Promoting Cultural Understanding through Sport-Based Exchanges

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Sport for Development - Other (Community Sport)
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Mark Twain once wrote: “Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all of one’s lifetime.” This belief is at the heart of why sport exchanges exist, and what can be learned through engaging with others in this way. The proposed presentation is an assessment of a two-way sport-based exchange program between citizens of the United States and South Africa, with an overarching goal of increasing cultural understanding between the two countries.

One of the most profound ways to learn about another country is to spend time there. Study abroad programs indicate that spending time in one’s non-native country results in growth in the areas of cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, adaptability to new situations, appreciation of those with differences, and an overall sense of global mindedness and perspective (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Hett, 1993; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Kehl & Morris, 2007; Penman & Ellis, 2004). The knowledge required to thrive in a multicultural world is underpinned by respect and appreciation of cultures other than our own.

Perhaps one of the best ways to gain this respect and appreciation is to engage with citizens of other countries, and sport is an ideal platform for engagement. Sport cuts across differences such as language, religion, race, and gender. It provides a neutral ground and can be modified to address physical and generational differences. Most importantly, sport, at its heart, is play, which equates to fun. These are some of the many reasons why the field of sport for development (SFD), or the intentional use of sport to achieve personal and social development objectives, has blossomed over the past several decades (Brunelli & Parisi, 2011; Houlihan & White, 2002).

Given the success of sport in bringing together people of different cultures, a two-way sport-based exchange program, funded by the U.S. Department of State, was created and carried out in 2015-2016 between people of the United States and South Africa. Phase I of the program involved 14 South African soccer coaches and administrators coming to the United States for two-weeks of training and immersing themselves in American life. They stayed with host families and worked with a local university and a local youth soccer club, gaining insights on how youth sport and American life are integrated in the United States, as well as developing social action projects to be implemented upon returning home. Phase II, which occurred approximately six months later, saw eight U.S. faculty and youth soccer coaches travel to South Africa to engage in a similar capacity overseas. In addition to participating in training, the American delegation worked with the South African coaches and administrators on implementing their social action projects and furthering the relationships between the two groups. All participants (both South African and American) participated in both phases of the exchange.

The evaluation of the program itself was holistic; however, this presentation will focus on the analysis of the following research questions:
1. To what extent does a short-term sport based exchange program impact levels of cultural adaptability in those involved in the program?
2. Does Intergroup Contact Theory explain the changes in cultural understanding and adaptability among participants?

Allport’s Intergroup Contact Theory (1954) states that interaction between people of different groups should increase the relationships and understanding between them. He posits that four conditions must exist in order to achieve optimal results: equal status within the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. Pettigrew, extending Intergroup Contact Theory, added a fifth condition that “the contact situation must provide the participants with the opportunity to become friends” (1998, p. 76). This theory underpinned the work,
and aided in the development of the exchange, in that we wanted to ensure that all five aspects of the theory were optimized in how the program was constructed.

Data collection and analysis followed a mixed methods approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Three surveys were administered to all participants one month before their international visit, and three- and six-months following their in-country residency. Questions assessed levels of cultural understanding and adaptability, and were both quantitative and open-ended. Part of the survey consisted of the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI), which is a cultural understanding assessment (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). Additionally, a 1-hour interview was conducted with each participant within one week of the conclusion of the in-country residency. Interviews were conducted by an independent researcher who was not engaged in the program, to ensure trustworthiness and reduce bias.

The quantitative data, which assessed changes in cultural understanding and adaptability, was analyzed through an Analysis of Variance, looking for significant differences on the CCAI from pre-test to post-test (3 month) and post-test (6 month). The responses of the South African participants were also compared to those of the American participants. Qualitatively, the open-ended responses on the surveys as well as the interviews followed an inductive form of analysis, where two researchers independently coded all data through open, axial, and selective coding, resulting in the major themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Preliminary results on the quantitative CCAI indicate that there were no significant changes in cultural adaptability from pre-program to post-program. While in every instance, mean CCAI scores increased from pre- to post-program, these differences were not statistically significant. This could have been impacted by the small sample size, or by the fact that those choosing to participate in a cross-cultural exchange may be highly culturally adaptable before participation. However, supplemented with the qualitative results, deep and profound levels of learning and change clearly occurred in the areas of cultural growth, understanding, and adaptability. The major themes that emerged include personal growth, a more detailed and accurate understanding of the other culture (US or South Africa), and the development of friendships across cultures. For instance, participants on both sides of the exchange mentioned how initial impressions were media driven, yet after the exchange they had more context in which to place these impressions. Additionally, participants spoke to the empathy that developed in them as a result of being in another country and better understanding the experiences of others. This directly relates to cultural understanding and adaptability. Finally, the research team found that four of the five components of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) were present in this exchange, and each contributed to the strong levels of growth. The one component that was not implemented as ideally as hoped was ‘equal status within the situation.’ As this program was funded and directed by U.S. citizens, there did appear to be an unequal balance of status. Allowing the South African participants to lead programming when the U.S. delegation visited their country helped level the playing field slightly, but all participants felt that the U.S. continued to be looked to as leaders in this exchange. These and other findings will be discussed, as well as best practices in successfully implementing sport based exchanges.