience that the participants felt and that 98% of the participants believed they were able to use these techniques in real-life situations.

These participants seemed to express a generally positive reaction to learning self-defense. These positive reactions transcended throughout the age groups. Participants felt more secure, self-confident, safer, and stronger after training. The participants' responses included reflections such as "realized there is much strength in me," "feel safe knowing some technique," "can say I am a strong woman capable not weak," and "I am small and not muscular, but it seems that the techniques can work in spite that." These statements are powerful, as they are situated in a high-risk social context. The self-confidence and strength expressed can lead to presenting oneself as less of a target in self-defense training terms and has the potential to reduce their fear of violence in such a high-risk area. Environmentally, as I observed, the streets have few lights. It is dark. I walked through the lower socioeconomic neighborhoods; I was vigilant. I could understand the fear of walking in such darkness. At one point, I was out with some informants, and suddenly, I saw a man very close to me. I was concerned.

Discussion

The girls and women within this research live in a place where fear and risk of violence are part of their lived experience. Socioeconomic status did not seem to be a factor; violence was a risk for all. Their perceptions are congruent with the literature indicating that Tijuana may be at high risk for violence. However, more importantly, self-defense seemed to reduce their fear of violence because they seemed to change their self-perception of their ability to be their own protectors. This change may provide an avenue for challenging the gendered norms that still seem prevalent (Cohen, 2021; Mendoza et al., 2021; Dansereau et al., 2017). This change is not to say that these women have come out of this experience with no risk of violence. However, they seem to have come out of this experience feeling more capable. As an instructor, I could

sense the empowerment as these girls and women struck the block pads using their complete bodies and voices. As a researcher, I viewed their non-verbal cues of wanting to hit. It appeared they were living and experiencing their bodies. This research does not address early childhood trauma though I understand it is some of the most profound traumas affecting health and adulthood. I was unable to address the issue in the context of this research.

Self-defense training is the embodiment of physical feminism (McCaughey, 1998). The women and girls within the study began to perceive themselves as capable of defending themselves. This self-perception challenges the "frailty myth" described by Dowling (2000). It thawed these female bodies such that 98% of the women and girls felt they could use the techniques within an environment riddled with the risk and fear of violence. It appeared to reduce their fear of violence which, in turn, can affect their fight, flight, or freeze reaction. The woman learns to live within her body as the female body thaws from its gendered body discourse. As Whitson (2002) suggested that boys learn to live their bodies at a young age, the self-defense learning environment offered these women and girls an opportunity to live their bodies. They are learning to use their complete body as a tool for self-protection. The perceived increase in empowerment can challenge gender socialization.

The Tijuana self-defense participants suggested that the risk of violence transcends social location, economic lines, and social lines. These women and girls represented the intersectionality of class and gender in terms of risk and fear of violence as depicted by their physical and social environments. All age groups perceived the context of their daily lives as areas with a high risk of violence. This study highlights the possibility that self-defense programs can affect the perceived capacity to react to a violent situation. In addition, this study evidenced the individual advocacy that self-defense seminars can provide, at least in the short term.

Although the information shared through the findings in the survey and autoethnographic narratives are informative, addressing limitations could enhance future research. This study provided a short-term self-defense seminar that required longer-term practice. Future self-defense programs should provide a more extended period for reflection in the group and physical practice. In creating a more extended program, participants could be interviewed by researchers to create more detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences but also time to apply them to their everyday lives. Another limitation is balancing the instructor and researcher roles. The instructor needs to focus on providing an effective program. A second researcher, who takes the role of complete observer or participant observer, should be placed within the class to note complete, detailed observations. Further research is needed to understand the systemic, structural factors that support violence against women in Tijuana, Mexico. Kelly and Green (2019) suggested that, sociologically, exploring the lived realities of those who live within a place and space can change those spaces.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Self-defense can be viewed as part of a multifaceted approach to addressing violence against women in high-risk areas. Professionals within public health and services have the possibility of liaising with ESD practitioners within their communities when appropriate.
2. Self-defense programs using an ESD approach focuses on addressing gender, violence, and physical empowerment within a social context. This approach could be a good fit within a K-12 educational system. Girls would be able to address gender socialization

which could lead to empowerment. This empowerment and confidence could impact various aspects of their lives, such as body image issues.

