Managerial Implications for a Systems Theory of Youth Development through Sport

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Sport for Development - Other (Youth Sport)  Abstract 2021-252
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  Mode: Asynchronous
Session: Live Q&A for Sport for Development (Asynchronous)  Saturday June 5, 2021, 1:40 PM - 2:40 PM

The field of Sport for Development (SfD) has been critiqued for its lack of coordinated action, with a particular focus on SfD programs and practitioners operating in isolation from one another and from other efforts (e.g., social development, health promotion) (Massey et al., 2015). Further, SfD research is often framed through a single disciplinary lens, as opposed to taking an interdisciplinary approach to inquiry (Darnell et al., 2016; Massey & Whitley, 2020). This has resulted in both overlapping and contradictory SfD research that often remains within disciplinary silos, thus reflecting what Doherty (2013) might classify as a multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary field of research.

The lack of conceptual and theoretical clarity is particularly evident within youth-focused SfD research, which has been critiqued for focusing quite narrowly (and selectively) on individual development (Jones et al., 2020). While SfD scholars have frequently alluded to the limitations of narrow empowerment approaches, translating such insight into practice has remained difficult. Most SfD programs serve youth in under-resourced communities that have frequently experienced complex and developmental trauma. In addition to understanding how these experiences manifest psychologically, it is also important to consider how SfD programs fit within broader social systems that in many cases perpetuate inequity.

During this presentation, we will outline an evidence-based systems theory of youth development through sport, which was developed through research with individuals who experienced complex and developmental trauma and were raised in under-resourced communities. While this research was conducted within sport psychology and sport sociology research frameworks, our aim in this presentation is to meld these theoretical insights with that of sport management to enable a critical discussion regarding the management of youth-focused SfD programs. First, an overview of this systems theory will be presented in the form of a systems map representing the social, infrastructural, and policy landscape through which youth engage in sport. Second, this map will be utilized to conceptually link different disciplinary perspectives around the synergies and interconnectedness between key concepts. Third, we engage in a critical discussion of how (or if) all of these components can be integrated into youth-focused SfD programs.

Our goal is to explore the nuance and complexities associated with various aspects of sport programming that are thought to facilitate or constrain youth development outcomes, focusing specifically on key sport psychology concepts such as competition, talent development, feedback loops, mastery experiences, locus of control, identity development, and implicit and explicit learning. In addition, we draw on theoretical insight from sport sociology to situate this analysis within the broader social, political, and economic contexts within which SfD programs operate. While there are commonalities across disciplinary perspectives, there are also key philosophical, theoretical, and epistemological tensions that, at times, create conflicting perspectives. We strive to embrace this complexity by anchoring sport management at the center of this discussion and offering recommendations for both research and practice.