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Diversity and culture can be abstract concepts that may be difficult for undergraduate students to grasp, especially for sport management students as this field had largely ignored cultural considerations until the turn of the 21st century (Girginov, 2010). Cunningham’s (2012) research into the prevalence, antecedents, and outcomes of diversity training has revealed that this topic has “received relatively little attention among sport management scholars” (p. 399) despite the benefits associated with such training. His research has identified positive associations between diversity training for individuals, work environments, and organizations. Since training alone does not translate to implementation of diverse practices, it is important to recognize that these connections need to be made within an organization’s mission, strategic aims, personnel evaluations, and hiring practices. Cunningham’s statements mirror research from Bopp et al. (2014), who asserted that diversity is not something that can be forced; instead, it must be “cautiously embedded within an organizational culture” (p. 2).

The Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA, 2016) provides eight accreditation principles that address assessment, planning, curriculum, faculty, scholarly/professional activities, resources, internal/external relationships, and educational innovations. Principle 7 addresses internal and external relationships with a section on diversity in sport management. COSMA (2016) states that sport management education should include many forms of diversity and prepare students to “function effectively in an increasingly diverse sport industry” (p. 54). However, no detailed description of diversity was provided, and the vague language used required the reader to interpret the meaning, application, and implementation (COSMA, 2016; Pitts & Shapiro, 2017). This gap is most telling when faculty members tasked with discussing topics of diversity, inclusion, and equity were instead reluctant to explore such subjects with their students due to lack of education in these areas (Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). Lack of diversity education can negatively affect the workplace, as diversity education can lead to more diverse and inclusive work environments, which contribute to increased productivity, job satisfaction, retention, commitment, motivation, and attracting new talent (Cunningham & Chelladurai, 2017). These are all strengths that sport management education seeks to promote; however, a lack of weight and focus on diversity and inclusion exists within these pedagogical practices due to the lack of research available in this area or the vague language used in the accreditation principles.

Nevertheless, sport management faculty could utilize the field of social work for pedagogical guidance with issues relating to diversity, inclusion, and social justice. The field of social work excels in addressing these issues, which are detailed within the accreditation standards. The Council on Social Work Education (2015) is the accrediting body for this field of social work and contains Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Similar to COSMA’s principles, the EPAS include nine competencies that provide active language requiring students to demonstrate, engage, advance, assess, intervene, and evaluate various dimensions of social work practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). These dimensions include an understanding of how to best meet the needs of the population. As such, the EPAS standards view diversity via specific requirements that include but are not limited to “age, class, color, culture, disability or ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status” (p. 7).

This viewpoint prioritizes an understanding of intersectionality, which considers the effect and significance of multiple intersecting identities on a person’s life (Crenshaw, 1989). It is nearly impossible for intersecting identities to create identical effects based on a certain mix of groups (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Instead, how identities interact produces effects that are “additive, multiplicative (also called interactional), and intersectional—depending on the social structures at play, the context, and time” (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017, p. 395).

Diversity specifications are outlined further within the National Association of Social Work’s (2015) cultural competencies, which require self-awareness, cultural humility, cross-cultural knowledge, empowerment and advocacy practices, education and training programs, leadership that advances cultural competence, and even language and communication among different populations. While issues of diversity in sport management notes the dominance of White, heterosexual males in positions of power and leadership (Bopp et al., 2014; Viaden & Gregg, 2017) diversity concerns extend beyond demographics. Therefore, utilizing social work standards and theories on diversity could assist the field of sport management with going beyond simply hiring a more diverse workforce.

Ecological systems theory is a recognized tool for implementing and educating diversity as supported by its use in social work accreditation standards and cultural competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2015). This theory is also used to provide workforce

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training on issues of substance abuse (Galvani, 2017) or interpersonal relationships (Bluteau et al., 2017) and provides perspectives that assist with creating trauma-informed teaching practices (Crosby, 2015) that focus specific attention on diversity. Ecological systems theory offers a unique outlook for teaching multicultural perspectives across various systems including micro, meso, exo, macro, andchrono. This theory provides a succinct model for demystifying such abstract concepts as diversity, inclusion, and social justice in sport, and provides sport management students, practitioners, and educators with a broader understanding of diversity.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecological systems theory was first proposed by a child psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974). During clinical work with clients, this psychologist noticed that many individually based interventions were not effective. Moreover, the challenges that his clients were facing did not appear to stem from individual psychopathology; instead, these challenges arose from external forces, such as parental/familial issues, school policies, and cultural considerations. Thus, individual interventions would not aid in the child’s recovery, and interventions across systems would likely be more effective. Bronfenbrenner then established the ecological systems theory, which describes five unique systems that influence individual development and wellness the microsystem, mesosystem (or meso), exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