3. Suppose a program such as a self-defense seminar is used as a tool to address risk or reduce risk. In that case, the scenarios should reflect those the community would confront. The personal voice of those individuals would then be better addressed. The administrators of a self-defense program or seminar would need to go within the community where the program is to be administered and ask girls and women what their concerns or situations have been.
4. Practitioners, advocates, and the like should observe the community and talk with community members. When dealing with risk reduction, the understanding of risk must be placed within the social context and the lived reality of those within the community. The rapport gained by conversing and interacting with those that experience the risk and allowing them to have a voice within its reduction is empowering, increases self-agency, and *buy-in* into the ability of the *tool* to help reduce risk. Familiarity and knowledge of the language or having a translator will help with this process.
5. The choice of martial art is an essential consideration in such an initiative. Reality-based self-defense systems provide a better fit for this type of community initiative. Reality-based self-defense systems can address the fluidity of a confrontation and teach less specialized techniques, which makes it easier to learn. In addition, a female lead instructor should be used, a male demonstration partner used to emphasize the technique's effectiveness, the program should be women-only and administered using an ESD model.

Conclusion

Self-defense seminars in high-risk violence areas can be part of a multifaceted approach to addressing violence against women. In the short term, seminars such as these can provide one method of increasing confidence to challenge gendered norms. By using physical feminism, gendered norms are challenged. They are challenged by thawing the female body from gendered socialization, where women and girls are depicted as weak and incapable. An ESD approach bridges the abstract challenging of gendered norms to the practicality of performing physical self-defense.

References

- Aaltonen, E. (2012). Punching like a girl: Embodied violence and resistance in the context of women's self-defense. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(2), 51-65.
- Adams, T. E., & Herrmann, A. F. (2020). Expanding our autoethnographic future. *Journal of Autoethnography*, 1, 1-8.
- Berthelsen, C. B., Lindhardt, T., & Frederiksen, K. (2017). A discussion of differences in preparation, performance, and post-reflections in participant observations within two grounded theory approaches. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 31, 413-420.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*.
- Brecklin, L. R. (2004). Self-defense/assertiveness training, women's victimization history, and psychology characteristics. *Violence Against Women*, 10(5), 479-497.

- Brecklin, L. R., & Middendorf, R. K. (2014). The group dynamics of women's self-defense training. *Violence Against Women, 20*, 326.
- Brecklin, L. R., & Ullman, S. E. (2004). Correlates of post-assault self-defense/assertiveness training participation for sexual assault survivors. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 28*, 147-158.
- Cahill, A. J. (2009). In defense of self-defense. *Philosophical Papers, 38*(3), 363-380.
- Calderon, L. Y., Heinle, K., Ferreira, O.R. & Shirk, D.A. (2019). Organized crime and violence in Mexico: Analysis through 2018. *Justice in Mexico Program*.
<https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Organized-Crime-and-Violence-in-Mexico-2019.pdf>.
- Cermele, J. A. (2004). Teaching Resistance to teach resistance: The use of self-defense in teaching undergraduates about gender violence. *Feminist Teacher, 15*(1), 1-15.
- Channon, A. (2018). Martial arts studies and the sociology of gender: Theory, research and pedagogical application. In Bowman, P. (Ed.), *The Martial Arts Studies Reader*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Cohen, L., Duberley, J., Adriana, B. & Torres, B. (2021). Experiencing gender regimes: Accounts of women professors in Mexico, the UK and Sweden. *Work, Employment and Society*.
- D'Andrea, W., Sharma, R., Zelechowski, A. D., & Spinazzola, J. (2011). Physical health problems after single trauma exposure: When stress takes root in the body. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, 17*(6), 378-392.
- Dansereau, E., Schaefer, A., Hernandez, B. Nelson, J., Palmisano, E., Rios-Zertuche, D., Woldeab, A., Zuniga, M.P., Iriarte, E.M., Mokdad, A.H., & Echeraoui, C.E. (2017). Perceptions of and barriers to family planning services in the poorest regions of Chiapas, Mexico: a qualitative study of men, women, and adolescents. *Reproductive Health, 14*(129).
- David, W.S., Simpson, T. L., & Cotton, A. J. (2006). Taking charge: A pilot curriculum of self-defense and personal safety training for female veterans with PTSD because of military sexual trauma. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*(4), 555-565.
- Dowling, C. (2000). *The frailty myth*. Random House.
- Forkey, H. C. (2018). Children exposed to abuse and neglect: The effects of trauma on the body and brain. *Journal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, 30*(2), 307-324.
- Garza, C. R. (2020). On our toes: Women against the femicide machine in Mexico. *Worldlit.org*.
<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2020/winter/our-toes-women-against-femicide-machine-mexico-cristina-rivera-garza>.
- Hollander, J. A. (2010). Why do women take self-defense classes? *Violence Against Women, 16*(4), 459-478.
- Hollander, J. A. (2014). Does self-defense training prevent sexual violence against women? *Violence Against Women, 20*(3), 252-269.
- Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). Qualitative research in pharmacy education: A review of the quality of rigor in qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 84*(1), 138-146.
- Jordan, J., & Mossman, E. (2021). "Don't ever give up!" Resisting victimhood through self-defense. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36*(3-4), NP1233-NP1258.

