Little League vs. Sandlot: Understanding the Meanings of Formal and Informal Youth Sport Experiences
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For sport managers, pick-up sports often occupy a nebulous role in the sport delivery system. Pick-up sports, after all, often fall outside of the scope of management efforts on definitional grounds; that is, as pick-up sports are participant-governed and spontaneous in nature, there may be little perceived need to manage them. In terms of the broader systems used to develop both elite athletes and recreational participants, however, pick-up sports play a complementary role to organized sports for children, particularly given that child development and play theorists suggest that pick-up sports represent an essential form of developmental play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). In fact, in his indictment over sport management’s emphasis on elite development through an organized sport context, Zeigler (2007) wonders, “Where is the evidence that organized sport’s goal is based on tenable theory consonant with societal values that claim to promote the welfare of all?” (p. 298). Green (2008) similarly challenges sport managers to take a more proactive, participant-centered approach to the design and implementation of programs in multiple contexts, and cautions that a laissez-faire approach reliant on organized sport alone may produce unforeseen (or incompatible) outcomes. In their study related to variations in formal and informal sport experiences, Chalip et al. (1984) conclude that “sport participation cannot be discussed in the simple good-versus-bad terms which have characterized much of the youth sport debate” (p. 15). Yet, broad generalizations are often how sport is traditionally conceptualized. Green (2008) notes that “sport has been treated as if it were a unitary experience. That is, all sport is seen as the same; it is assumed to provide the same benefits to all participants no matter the program or context” (p. 138). Consequently, few empirical accounts have examined the sport experience outside of an organized sport context. Understanding context-specific variations in the sport experience, therefore, may equip sport managers with the knowledge necessary to create more responsive programs and policies for a diverse range of sport participants. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which participation in organized and pick-up sport contexts produces qualitatively differing meanings in the experiences of youth participants.

Consequently, this research adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Through its focus on the meaning of lived experience, phenomenology views the body as the channel through which individuals interpret and understand the world in which they live (Husserl, 1970; van Manen, 1997). As the body interacts with the world, the mind interprets and provides meaning for every situation that it encounters (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). These experiences (and their subsequent interpretation and meaning) are what then allow individuals to comprehend their own existence (Heidegger, 1962). In terms of the objective of the present research, phenomenology facilitates an immersive understanding of participant experiences in a manner that generates a “thick description” of the context (cf. Geertz, 1973). In accordance with phenomenological research methodology, data collection proceeds in a manner that “creates a multilayered text about the meaning of the human experiences under inquiry” (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000, p. 58). The genesis of this “text” emerges from the synthesis of “interactive” interviews aimed at eliciting “narrative texts” from the participant and naturalistic and participant-observer field notes (in addition to field documents) designed to yield a “field text” from the researcher (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). Traditionally, given the intensive level of immersion by the researcher in phenomenology, an average of six-to-nine purposively sampled participants is deemed sufficient for the analysis (Morse, 1994). Based on “close observation” (van Manen, 1997), eight-to-12 participants will be purposively sampled from approximately 60-80 children (aged 8-12) who participate in a central Texas youth association’s “Sandlot Night,” a weekly event in which the organization’s facilities (baseball and soccer fields) are opened up to allow youth the opportunity to play sports in a less-structured environment with minimal adult imposition. The duration of the research will last the length of the organization’s Fall sport season, but in order to elicit a more contemporaneous narrative from these participants, a longitudinal, prospective approach has been adopted whereby the researcher observes sport experiences of the participants in the two contexts and subsequently conduct semi-structured, conversational interviews about their experiences in these different settings (cf. Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). Only boys will be sampled in this particular study. While there are undoubtedly meaningful differences between the experiences of boys and girls at this age, it is important to adequately investigate each gender in sufficient depth to produce valuable insights, rather than providing a superficial understanding of a broader participant range.

In addition to observation and interactive interviews during the ongoing “Sandlot Nights,” the researcher also observes and interviews the participants during/after participation in organized league games in order to elicit opportunities for the natural emergence of context-specific variations. Following observation and interview of each participant in both experiential contexts, participants will be asked to write a reflective written account of the two experiences in each participative context that
represent their favorite and least favorite memories of playing sports in informal and organized settings. In accordance with the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (2000) designed to promote trustworthiness and authenticity of the data, the specific data analysis steps will strictly adhere to those proposed by the hermeneutic phenomenology framework developed by Ajaw and Higgs (2007).

This research is significant for sport managers because it inverts the assumption that the outcomes of sport participation are universal, which in turn may shift provider focus from the general provision of sport programs to the development of a diverse range of sport programs aimed at more directly meeting the demands of heretofore under-explored market segments. The anticipated findings will demonstrate that different sport contexts produce different meanings in the sport experiences, and the empirical conceptualization of the sport experience will begin the process of deconstructing participant experiences from sweeping generalities into manageable settings. Although this study will only represent an initial step toward understanding the experiences of sport participation in two contexts, it signifies an ontological shift about understanding the potential value of sport experiences that fall outside the realm of organized sport. Whether, for example, you are a sport provider designing a program for at-risk youth to develop the ability to more effectively mediate social conflict, a sport organization creating a marketing campaign that connects with youth on a deeper level, or a coach looking to supplement the development of his/her athletes with less structured training regimens, an understanding of the meanings of participating in both pick-up and organized sports can offer significant insight. By gaining a more nuanced understanding of these variations in experience, sport managers will be in a position to leverage this knowledge to design and implement programs that both appeal to a broader array of participants and serve complementary functions within the sport development system.