Hidden in Plain Sight: Deconstructing “Race” and Colonial Legacy in the Narratives of Curling Club Culture

Richard Norman, University of Waterloo
Heather Mair (Advisor), University of Waterloo
Katie Misener (Advisor), University of Waterloo

Conference Theme - Race Forward (Community Sport) Abstract 2021-009
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Mode: Synchronous
Session: Race Forward 1 Thursday June 3, 2021, 8:55 AM - 9:15 AM

Sport represents a site where participants form strong bonds which contributing to a sense belonging both at the community level as well as to broader social arrangements (Donnelly, 2000; Kidd, 2013b, 2013a). Sport is part of our social fabric, and as such, attention to its accountability as to who participates requires consideration especially at the local level. In Canada, as many communities are experience an increasingly diverse population, sport must account for the continued inequity experienced by racialized persons (Cunningham, 2007; Singer, 2005). Curling is a unique sport to trace such impacts with its deep history, colonial legacy, and quintessential “Canadianess” (Mair, 2007; 2009). However, as with other sports, curling must attend to declining participation rates which expose the challenges of maintaining while encouraging growth from an increasing diverse population (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Sawrikar & Muir, 2010). Yet, curling’s image continues to be aligned with dominant discourses (i.e., white, middle-classed, heterosexual, and able-bodied) rather than reflecting the diverse communities where clubs are situated. This image is problematic and may inhibit participation for racialized persons, as they do not see themselves represented within club membership (Elling & Knoppers, 2005). Moreover, understanding how internal culture(s) affect participation by presenting real or perceived barriers to access (Taylor, 2001; Vandermeerschen et al., 2016) require interrogation within the local sport club environment.

The purpose of the study was to explore how narratives of curlers’ experiences perpetuate notions of dominance in sport culture(s) and present barriers to sport participation and leadership for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC). The study is framed by literature centering organizational culture and the role it plays in perpetuating dominant culture, which marginalizes racialized persons within in a settler-colonialized society. There is need to understand how dominant forms are preserved through tradition, symbols, and behaviours shaping internal sporting culture (Frost et al., 2013; Spaaij et al., 2019). The local curling club is the focal context for this research as curling is predominantly played at the community, grassroots level. Photo-elicited interviews with fifteen curlers and researcher observations within the club setting were used to discern dominant and counternarratives through a narrative analysis process. The findings reveal how internalized stories about curling shape the organizational culture of community curling clubs through intersecting notions of “race,” “whiteness,” and colonialism. The inquiry also identified narratives that were absent or underrepresented as part of discourses related to diversity in sport, thereby highlighting specific privileges and inequalities within the sport. The presentation will discuss how curling’s lack of diversity presents a conflicting view to long-held traditions that often celebrate sense of community and accessibility. The paper advances narrative inquiry in sport management by interrogating how the narratives told and counternarratives impact a local sport organization’s ability to understand and promote diversity. The research offers valuable new insights, which can be used to guide inclusive decision-making while advancing opportunities for racialized peoples to participate and lead in community sport.