- Katsulis, Y., Lopez, V., Durfee, A., & Robillard, A. (2010). Female sex workers and the social context of workplace violence in Tijuana, Mexico. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 24(3), 344-362.
- Katsulis, Y., Durfee, A., Lopez, V., & Robillard, A. (2015). Predictors of workplace violence among female sex workers in Tijuana, Mexico. *Violence Against Women*, 21(5), 571-597.
- Kelly, M. P., & Green, J. (2019). What can sociology offer urban public health? *Critical Public Health*, 29, 517-52.
- Livingston, J. (2004). Murder in Juarez: Gender, sexual violence and the global assembly line. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 25(1), 59-76.
- McCaughey, M. (1998). The fighting spirit: Women's self-defense training and the discourse of sexed embodiment. *Gender and Society*, 12(3), 277-300.
- Mendoza, M. P. R., Gomez-Dantes, H., Montiel, Q. M., Hernandez, G. J. S., Rincon, J. C. C., Lozano, R., & Icaza, M. (2021). The invisible burden of violence against girls and young women in Mexico: 1990 to 2015. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(5-6), 2753-2771.
- Monnat, S. M., & Chandler, R. F. (2015). Long-term physical health consequences of adverse childhood experiences. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 56(4), 723-752.
- Neumark-Sztainer, D., Wall, M. M., Choi, J., Barr-Anderson, D. J., Telke, S., & Mason, S. M. (2020). Exposure to adverse events and association with stress levels and the practice of yoga: Survey findings from a population-based study of diverse emerging young adults. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 26(6), 882-490.
- Orchowski, L. M., Gidycz, C. A., & Raffle, H. (2008). Evaluation of a sexual assault risk reduction and self-defense program: A prospective analysis of a revised protocol. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32, 204-218.
- Ortiz, R., & Sibinga, E. M. (2017). The role of mindfulness in reducing the adverse effects of childhood stress and trauma. *Children*, 4, 16.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (2017). Bourdieu and critical autoethnography: Implications for research, writing, and teaching. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 19(1), 144-154.
- Rentschler, C. A. (1999). Women's self-defense: Physical education for everyday life. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 27(1/2), 152-161.
- Romero, D. F. F., & Hernandez, I. A. G. (2008). Women's violent casualties in Tijuana, Baja California, 1999-2005. *Papeles de Poblacion*, 14(56), 257-282.
- Senn, C. Y., Eliasziw, M., Barata, P. C., Thurston, W. E., Newby-Clark, I. R., Radtke, H. C., & Hobden, K. L. (2015). Efficacy of a sexual assault resistance program for university women. *N ENGL J MED*, 372, 2326-2335.
- Shelby, R. M. (2020). Techno-physical feminism: anti-rape technology, gender, and corporeal surveillance. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(8), 1088-1109.
- Takvi, E. (2015). The challenge of involvement and detachment in participant observation. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(6), 864-872.
- Tellez, M. (2008). Community of struggle: Gender, violence, and resistance on the U.S./Mexico border. *Gender & Society*, 22(5), 545-567.
- Wattenbarger, M. (2019, March 21). Self-defense classes, with a side of feminist theory. *BRIGHT Magazine*. <https://brightthemag.com/mexicos-women-are-learning-to-hit-like-a-girl-feminist-self-defense-sexual-violence-a21559c2f389>.
- Whitson, D. (2002). The embodiment of gender: Discipline, domination, and empowerment. In S. Scraton & A. Flintoff (Eds.), *Gender and sport: A reader* (pp.227-240). Routledge.