The **microsystem** is the individual’s immediate environment, where they interact with different systems (people and physical spaces) on an everyday basis. In sports, an athlete’s coaches and teammates are their microsystem. The **mesosystem** refers to how the microsystem interacts to impact the individual. For example, although an athlete may not be directly involved in the interaction, an altercation between an athlete’s coach and the athlete’s guardian has implications for the athlete. The **exosystem** is comprised of larger environments and/or systems whose interactions impact the individual; however, these interactions may not directly interact with the individual. For instance, if the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) investigates a university for recruiting violations, that would impact the experience of a student-athlete and be an example of exosystem. The **macrosystem** includes patterns of culture and belief systems that create the society in which the individual is living. Instances of how Title IX impacts college athletics, how systematic racism impacts individual Black athletes’ experiences, or how playing football in the American South is culturally different from playing football in Canada all represent macrolevel societal culture and belief systems. Finally, the **chronosystem** includes changes in time and eras in which an individual is living. A sport-specific example is the “steroid era” in baseball. A professional baseball player playing in the steroid era is going to have a different playing experience than a professional player playing when performance-enhancing drugs are heavily regulated. The baseball player today is still impacted by the “steroid era” as some offensive records were established with the alleged assistance of performance-enhancing drugs.

Ecological systems theory is used as a practical model in social work that guides practice and education to assess a clients’ needs across systems attending to diverse factors that make up the individual’s experience (see Figure 1; Kondrat, 2017). In this way, the social worker conceptualizes the client’s case beyond demographic diversity. Thus, attention to diversity encompasses the organizations and cultures the client is embedded in, along with an understanding of individual attributes. Similarly, sport management professionals trained to work with individuals should understand the impacts of cultural systems, as well as be attuned to organizational practices, which are all aspects of diversity that may be missed under traditional conceptualizations that do consider diversity beyond visible differences (Clair et al., 2005). Therefore, incorporating a model that attends to all aspects of diversity, including individual (micro), organizational (meso), and cultural/structural (macro), in ecological systems theory, may be beneficial to sport management students as they learn the important impact of diversity on managerial decisions.

**Practical Applications**

Ecological systems theory has been used by sports scholars as a theoretical framework for their research (Cooper et al., 2016; Culpepper & Kilion, 2016; Harris et al., 2014; LaVoi, 2011; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) used ecological systems theory to explore the experiences of female coaches, and Culpepper and Kilion (2016) used ecological systems theory to analyze sport as a macrosystem due to its reproduction and creation of culture. Although utilizing ecological systems in academic literature for sports management is an important contribution, there needs to be a translation of theory to practice, an essential step in sport management education. This is especially needed when considering educational applications of social justice and sport for development (Welty Peachey et al., 2019). Woods et al. (2020) have suggested using the ecological perspective or the athlete-environment fit to translate this theory to practice in sport organizations in relation to coaching and athlete performance. However, while this perspective does consider the micro- and macrosystems, it ignores the meso- and exosystems, which may be especially important for future sport managers who are trained to attend to these organizational demands.

Incorporating ecological systems theory into the sport management classroom may be particularly effective in teaching a broader conceptualization of diversity. Specifically, if ecological systems theory is introduced as the theoretical frame across coursework and is used to design core course projects, it provides sport management students specific ways to think about sport management, in much the same way that it encourages social work students to understand client assessment. In this way, it may become easier for students to comprehend and professors to teach the impact of diversity on managerial decisions when using a visual, practical model (Gitterman, 2008).

