Critical Social Science and the Development of Sustainable Sport Management Studies
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There have been constant calls for a reexamination of research methods and approaches within the sport management field (Chalip, 1997). For example, in 2005 the Journal of Sport Management published a special issue featuring new ways of conducting research within the field. In this issue, Amis and Silk (2005) encouraged the use of critical paradigms. Further, Frisby (2005) in her Zeigler Address spoke of the importance of critical social research to “uncover and begin to deal more adequately with the bad and ugly sides of sports” (Frisby, p. 5). One “ugly” side that has not previously been explored is the environmental impact of sport organizations (Hums, 2009).

Environmental sustainability can be characterized as “not treat[ing] humans and nature as separate from each other and [the] wish to maintain life opportunities by reconciling sound human development and environmental integrity” (Ayres, van den Bergh & Gowdy, 2001). As a result of heightened awareness among consumers, environmental sustainability stands as one of the largest growing concerns within business operations. However, environmental programs are the exception rather than the norm among sport organizations. Considering the lack of concern for the environment, a critical examination is needed to understand why sport organizations engage or disregard environmental sustainability programs. Understanding these practices can ultimately lead to social change, not only by decreasing the environmental impact of sport organizations but through consistent consideration for the environment. It is our purpose to develop a critical environmental lens with fusing critical social science and study of environmental sustainability.

Critical social science can provide an alternative lens when developing research questions that go beyond the scope of developed managerial theory. Jermier and Forbes (2003) apply critical social science to environmental issues, but further understanding is needed within a sport context. Frisby indicates, “CSS arose because of a disillusionment with traditional forms of managerial theory, research, and practice (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992) and can best be understood as a way of empowering individuals by confronting injustices in order to promote social change (Kincheloe & McLaren)” (p. 2). The field has encouraged sport to be used as a forum for social change (Ziegler, 1995). Unlike previous contextual applications of critical social science, the environment has no voice and only advocates (e.g. non-profit organizations, activists, scholars, researchers) to stand up for its protection. As a result of advocacy, conflict takes place between power positions (e.g. governments, corporations) and advocates for the environment (McIntosh, 2009; Mincyte, Casper & Cole, 2009; Sze, 2009; Vivoni, 2009).

Critical social science embodies three coinciding stages of inquiry (i.e. insight, critique, and transformative redefinition; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) that can give a more substantial view of the environmental impacts of sport organizations. Through these stages a critical lens can further organizational research and theory. Like institutional theory (see Bill & Hardgrave, 1981; Hodgson, 1994; Scott, 2001), critical social science examines the institutionalization of knowledge and procedures. Gaining insight to the lack of environmental concern can indicate how these practices are reinforced. Additionally, examining organizations that have become environmentally friendly can provide insight to how institutionalized practices of disregarding the environment have been eroded. For example, a select number of golf courses within the United States have embraced environmental sustainability. These courses have abandoned commonly used maintenance practices that use excessive amounts of pesticides, fertilizers, and water (Audubon International, 2009). As a result, these courses have dramatically decreased their impact on the surrounding ecosystem and wildlife populations.

Additionally, the critique of environmentally harmful practices can be rather fruitful. From this understanding, environmental practices can examine claims of the organization’s concern for the environment. Frisby (2005) demonstrates the critique’s “goal is to reveal how knowledge claims are politically loaded but are often obscured by claims of truth and experience, that at the very worst, can cause subordinates to see their situations as natural or inevitable” (pp. 7). Through this phase, researchers can identify environmental concerns that are of no concern or ignored by government agencies and sport organizations. For example, Donald Trump is developing a golf course in Scotland, but the construction threatens a Site of Scientific Interest (McIntosh, 2009). The environmental impact due
to the development was not questioned by local government agencies, but was challenged by local residents with no result. Studying this example with a critical lens can bring further understanding of the power controls to the lack of policies and procedures that threaten a once protected environmental landscape.

Lastly, transformative redefinition has tremendous managerial implications (Frisby, 2005). Though this phase, new understanding of organizational processes are interpreted to provide social change. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) show that transformative redefinition reveals “managerially relevant knowledge and practical understanding that enables change and provides skills for new ways of operating” (p. 21). Managers can be educated on the processes and necessary changes that are needed to become environmentally sustainable as environmental issues are discovered, explored, and interpreted. These new processes can encourage innovation within management as organizations strive to become environmentally sustainable. As the goal with CSS, managerial changes can ultimately lead to social changes (Frisby). Within in social change institutional practices that disregard the environment will erode to practices that embrace environmental integrity. For example, the Philadelphia Eagles had adopted environmental sustainability programs, including offsetting the team’s carbon emissions. Additional programs extend into the daily management of the organization (King, 2008). The program in Philadelphia has led the National Football League and other teams to incorporate similar environmental programs.

We conclude the presentation by discussing other applications of this critical lens to issues within international (e.g. Sydney and Beijing Olympics, Six Nations Rugby), professional (e.g. NFL, MLB, PGA), collegiate (e.g. NCAA), and recreational sport. Additionally, we will discuss the implications of social change with regards to the environment, local communities, stakeholders, and other organizations within the sport industry. Finally, we will also present suggestions for future research using a critical lens and studying environmental sustainability.