Adverse Childhood Experiences and Student-Athlete Mental Health: A Social Work in Sports Perspective

M. Daniel Bennett

School of Social Work – University of Alabama

The present discussion reviews the current literature on the impact of adverse childhood experiences on college student-athlete mental health and advocates for the inclusion of trauma informed mental health social work practice in addressing the needs of this uniquely at-risk, and vulnerable population. The sport ethic model is presented as a cognitive lens through which social workers may better understand the athletic context. Sports social work practitioners, skilled in trauma-informed mental health practice, focus on the personal and contextual influences that potentially affect athlete mental health and well-being. In this way, sports social workers are uniquely qualified to address challenges of the athletic experience and provide athletes with the resources and support needed to successfully thrive in the athletic context.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, athlete mental health, trauma, social work, sport ethic model

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have been defined as traumatic incidents that occur during childhood (Petrucci, Davis, & Berman, 2019). ACEs can include violent victimization, exposure to violence, psychological and/or emotional abuse, and family mental health or substance use challenges (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Chronic exposure to stressors related to ACEs may potentially alter brain development and affect the ways in which the body responds to stress (Ridout, Khan, & Ridout, 2018). Further, ACEs may impact life course trajectories as they are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood (Hajat, Nurius, & Song, 2020).

Although the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and adult life-course outcomes is becoming well established, far less is known about the complex and multiple ways in which ACEs may exert a negative influence on the mental health of student-athletes at the college or university level. The current discussion aims to explore the impact of ACEs within an athletic context and serve as a prospective guide for practice and intervention with student-athletes who may have been affected by such.

Invisible Injury: Adverse Childhood Experiences

Once again, ACEs are those traumatic incidents that occur during childhood. These incidents can include violence, various forms of abuse, as well family issues and challenges. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) have grouped such events into three categories consisting of *Abuse*, *Household challenges*, and *Neglect*. Each of these categories is further divided into several sub-categories. Briefly, the *Abuse* category is sub-divided into *emotional abuse*, *physical abuse*, and *sexual abuse*. The emotional abuse and physical abuse sub-categories are limited to abusive acts committed by adults living in the household. The sexual abuse sub-category spans abusive acts committed by family members, relatives, friends, or strangers. The *Household challenges* category consists of substance abuse inside the household, mental illness in the household, an incarcerated family member, parental separation or divorce, and domestic or intimate partner violence. The *Neglect* category consists of physical and emotional neglect within the family context. Recent investigations suggest that community-level factors including neighborhood violence, poverty and racial discrimination may too be a potential source of ACEs (Bernard et al., 2021, Bruner, 2017).

What Lies Beneath

While a substantive body of literature on ACEs exists, there continues to be issues related to the full understanding and diagnosis of children who may have been subjected to such experiences (D'Andrea, Ford, Stolbach, Spinazzola, & Van der Kolk, 2012; Spinazzola, Van der Kolk, & Ford, 2018). That is, while some children may be subject to adverse experiences, they may not meet diagnostic criteria for certain psychological disorders despite chronic exposure to such (Croft et al., 2019; Denton, Frogley, Jackson, John, & Querstret, 2017). Prior studies suggest that adverse and/or traumatic experiences, regardless of meeting diagnostic criteria may significantly impact athletes' psychosocial behavior and athletic performance (Lynch, 2021; Aron, Harvey, Hainline, Hitchcock, & Reardon, 2019).

The impact of adverse and/or traumatic experiences may present in the form of avoidance, hypervigilance, and dissociative behaviors (Aron, Harvey, Hainline, Hitchcock, & Reardon, 2019). This phenomenon may be further complicated as student-athletes may conceal symptoms of PTSD and other trauma-related disorders including ACEs (Miller-Aron & LeFay, 2021). This may present a dilemma in the athletic context as athletic administrators, coaches, and trainers may not recognize the residual and potentially long-term effects of chronic exposure to trauma and ACEs in student-athlete populations.

The residual and potentially long-term effects of chronic exposure to ACEs in student-athletes navigating the college or university sports environment may present in several ways. This includes but may not be limited to lack of focus, poor motivation, violation of team rules, interpersonal conflict with coaches and players, and general misconduct. To be sure, ACEs are pervasive and affect an estimated two-thirds of the general U.S. population (Felitti, 2019). Several studies have explored how ACEs may impact adult life-course trajectories. Prolonged exposure to adverse experiences in childhood has been linked to poor outcomes in adulthood including increased risk for chronic disease, mental illness, and risky health behaviors (Boullier & Blair, 2018). However, much less is known about the ways in which ACEs may impact the health and well-being of student-athletes.

Recent studies suggest that the prevalence of ACEs among college and university student-athletes may be similar to that of the general population (Brown, 2019). In a systematic review of the relevant research literature published between 1989 and 2017, Brown (2019), utilizing a research synthesis and meta-analytic approach as set for by Cooper (2010) found that over two thirds of NCAA athletes across divisions I, II, and III reported at least one ACE. Further, the study found that the most commonly reported ACEs were physical abuse, household mental illness, parental separation, and household substance abuse. This suggests that the incidence and prevalence of ACEs among student-athletes may indeed be similar to that of the general U.S. population.

