



An ethnographic study of issues surrounding the provision of sport opportunities to young men from a western Canadian inner-city

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 December 2012

Received in revised form

15 February 2013

Accepted 17 February 2013

Available online 14 March 2013

Keywords:

Mental health

Ethnographic

Qualitative

At risk

Masculinity

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to examine issues surrounding the provision of sport opportunities to young men from inner-city areas of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. More specifically, the research question was: What are the benefits, constraints, and opportunities associated with providing sport programs to young men from inner-city areas?

Design: Ethnography.

Methods: Data were collected via 15 months of participant observation and interviews with 12 youth workers who were responsible for the provision of various sport programs to young inner-city dwellers. Analysis was framed around personal, social, and structural issues.

Results: At a personal level sport provided young men with an outlet for overcoming boredom and a temporary reprieve from the conditions of their daily lives. At a social level sport provided opportunities for relationship building between the youth workers and the young men. However, enduring structural constraints associated with economic and social inequality and the lack of a coordinated approach to the delivery of services restricted the influence that sport could have in the lives of the young men.

Conclusion: This study provided some precise understandings of the benefits, constraints, and opportunities associated with providing sport programs to members of specific populations in certain inner-city circumstances. Findings, therefore, have the potential to inform public health policy concerning the use of sport-for-development programming in such contexts.

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Despite a lack of direct and robust evidence for the benefits of sport participation (Coakley, 2011; Holt & Jones, 2008; Smith & Waddington, 2004), there is a history of the implementation of sport programs by governmental and non-governmental organizations in many countries as corrective measures for a range of health, psychological, and social problems. Such 'sport-for-development' programs are popularly regarded as common sense neoliberal solutions to public issues as diverse as poverty, crime prevention, youth development, peace, risk reduction, and health promotion (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2010; Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Levermore, 2008). However, despite the ascendancy of these claims, research is needed to gain better understandings of the precise types of outcomes specific programs may produce, under what circumstances, and the mechanisms that produce or limit the attainment of such outcomes (Coalter, 2010; Levermore, 2008).

In order to identify outcomes and mechanisms associated with participation in sport programs it may be useful to distinguish

between different types of programs. Coalter (2010) described *traditional* forms of sport as programs with an implicit assumption or explicit focus on the value of sport for promoting development. Participation in traditional sport programs has been associated with negative outcomes such as the misuse of alcohol (O'Brien, Blackie, & Hunter, 2005), engagement in delinquent behaviors (Begg, Langley, Moffit, & Marshall, 1996), and use of illegal drugs (Peretti-Watel et al., 2003). On the other hand, participation in traditional sport has been correlated with positive outcomes such as improved self-esteem, emotional regulation, problem-solving, goal attainment, social skills, and academic performance (e.g., Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

Other types of sport-for-development programs have been classified as *sport plus* and *plus sport* (Coalter, 2010). *Sport plus* programs involve sports that are adapted and/or augmented with parallel programs to maximize their potential to achieve developmental objectives. *Plus sport* programs, on the other hand, use sport's popularity as a 'hook' to attract young people to education and training. *Sport plus* and *plus sport* programs can be viewed on a continuum and the differences between these programs are not

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always clear cut. In the current study, for example, we examined a program that could best be classified as *sport plus*, in that it used sport to attract less affluent young men to social services provided by inner-city agencies. There remains a need to examine issues relating to the provision of sport-for-development programs because, although they are often rooted in enduring beliefs about the power of sport for building prosocial outcomes, there is little evidence to support these claims (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2007, 2010). Moreover, for critics, such approaches are regularly articulated with neoliberal ideology that encourages a focus on individual personal development and success while “discounting social issues and the need for progressive change at a collective or community level” (Coakley, 2011, p. 308).

Midnight basketball programs in the US are a prime example of a neoliberal *sport plus* approach designed to inculcate values of discipline while keeping inner-city Black youths off the streets, all without addressing broader public issues of poverty and inequitable race relations. Some cities that initially embraced officially sanctioned midnight basketball leagues experienced sharper decreases in property crime rates than other US cities (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). In follow-up research, Wheelock and Hartmann (2007) further suggested that midnight basketball programs appeared to have positive influence on crime rates in addition to briefly shining a critical spotlight on issues of inequitable race relations in public debates. However, for these authors, the ‘real’ impact of these programs was more complex. Ironically, the media’s coverage of midnight basketball may have ultimately contributed to the increased production of images of crime and, in turn, heightened a racialized moral panic that made prevention appear misguided and ineffective. These studies of midnight basketball reflect a key issue; that sport-for-development programs may produce specific positive and negative influences on some people in certain circumstances (Coalter, 2007), although they rarely move beyond a focus on personal troubles to “larger issues of social and structural change at the neighborhood and community levels” (Coakley, 2011, p. 316). Indeed, for critics, one the key reasons why these types of programs are so popular “is that it is much easier and, cheaper, to occupy the time of young people identified as ‘at risk’ than it is to deal with the real problems of poverty, impoverished neighborhoods, lack of role models, poor education, and other issues” (Coakley & Donnelly, 2002, p. 12). From this perspective, sport-for-development programs focused on personal development almost altogether ignore the immediate, pressing, and ‘real time’ social concerns that are encountered by ‘high risk’ populations in everyday living.

