The Arborescent Model of Privilege: Critical Allyship in Sport Management

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Leadership in the sport industry is dominated by individuals that possess multiple privileged identities (e.g., White, male, able-bodied, heterosexual; Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Fink et al., 2001; Lapchick, 2020). The same can be said about students that enroll in sport management programs. A recent survey of 333 sport management students found that 63.4% were male, 66.4% were White and 85.9% came from middle (51.7%) or upper-middle (34.2%) class households (Barnhill et al., 2018). Thus, the industry must be cognizant of its obligation to address various forms of inequality to ensure that sport is accessible to all.

The many -isms (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) in American society are often framed as issues impacting marginalized populations instead of as a comprehensive problem where elevated populations benefit from these same systems of inequality (Nixon, 2019). Those with unearned advantage (i.e., privilege) give their time and energy to the perceived benefit of those who are oppressed, typically without acknowledging their role in perpetuating these systems. Through this lens, the involvement of the privileged “has been seen most often—by themselves and by others—as magnanimous” (Daniels, 1996, p. 200).

We continue to see social inequities feature prominently in the collective consciousness of those in the United States, and sport has continually provided a central forum for discussion on such issues. As a field it is integral that we equip ourselves to productively contribute to such conversations. The goal of this presentation, therefore, is to build upon Nixon's (2019) Coin Model of Privilege and to facilitate a discussion on critical allyship in the sport industry.

The model provides a visual representation of systems of inequality that explains how social structures (i.e., the middle of the coin) produce both unearned advantage for those on top of the coin, and unearned disadvantage for those on the bottom (i.e., oppression). Further, Nixon (2019) introduced the concept of critical allyship which advocates for a reorientation from the dominant way of thinking about how people in positions of privilege should address inequities, which assumes that the most ethical and effective way to address… disparities is for people on top of the coin to use their expertise to help marginalized groups with their problems (p. 7).

Critical allyship asks those on top of the coin to understand their role in perpetuating systems of inequality, learn from and work alongside individuals in historically marginalized groups, and work “to build insight among others in positions of privilege, and [mobilize] in collective action under the leadership of people on the bottom of the coin.” (p. 8, emphasis in original).

Though Nixon’s model was intended to confront “health inequities” (p. 1), the model is highly adaptable to sport both to tackle systems of inequity within sport and teach and promote allyship within the discipline. Using the coin model to advocate for critical allyship can greatly benefit sport as it asks all, not just those in marginalized groups, to view inequity as a multifaceted and complex problem.