Counting up the Cost

The risk and protection literature has long since concluded that the presence of multiple risk factors may have a cumulative impact on a host of social and developmental outcomes (Greenberg et al., 1999). Prior research has linked the presence of multiple risk factors to low academic achievement (Gubbels, van der Put, & Assink, 2019), mental illness (Sameroff & Seifer, 2021), and chronic disease (Anderson & Durstine, 2019). The same may be said of ACEs. That is, multiple ACEs may increase the likelihood for poor social and developmental outcomes for student-athletes. Recent studies have shown that chronic exposure to multiple ACEs is strongly associated with alcohol use, anxiety, poor emotional regulation, physical injury, and substance use (Thomson, & Jaque, 2020; Kaier, Cromer, Davis, & Strunk, 2015). The impact of ACEs on student-athletes may be further amplified by the strenuous rigors, demands, and expectations of college and university athletics.

The behavioral consequences associated with ACEs can threaten one's general health and well-being and adult life-course trajectories. These threats are perhaps more pronounced within the athletic context given its confined social space (Brown, 2019). College student-athletes have a four-year window of opportunity to transition from high school, manage an academic course load, and meet the demands of athletic competition at a level never before experienced (Miranda-Comas, Zaman, Ramin, & Gluck, 2022). This is a tall order in and of itself, but in the absence of therapeutic intervention, the acquisition of requisite coping skills, and ongoing support, the opportunities to succeed for student-athletes affected by ACEs are severely truncated.

This is not to suggest that college athletic programs are ill-equipped to support student-athletes and help them succeed. Many college and university athletic programs are staffed with tutors and counselors to assist in the areas previously mentioned. However, the impact of trauma, including ACEs, on student-athletes can be an unknown quantity and beyond the scope of what tutors and counselors have been trained to do. To effectively address the impact of ACEs on student-athletes requires specialized knowledge and training.

Social Work in Athletic Contexts

Sport social work is a burgeoning area of practice that harbors great potential for college athletic programs. Social work is well equipped to promote the health and well-being of student-athletes through direct practice, advocacy, policy development, constituent education and research (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). College student-athletes are a distinct yet vulnerable population. Mental health and physical challenges including but not limited to ACEs, may be amplified, and uniquely situated within the confined social space of the

athletic context. As such, sport social work and trauma-informed mental health practice represent complements to the athletic context and has the potential to improve the overall well-being of student-athlete populations (Aron, Harvey, Hainline, Hitchcock, & Reardon, 2019).

Given the pervasiveness of ACEs and how they may be uniquely situated among the population of college student-athletes, individuals with specialized knowledge and training in the area of trauma-informed mental health practice can serve as a valuable asset to college athletic programs. As such, social work education programs should strongly consider offering specialized training and instruction in this area of practice with consideration for multiple social contexts. This may be particularly salient in athletic contexts when one considers that mental health status can greatly influence athletic performance (Eganov, Romanova, Nikiforova, Korneeva, & Tselishcheva, 2021).

Social workers skilled and experienced in trauma-informed mental health practice are ideally suited to address the needs and challenges that student-athletes affected by ACEs may encounter. Therefore, social workers skilled in trauma-informed mental health practice, as part of a multidisciplinary effort, could be effectively utilized to help athletes develop the requisite skills to cope with the challenges of college athletics despite ACEs (Bennett, 2022). To be sure, student-athletes may develop psychological and physiological adaptations that mask common symptoms of psychological distress. Therefore, social workers may also be useful in consulting with, and educating coaches, sports medicine, and other support staff to recognize and appropriately respond to concerns of student-athlete mental health.

A multidisciplinary approach that includes trauma-informed mental health practice may increase the likelihood that student-athletes, including those affected by ACEs, receive needed intervention and support. Doing so would be beneficial in augmenting the athletic culture and context, acknowledging that student-athlete mental health is as important as athletic performance, and improving opportunities for success for those student-athletes who may be disadvantaged by the impact of ACEs (Bennett, 2022). Social workers may also be instrumental in creating and coordinating trauma-informed environments within athletic programs with an emphasis on treatment / intervention for symptomatic athletes. This may include a multidisciplinary team equipped to provide counseling and medications where appropriate (Bennett, 2022).

Social Workers Beware!

Social work practice in athletic contexts presents unique challenges – particularly given the highly competitive nature of college athletics. Traditional models of practice and intervention may require modification or adjustment. Moreover, the theoretical perspectives typically used to inform models of practice and intervention may have to be adapted in consideration for the circumstances and conditions of the athletic environment.