A sports organization’s financial plan can be placed in the center of the model, and students can examine the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono influences that contributed to the plan. This will offer students a framework for beginning a discussion on assessing the diverse influences and impacts of an organization’s financial decisions. This model could be applied to discussions of discriminatory policies and cognitions that impact transgender athletes in a sport governance course. The students could analyze various levels of discrimination that impact the athlete, from the coaching staff (micro) level to lack of inclusive policies (exo) to a history of discriminatory practices (chrono; see Figure 1). Once these systems of discrimination are identified, the instructor could task students with generating one specific action step for change at each level. At the microlevel, the action step might be to host an educational workshop for coaches that raises awareness of inclusive definitions, terms, and approaches as well as assists in
Figure 1 — Ecological systems theory with applications of diversity in sport. FTM = female-to-male.
recognizing any personal biases toward the community. Whereas at the macrolevel, they may advocate for their organizational leaders to end policies requiring individuals to identify by their biological sex.

Students could be assigned to create an event plan in an event management class for their final project wherein they play the role as event manager tasked with making an event accessible to individuals with mobility issues. The instructor would have students place the individual using a wheelchair or crutches in the center of the model, and students would identify micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronolevel influences on that individual in order to identify their various needs. The students would then discuss a plan of action to meet the needs of that individual at each level. At the microlevel, perhaps students would identify the role of a caregiver as an important aspect of inclusion; therefore, they would need to ensure that accessible seating also has companion seating. At the mesolevel, the students may identify the relationship between public transportation and event parking, and thus, will ensure that in addition to available, accessible parking near the event entrance, that buses transporting individuals with mobility issues also have access to a drop-off near the event entrance. At the exolevel, students may identify the lack of training and education that their organization has regarding individuals with disabilities, and they might initiate a training for all of the event staff. At the macrolevel, students might identify important applications of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and recognize the need to ensure that their facility is ADA compliant. Finally, at the chronolevel, students might identify the history of discriminatory language surrounding individuals with disabilities. Applying historical concepts at the chronolevel can assist them with making connections between a history of discriminatory language and a need for more inclusive signage, advertisements, and marketing that include appropriate disability language.

In addition, entire classes may also be structured around this model. This theory could be presented in a sociocultural foundations course on the first day of class, discussing how sport management tended to focus on the microlevel (individual athletes) and meso/exolevels (organizations). However, sociology tends to focus on the macro- and chronolevels (culture). The instructor could then return to the model and place information in each system that impacts the population being discussed, such as the experiences of ethnic minorities in sport, or the experiences of youth athletes in elite sports. This may help students conceptualize the connection between sport management and various sociological concepts during the semester.

These are only a few specific examples; however, the authors have found that this model could be a useful tool in the classroom for broadening students concepts of diversity while also creating a practical vehicle for applying these concepts. Conceptualizing cases across these systems allows for the expansion of thinking about various themes within sport management and challenges students to find avenues for advocacy and change that go beyond individual interventions and one-dimensional practices. Rather than simply building a singular wheelchair ramp for basic accommodation purposes, the student is now challenged to discover additional areas of need, such as more inclusive language. Attention to the macro- and chronosystems also prompts the students and instructors to expand upon their notions of diversity and to think about advocacy outside of their individual organizations, to make sport a more diverse and inclusive environment.

Conclusion

Sport management research supports the importance and need for having a diverse and inclusive work environment (Bopp et al., 2014; Cunningham, 2012; Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020), and COSMA (2016) expects students to be educated on how to navigate diverse sport environments. Ecological systems theory provides a framework for implementing educational and practical applications related to the concepts of diversity. Social work competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2015) utilize the same framework which encourage educators to specifically instruct students on how to understand the importance of diversity via practical exercises at the micro-, mezzo-, and macrolevels. Moreover, this approach allows students to apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels. Similar models of education should be employed in the sport management curriculum by teaching ecological systems theory in sport management classes and using it to inform core assignments as a way to incorporate and teach a broader conceptualization of diversity.

Utilizing ecological systems theory within sport management courses can clarify and expand upon COSMA’s principles regarding diversity and provide sport management educators with a path for implementation. Implementation of ecological systems theory in sport management education can assist educators with embedding diversity in organizational culture by arming sport management students with a deeper understanding of diversity and inclusion and providing them with the knowledge on how to apply those concepts in sport management decisions and policies. This may promote a deeper commitment to diversity in sport culture following Bopp et al.’s (2014) and Cunningham’s (2012) call. Sport management education has the opportunity to greatly benefit from the application of social work theories and principles.

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References


