Applying Intergroup Contact Theory to the Sport Management Classroom

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Sport management research and practice over the years has touted the value of “real world” involvement and practical experience for students in preparing them for careers (Cuneen, 2004; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; Parilla & Hesser, 1998; Williams, 2004; Young & Baker, 2004). We offer internships, even requiring these for graduation at most institutions (Chouinard, 1993; Martin & Leberman, 2005) as a means to position students more favorably for jobs. And sport management researchers have also focused attention on issues of diversity in the sport industry and the organizations that compose it (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2005; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Sosa & Sagas, 2008), primarily noting that discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities and their underrepresentation in positions of leadership. However, beyond the social foundations course offered by most sport management programs, and required for program accreditation (www.cosmaweb.org) which typically provides only textbook knowledge of diversity, few sport management students have “real world” involvement and practical experience in racially diverse settings.

This symposium presents both a model for classroom and experiential engagement around diversity in sport, as well as student learning outcomes in accordance with the tenets of intergroup contact theory.

Research has examined the ability of intergroup contact to reduce prejudice. Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis states that contact with members of an out group, particularly those who are of a different race and/or ethnic group than oneself, is effective changing attitudes. Five key conditions inform the intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954, Pettigrew, 1998):

1. There must be equal status among group members within the contact situation.
2. Group members involved in the contact situation should engage in focused, interdependent activities towards the pursuit of common goals.
3. The contact situation should occur in an environment that fosters cooperation, rather than competition, between group members towards the common goal.
4. The contact situation must have proper approval and support of any relevant authorities. Institutional support may come from any authority seen as legitimate by the contact group.
5. The contact situation is conducive to the formation of cross group friendships in order to reduce prejudice and facilitate the potential for reducing prejudice of other out-groups as well.

The results of most research conducted has supported Allport’s hypothesis that contact with members of out-groups is in fact effective in reducing negative attitudes (Allport, 1954; Brown, Eller, Leeds and Stace, 2006; Dixon, Durheim and Tredoux, 2007; Pettigrew, 1997; Wagner, van Dick, Pettigrew and Christ, 2003; Wolsko, Park, Judd and Bachelor, 2003). And while some have found that intergroup contact does little or has no effect at all prejudice (Amir, 1976; Rothbart and John, 1985), it is accepted that participation in intergroup contact situations will likely result in a reduction of stereotypes and negative attitudes about out-group members. The question remains in these situations, however, what takes place to result in the minimizing of negative attitudes. Three mediators have been attributed as responsible for the change in attitudes: increased knowledge about the out-group, reduction of anxiety about the out-group and an increase in empathy towards the out-group (Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Rothbart & John, 1985; Sigelman & Welch; 1993).
Intergroup contact theory, complete with the five conditions and three mediators, was applied to an undergraduate and graduate hybrid service learning course. The course had a classroom component where students read selections on education, health and leadership in urban areas. They also spent a minimum of 35 hours per semester at one of four sites (a public elementary school, a public middle school, a city-operated recreation center, and a faith-based community program) engaged in sports and physical activity with children ages 5-18. The students then discussed and wrote reflections on the readings, their experiences at the three sites, and their own previous life experiences that have influenced their social identities and their understanding of others.

Data were gathered over three years, composed of 10 offerings of the course, 131 undergraduate and graduate students completed the class and ninety-one of the students gave consent to the use of selected written reflections, online discussions, and group papers. Classic content analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was utilized for preliminary open coding. From there axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) allowed for identifying causal relationships among the data within each open code. Results were organized first around establishing how Allport (1954) and Pettigrew’s (1998) five conditions were present, both through course design and students’ perceptions of the conditions. Next, data that spoke to the mediators was addressed. And lastly, data from the students that addressed changes, or lack thereof, in their perceptions of out-group members composed the remainder of the results.

Discussion in the symposium will center on the value of creating intergroup contact situations for sport management students that facilitate their increased knowledge of out-groups, reduction of anxiety about the out-group, and an increase in empathy toward the out-group. In doing such, sport management educators will be providing “real world” experience that not only will assist students in becoming more effective managers, but provide knowledge and understanding that they can generalize to other out-groups in situations the encounter in their lives and careers.