With modification, some theoretical perspectives are relevant and applicable to student-athletes and the college athletic environment. The ecological perspective can provide context for understanding the dynamics of the athletic context and how student-athletes are situated within such a context. The levels of analysis (*micro*, *mezzo*, and *macro*) may be modified or re-defined so that the micro level represents the individual student-athlete and their inter-personal relationships. The mezzo level may represent coaches and other departmental staff. Finally, the macro level may represent college administrators. As such, the ecological perspective may be

used to examine athlete-in-environment transactions and the ways such transactions may affect student-athletes.

On balance, athletic departments operate as a system. As such, the systems perspective is applicable to the athletic context. This perspective may be used to examine the role(s) of individuals within that system and assess balance and system function (Lopez-Felip, Davis, Frank, & Dixon, 2018). The systems perspective may be used to explore how individual characteristics and behaviors may influence interaction with others. When behavioral and psychosocial risks are present, some student-athletes may require support from the system (i.e., the athletic milieu) to re-establish stasis. This is more likely to occur when there is a well-functioning, interdependent, and stable system (Bennett, 2022).

Lastly, much of human behavior can be understood through the lens of the social learning perspective. This perspective posits that new behaviors may be acquired by observing and imitating others. When a particular behavior is rewarded regularly, it will most likely persist; conversely, if a particular behavior is constantly punished, it will most likely desist (Bandura & Walters, 1977). As it pertains to the athletic context, the social learning perspective is key to understanding both individual and collective behavior dynamics. Sports social work practitioners may utilize the social learning perspective to understand the presence, role, and function of student-athlete behaviors and also how to facilitate positive behavior and attitude change in service of mental health and well-being.

The Sport Ethic Model: Uncharted Territory for Social Workers?

Hughes and Coakley (1991) proposed the sport ethic model wherein they asserted the sport ethic was rooted in the development of a form of deviance in the athletic context (Fournier, Parent & Paradis, 2022). Hughes and Coakley (1991) counterintuitively hypothesized that deviance in the athletic context was driven by an acceptance of, and deep commitment to, a system of sport-related goals and values. Further, Hughes and Coakley (1991) expanded on this idea and introduced the concept of positive deviance. They defined positive deviance, as over-conformity to sport-related goals and values.

The sport ethic is a set of norms accepted as the defining criteria for what it means to be an athlete in the world of competitive athletics (Coakley, 2021). According to Hughes and Coakley (1991) the sport ethic consists of four norms; *sacrifice*, *perfection*, *pain/risk*, and *refusal to accept limits*. According to these norms, an athlete must be willing to sacrifice for their sport, strive for perfection in training and competition, accept pain and risk, and refuse to accept any limitations that may be placed on them (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). It should be noted that ACEs in some instances may serve as a catalyst for over-conformity to the sport ethic. That is, for some student-athletes participation in athletics represent an avenue of escape from the impact of adverse circumstances and conditions (Aron et al., 2019). As such, sport social workers are advised to take these factors into consideration when intervening with student-athletes.

Given the highly competitive nature of college athletics, many student-athletes may indeed over-conform to the sport ethic as proposed by Hughes and Coakley (1991). This over-conformity or positive deviance as it is now referred to in the research literature, has been normalized through the use of nomenclature such as “*no days off*”, “*go hard or go home*” etc. Further, positive deviance has strong implications for over-training syndrome (OTS), substance use including performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), and psychological distress (Carreathers, 2020; Turner, Aspin, & Gillman, 2019; Weakley, Halson, & Mujika, 2022). It should be noted

that within the sport ethic model, the resort to PEDs is considered negative deviance as such use may place both athletes and athletic programs in jeopardy.

Positive deviance may also have implications for student-athletes affected by ACEs. Student-athletes affected by ACEs in some instances may be further traumatized by harsh athletic environments where the culture is one of positive deviance. Fournier, Parent, and Paradis (2022) assert that while several actors within the athletic environment may play a role in establishing and maintaining a culture of positive deviance, coaches are largely identified as being primarily responsible for establishing such a culture.

Fortier et al. (2020) posit that coaches who communicate with abusive or violent language, exact harsh penalties for failure to meet certain training or competition milestones, and who otherwise communicate with dispassionate objectivity, are more likely to spawn a culture of positive deviance. Student-athletes affected by ACEs who are a part of such athletic environments may experience additional trauma as a function of past adverse experiences. That is, student-athletes with childhoods characterized by physical and verbal abuse, neglect, and violence may experience further psychological trauma in harsh athletic environments. They may over-conform to the sport ethic in a quasi-adaptive effort to forestall any further punitive measures.

