The Sociological Imagination: A Tool to Help Sport Management Students See the Big Picture

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Significance of topic to sport managers

One of the commonalities in approval/accreditation requirements as sport management departments/programs transition from the SMPRC requirements to newer COSMA principles is the inclusion of social scientific frameworks in order to better understand sport and physical activity. Once known as "socio-cultural aspects" of sport and now labeled as "psychosocial foundations" of sport, examinations of sport from social science perspectives helps students understand how sport is structured, and how prospective sport managers fit themselves and their organizations into their current social milieu.

Literature review

C. Wright Mills's (1959) concept of the sociological imagination helps to explain how an individual is able to distinguish between public issues and personal problems and how action is the result of better understanding this complex relationship, which is based on history and biography. Mills's concern was that academic disciplines were too narrowly focused upon individual problems and were neglecting to study or produce students that adequately understood the importance of larger social arrangements upon individual actions (Hilliard, 1994). Similarly, Theodore Levitt's (1983) "marketing imagination" is a reminder to marketers everywhere about the importance of knowing the social world in order to better understand information, as compared to raw data separated from human experience. Korschning and Wilson (1996) note the similarity of Mills's "sociological imagination" with Levitt's "marketing imagination." Specifically:

[a]s the sociological imagination takes the sociologist beyond the narrow confines of studying individual problems within a localized milieu to upstanding social issues in their historical and sociocultural perspectives, so the marketing imagination takes the market researcher beyond the nature and characteristics of the specific product to the meaning the product might have to its potential purchasers and users (Korschning & Wilson, 1996, p.22).

Since sociologists, market researchers, and future sport managers collect information in order to understand social events or actions, harnessing the analytical power of both sociological and marketing imaginations is crucial for sport managers to develop products, services, and programs for their fans, constituents, and consumers. Sport managers with myopic or narrow-minded worldviews may miss how their organizations fit within their community, region, or culture.

Purpose/objectives

Since the marketing imagination may be taught to sport managers through a variety of marketing classes or experiences, the sport management classes focused on teaching psychosocial foundations should expose prospective sport managers to the sociological imagination. The purpose of this presentation is to illustrate one teaching method for understanding sport and the sociological imagination. To expand students' understanding of the sociological imagination, in general, a variety of classroom methods have been used to illustrate this concept. Hendershott and Wright (1993) used autobiographies to teach non-sociology majors the concept, Mobley (2000) had students develop occupational profiles, and Valdez and Halley (1999) utilized film to connect public problems with Mexican-American experiences. Blinde (1995), however, required students from sociology of sport classes to attend live sporting events to identify the power of social structure upon the individual, thereby, forcing students to examine the sociological imagination as a concept prevalent within sport. Building upon the diverse methods used to examine the sociological imagination, the presentation includes both a brief demonstration of the method and evidence regarding its impact on sport management students.
In demonstrating this method, thirteen archival photographs are utilized. Specifically, these photographs, from the university library archives, represent images of sport, recreation, and physical activity from the university's sports programs or local sporting activities. Photos represent the evolution of sports, including women and youth sports, sport facilities, and community sport events. The photos range in years from 1885 to 1938, and they are compared to students' understanding of current sport experiences. During the exercise, students examine each photograph and, as a group, the class discusses individual observations of each photograph. Each photograph is then related to the historical context in which the photograph was taken. By relating the individuals in the photograph to the local, national, and global historical context of the time, sport management students better understand how sport participation and consumption is related to larger social, political, and economic forces.

Potential for impact on teaching quality

The presenter employed the sociological imagination class activity in both graduate and undergraduate sport management sociology of sport classes since 2006. After each presentation, students filled out a questionnaire regarding their understanding of the sociological imagination and the activity's impact upon that resultant understanding. The survey, which was adapted from Hanson (2002), included demographic information, close-ended Likert scale questions regarding the activity's effectiveness, and open-ended questions where students were able to assess the activity. Likert scale responses ranged one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree). After coding the surveys, there were 138 usable surveys ($n = 138$). The sample had an average age of 22 years old, was composed primarily of juniors (36.2%), seniors (27.5%), and graduate students (26.1%). Finally, the sample included more males as compared to females (80% vs. 20%) and was primarily white, non-Hispanic (94%) as compared to African-American (6%).

Preliminary analysis reveals a vast majority of students feel the exercise was beneficial to their understanding of the sociological imagination, in general, and better helped them understand how this analytical concept relates to the sport management industry. For example, all six questions measuring students' evaluation of the method had means ranging from 3.2/4.0 to 3.97/4.0 illustrating students' overall positive evaluation of the exercise. Implications and further analyses are discussed and recommendations for how to teach such an analytical concept are provided.

Originality of teaching innovation

The photograph method for teaching the sociological imagination has been previously used by Hanson (2002) in a non-sport context. Hanson (2002) noted that the use of photographs has been largely untapped as a teaching resource regarding this concept, and used depression-era photographs to illustrate how economic hardships impact individual families. The in-class presentation/discussion replicated this teaching method (e.g. utilizing photographs) and applied both the method and concept to sport management courses.