Sporting Communities: A Comparison of Formal versus Informal Sport Contexts

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The sporting environment is frequently considered a context that draws people together and contributes to the creation of community both among fans and participants (Schimmel, 2003). However, sport outcomes are not always positive. In fact, critics have cited sport as an arena that fosters anomic and deviant behaviors, actually pulling people away from accepted social norms and group belonging (Carter & Carter, 2007; Chalip, 2006; Coakley, 2001; Irwin, 1973; Kleiber, 1983). The outcomes from sport whether positive or negative, clearly are dependent upon both the structure and management of the sport experience (see Chalip, 2006; Kleiber, 1983).

McCormack and Chalip (1988) have argued that much of the sport literature has operated on the methodological assumption that sporting environments are unitary by simply comparing sport participants to non-participants. Such studies treat all sporting environments and participant experiences as if they were consistently identical, when in fact there is likely great variation between participation experiences based on the structure and delivery (including coaching, context, social networks) of the specific sport in which they are participating. In an effort to expand existing theory through “the delineation of sport variations” (McCormack & Chalip, 1988, p. 90), the aim of this study is to explain how variations in sport delivery impact sport participants’ (i.e., athletes’) experiences, particularly those related to the participants’ sense of community.

Sense of community is an important outcome, especially for college students, as it has been shown to be related to increased academic performance and retention, as well as decreased drug and alcohol use (Battistich & Hom, 1997; McCarthy et al., 1990). Thus, understanding how and when college sport participants do or do not feel a sense of community can help in the conception and design of campus programs to improve community (Warner & Dixon, in press). From a broad perspective, the findings from this study may also inform how sport, as one of the few realms that consistently promotes a collective social experience (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1997), may play a role in enhancing a waning sense of community that has been recently documented in the larger US society (McPherson et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000).

Within the American collegiate setting two similar yet distinct sport systems typically exist: varsity athletics and sport clubs. Although both varsity and sport club systems bring together individuals with a common interest in sport, the way in which both programs are structured and implemented are quite different. In brief, varsity athletics are more structured, more regulated, and coach directed while sports clubs tend to be less structured, less regulated, and athlete directed. Based on the review of literature and examination of these two contexts, the following questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: Are there differences in what creates a sense of community for athletes within a formalized administrator led sport model (i.e., varsity athletics) and a less formal athlete-led model (i.e., sport clubs)?

Research Question 2: What are the contingencies in both sport models that seem to create a more conducive environment for community building?

Utilizing an interpretive approach, 8 focus groups consisting of a total of 39 current varsity and sport club athletes were utilized to interpret and explain the differences and similarities that emerged from interviews of individuals in both contexts regarding their sense of community and factors related to it (cf., Warner, 2010; Warner & Dixon, in press). Example focus group questions included: How does this experience relate to your own? Do you think these factors do/do not capture your own experience? Would you add or remove any factor? Focus groups were conducted until saturation was met and no new themes or information was emerging. The data were then analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 8 according to themes from previous literature, with attention to any new emergent ideas. Careful attention was also given to the relative importance of factors and differences between the contexts in which the speakers interpreted the results.

The focus group data showed that although many of the factors that create sense of community (e.g., Competition, Leadership, Equality of Administrative Decisions, Social Spaces, Administrative Consideration, Common Interest, and Voluntary Action/Amateurism) were similar between the contexts, the ways the factors manifested themselves and the relative importance they held for participants was strikingly different. For just one example, in the varsity context equitable administrative decisions were not expected, and when they occurred the sense of community and sport experience was enhanced. However, in the club context equitable decisions were expected and therefore, only detracted from a sense of community for club athletes when...
decisions were not equitable. Further, the more formal and professionalized varsity sport system set up a context where Leadership Opportunities, Administration Consideration, and Amateurism were not expected while these factors were expected within the more informal athlete-driven sport club model. Thus, the salience of the various factors in fostering a sense of community was context dependent, and the differing contingencies within the two sport structures helped mold a distinctive set of participant expectations and experiences. The social implications and philosophical differences between an athlete-directed sport experience versus a more formalized and structured sport experience are also discussed.