In order for social workers to be effective in the athletic context, it is essential they possess substantive knowledge and understanding of sport and athletic culture. The sport ethic model provides a cognitive lens through which to more fully understand the rigors, demands, and expectations that are placed upon college student-athletes. The sport ethic model may also help guide trauma-informed mental health practice and intervention with student-athletes as it may assist social workers in understanding how best to adapt traditional models of practice to fit within the athletic context.

Barriers to Treatment

There may be characteristics specific to the athletic environment that serve as barriers to efficacious or effective treatment for student-athletes affected ACEs or other trauma. Despite greater attention to athlete mental health in recent years, historically the culture of sports has given little consideration to non-physical injuries. This is due in part to prevailing stigma and misconceptions that athletes are somehow immune to psychological or emotional trauma. Eschewing labels and perceptions of weakness, and to conceal psychological distress and functional impairment, student-athletes may over-conform to rigid training programs and totally immerse themselves in their sport (Lynch, 2021).

This type of behavioral response makes treatment and intervention difficult. Student-athletes may not self-report psychological distress or functional impairment. However, less readily identifiable symptoms may arise and then be attributed to other issues (e.g., burnout, OTS) instead of acknowledging distress or trauma. This includes a sudden reluctance to train with full intensity, avoidance of extra-curricular activities, or sleep disturbances (Lynch, 2021) Once again, this is a complex dynamic and one that requires ongoing monitoring and assessment from competent social work professionals with substantive knowledge and understanding of athletic culture, the sport ethic model, and trauma-informed mental health approaches.

Conclusion

In recent years there has been increased awareness of the role ACEs and psychological trauma may play in the lives of student-athletes. In order to effectively address the needs of student-athletes impacted by adverse childhood experiences and other forms of trauma, athletic programs must develop a practical means by which to identify trauma survivors who may have ongoing psychopathology, reduce stigma attached to mental health intervention, and provide an evidence-based, contextually relevant standard of care.

An estimated one in eight student-athletes are affected by invisible injuries due to trauma and other adverse experiences. In order to maximize athletic performance while also providing optimal mental health treatment, sport social workers with core competencies in trauma-informed mental health practice and intervention must be fully integrated into college and university athletic programs. The role(s) of the sports social worker should be clearly articulated for both athletes and coaching staff. It should be noted that sport social work differs from sport psychology and other modalities in that it does not locate the problem as residing only within the individual. Rather, sport social work considers multiple factors that may contribute to the student-athlete's presenting problem.

Given the complex presentation of ACEs and trauma related disorders in the athletic context, diagnosis and treatment present a unique challenge. It is only through the coordinated and concerted efforts of a multidisciplinary team that includes sport social workers can student-athletes receive the care and resources needed to make best use of the opportunity that college athletics can provide.