Related to this latter point, of particular relevance to the current research is the view that sport may play a role in offering avenues to health and personal development for low-income ‘at risk’ individuals by linking the disparate cultures of the inner-city with those of the broader mainstream population (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). A host of sport programs across Canada provide people from less affluent backgrounds with opportunities to have fun, exercise, and compete – opportunities they could not otherwise afford given the escalating cost of playing sport (Donnelly & Harvey, 2006). Despite their popularity, Coakley and Donnelly (2002) highlighted that the historical development of urban sport programs in Canada was regularly constituted by the instrumental goals of assimilation and social control to inculcate ‘at risk’ youth and new immigrants with middle-class values of self-discipline, respect for authority, and the virtues of fair play.

This study more specifically focused on the role of sport programs delivered to young males from inner-city areas from mental health perspectives. In the academic literature, the term mental health is used to refer to a high level of wellbeing and the absence of disease (Biddle & Mutrie, 2001), whereas mental illness is a term

commonly used to refer to clinically diagnosed conditions (e.g., personality and mood disorders), often based on the classification system of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Several researchers have examined the role of various forms of physical activity and sport as a therapeutic treatment for individuals with mental illness. Involvement in physical activity/sport programs can provide individuals with mental illness important opportunities for social interactions that can improve self-esteem and create new meanings and senses of identity (Carless & Douglas, 2004; Faulkner, 2005). For example, Faulkner and Sparkes (1999) examined physical activity opportunities provided at an inner-city hostel for young people with a history of homelessness in London, England. Participants (who were individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia) received a 10-week exercise program that consisted of twice weekly 30 min sessions of moderate activity. Reported changes as a result of participating in the program included a reduction of thought disorder (‘voices’), improved sleeping patterns, and improved behavior on the days when participants exercised. These benefits were thought to stem from the distraction from everyday activities provided by the exercise program, in addition to the new opportunities for social interactions the program offered, and improvements in participants’ self-esteem.

Researchers have also sought to understand the experiences of men with mental illness in relation to sport participation. For example, Carless and Douglas (2008) used participant observation and interviews with 11 men (aged 24–43 years) who attended a vocational rehabilitation centre in the UK and participated in a weekly activity group. They identified three narratives that depicted the participants’ experiences. An ‘action’ narrative captured the importance of sport in providing opportunities to engage in activities and having things to do. An ‘achievement narrative’ reflected the role of sport in providing opportunities for participants to simply accomplish things, thus nourishing a sense of success and confidence in their lives. Finally, a ‘relationship narrative’ referred to the social opportunities people developed through new social bonds with other program attendees and the program providers. Through sport, participants “were able, to a greater or lesser extent, to re-story their lives through reconstructing or sustaining a more positive, hopeful, and meaningful identity and sense of self independent of mental health culture” (p. 592). Together, these and other related studies (e.g., Carless & Sparkes, 2008; Douglas & Carless, 2010) have revealed important information about the potential benefits of sport for people with mental illness.

Individuals who grow up in less affluent/inner-city neighborhoods tend to fare worse in terms of education, physical and mental health, and employment than those from more advantaged neighborhoods (Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2007). Young men from inner-city areas, in this respect, embody a range of ‘hidden injuries’ of social class, as well as physical ones stemming from an omnipresent culture of violence that plays a powerful role in shaping social relationships and their gendered identities (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Young men who live in violent or crime-prone inner-city neighborhoods often have greater contact with the criminal justice system and, unsurprisingly, these contacts are overwhelmingly negative, potentially leading to a distrust of social institutions and officials with power (Harding, 2010).

Although sport programs may offer a promising avenue for making connections with young men from inner-cities (McLaughlin et al., 1994), there are a number of caveats that need to be raised in association with this claim. For example, when these programs have been exclusively designed for boys and young men they can also become a distinctly gendered forum for the teaching of masculine virtues (e.g., strength, toughness, quiet fortitude, and fraternal loyalty). Subscription to such hegemonic masculinity can

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