References

- Anderson, E., & Durstine, J. L. (2019). Physical activity, exercise, and chronic diseases: A brief review. *Sports Medicine and Health Science*, 1(1), 3-10.
- Aron, C. M., Harvey, S., Hainline, B., Hitchcock, M. E., & Reardon, C. L. (2019). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma-related mental disorders in elite athletes: a narrative review. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 53(12), 779-784.
- Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977). *Social learning theory* (Vol. 1). Prentice Hall.
- Bennett, M. D. (2022) When the game stands tall: Social work in an athletic context. *Journal of Social Work Practice*. (in press)
- Bernard, D. L., Calhoun, C. D., Banks, D. E., Halliday, C. A., Hughes-Halbert, C., & Danielson, C. K. (2021). Making the "C-ACE" for a culturally informed adverse childhood experiences framework to understand the pervasive mental health impact of racism on Black youth. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 14(2), 233-247.
- Boullier, M., & Blair, M. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences. *Pediatrics and Child Health*, 28(3), 132-137.
- Brown, B. J. (2019). *Beyond the lines: Exploring the impact of adverse childhood experiences on NCAA student-athlete health*. East Carolina University.
- Bruner, C. (2017). ACE, place, race, and poverty: Building hope for children. *Academic Pediatrics*, 17(7), S123-S129.
- Carreathers, B. T. (2020). Athletes' substance abuse and mental health. *McNair Scholars Research Journal*, 13(1), 3.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022, April 17) Adverse childhood experiences. <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/priority/aces.html>.
- Coakley, J. (2021). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. McGraw -Hill
- Croft, J., Heron, J., Teufel, C., Cannon, M., Wolke, D., Thompson, A., ... & Zammit, S. (2019). Association of trauma type, age of exposure, and frequency in childhood and adolescence with psychotic experiences in early adulthood. *JAMA psychiatry*, 76(1), 79-86.
- D'Andrea, W., Ford, J., Stolbach, B., Spinazzola, J., & van der Kolk, B. A. (2012). Understanding interpersonal trauma in children: Why we need a developmentally appropriate trauma diagnosis. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(2), 187.
- Denton, R., Frogley, C., Jackson, S., John, M., & Querstret, D. (2017). The assessment of developmental trauma in children and adolescents: A systematic review. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 22(2), 260-287.
- Eganov, A. V., Romanova, L. A., Nikiforova, S. A., Korneeva, S. V., & Tselishcheva, E. I. (2021). Dependence of athletic performance on mental health in female students. *Journal of Physical Education and Sport*, 21(6), 3433-3438.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (2019). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.
- Fortier, K., Parent, S., & Lessard, G. (2020). Child maltreatment in sport: Smashing the wall of silence: A narrative review of physical, sexual, psychological abuses and neglect. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 54(1), 4-7.
- Fournier, C., Parent, S., & Paradis, H. (2022). The relationship between psychological violence by coaches and conformity of young athletes to the sport ethic norms. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 19(1), 37-55.
- Greenberg, M. T., Lengua, L. J., Coie, J. D., Pinderhughes, E. E., Bierman, K., Dodge, K. A., Lochman, J. E., & McMahon, R. J. (1999). Predicting developmental outcomes at school entry using a multiple-risk model: Four American communities. *Developmental Psychology*, 35(2), 403.
- Gubbels, J., van der Put, C. E., & Assink, M. (2019). Risk factors for school absenteeism and dropout: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(9), 1637-1667.
- Hajat, A., Nurius, P., & Song, C. (2020). Differing trajectories of adversity over the life course: implications for adult health and well-being. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 102, 104392.
- Hughes, R., & Coakley, J. (1991). Positive deviance among athletes: The implications of over-conformity to the sport ethic. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8(4), 307-325.
- Kaier, E., Cromer, L. D., Davis, J. L., & Strunk, K. (2015). The relationship between adverse childhood experiences and subsequent health complaints in elite athletes. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 8(2), 83-92.
- López-Felip, M. A., Davis, T. J., Frank, T. D., & Dixon, J. A. (2018). A cluster phase analysis for collective behavior in team sports. *Human Movement Science*, 59, 96-111.
- Lynch, J. H. (2021). Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Elite Athletes. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 20(12), 645-650.
- Miller-Aron, C., & LeFay, S. M. (2021). Best practices for diagnosis and management of trauma-related disorders in Athletes. In *The Routledge Handbook of Clinical Sport Psychology* (pp. 306-320). Routledge.

- Miranda-Comas, G., Zaman, N., Ramin, J., & Gluck, A. (2022). The role of workload management in injury prevention, athletic, and academic performance in the student-athlete. *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, 21(6), 186-191.
- Moore, M., & Gummelt, G. (2018). *Sport social work: Promoting the functioning and well-being of college and professional athletes*. Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Petrucelli, K., Davis, J., & Berman, T. (2019). Adverse childhood experiences and associated health outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 97, 104127.
- Ridout, K. K., Khan, M., & Ridout, S. J. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences run deep: Toxic early life stress, telomeres, and mitochondrial DNA copy number, the biological markers of cumulative stress. *Bio-Essays*, 40(9), 1800077.
- Sameroff, A. J., & Seifer, R. (2021). Accumulation of environmental risk and child mental health. In *Children of poverty* (pp. 233-258). Routledge.
- Spinazzola, J., Van der Kolk, B., & Ford, J. D. (2018). When nowhere is safe: Interpersonal trauma and attachment adversity as antecedents of posttraumatic stress disorder and developmental trauma disorder. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 31(5), 631-642.
- Thomson, P., & Jaque, S. (2020). Cumulative psychological trauma, emotional regulation, and orthopedic injury in a sample of pre-professional and professional dancers and college athletes. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 35(2), 89-95.
- Turner, M. J., Aspin, G., & Gillman, J. (2019). Maladaptive schemas as a potential mechanism through which irrational beliefs relate to psychological distress in athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 44, 9-16.
- Weakley, J., Halson, S. L., & Mujika, I. (2022). Overtraining Syndrome Symptoms and Diagnosis in Athletes: Where Is the Research? A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance*, 1(aop), 1-7.