Social Connection and Shared Responsibility in Sport: Locating Sport Management’s Role in Issues of Exploitation and Social Justice

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The topics of responsibility, fairness, and social justice are not new to the sport management discipline. For example, there has been a great deal of research that has focused on topics like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and managing diverse workforces. The premise of CSR is that organizations not only have a responsibility to maximize profits, but they must also use their power and influence to enhance the quality of life of its core constituents and surrounding communities (Krausz & Pava, 1995). Similarly, diversity researchers argue that organizations have a moral obligation and social responsibility to treat all of their employees fairly regardless of individual differences (Cunningham, 2006; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999). While many advances have been made in both of these areas of study, the focus often lies within the upper echelons of the organizations (i.e., the decision-makers) and not in relation to the larger institution of sport. Thus, the issue of responsibility is viewed as collective in that a loosely defined group of persons is identified as having responsibility rather than assigning personal responsibility to all involved (i.e., shared responsibility; May, 1992; Young, 2006). The purpose of this symposium is to discuss the shared responsibility those within sport have in a) preventing harm within the sport context, b) protecting the resources that are most exploited and perhaps least discussed within the sport context, and c) identifying the role of the sport management discipline in disseminating the necessary actions through which change can occur. Specifically, five panelists from diverse backgrounds will address protecting youth and adolescent sport participants from injury, protecting sport participants from sexual violence and abuse, protecting our planet, and protecting non-humans who are involuntarily used for sport and entertainment. The theoretical framework from which we approach this discussion is provided below.

The social connection model of responsibility puts forth that no one individual, group, nation state, or institutional policy can be blamed for structural injustices (Young, 2006). Rather, each person within a system characterized by hegemonic processes that privilege some and disadvantage many others (i.e., structurally unjust system; Young, 2006) bears some degree of responsibility because of his/her contributing actions. Thus, by being present and participating in a socially unjust context, individuals are contributing to and reproducing socially unjust processes. Identifying the communal nature of these contributing actions is not meant to assign blame, but rather call into question the moral acceptability of the taken-for-granted institutional and structural norms, processes, and practices that have led to the formation of such collective actions. In doing so, individuals recognize their personal responsibility and are subsequently united in a sense of shared responsibility which facilitates forward-thinking collective action (Young, 2006).

Cunningham (in press) touched on the basic tenets of the social connection model of responsibility in his 2013 Zeigler address. Embracing the teachings of scholars like Socrates and the sentiments and actions of profound social activists like Martin Luther King, Jr., Cunningham identified the field of sport management as a collective body of interconnected individuals who “all have a stake in ensuring sport is inclusive and socially just” (p. 2). As such, those within sport management have a responsibility to “contribute to a more just and inclusive sport environment” through collective action (p. 8). While Cunningham’s stated focus was not on larger social issues of mortality, violence, safety, climate change, and animal rights specifically, his words, coupled with the social connection model (Young, 2006), highlight the necessity for sport management scholars to question the structures and processes within sport that relate to the aforementioned issues of exploitation. A brief description of each of these issues substantiates this stance.
Ideally, the concern for sport participants’ well being would override all other motives. In reality, however, conflicts often exist between an athlete’s best interests and the interests of authority figures and key decision makers within a sport organization (Brackenridge, 1994; Courson et al., 2013). As the potentially devastating effects of injuries such as head injuries, heat stroke/exhaustion, and sudden cardiac events become increasingly evident so too does the presence and role of sports medicine professionals within organized sport. Likewise, as issues of abuse and violence (i.e., physical, mental, emotional, and sexual) continue to permeate every level of the sport industry from youth and club sport organizations through college, professional and Olympic sport, the responsibility of sport administrators and managers is underscored. Within youth sport, for example, participants are dependent upon sport organizations and administrators to implement and understand child protection measures as well as ensure that the need to assist victims supersedes a sport organization’s desire to protect its program (Kerr & Sterling, 2008). Thus, there exists a profound responsibility for sport managers to examine and question the processes and policies that may allow for some to lose sight of an athlete-centered approach to organizational practices.

On a larger scale, there also exists a responsibility for the field of sport management to discuss the harm that occurs from exploiting taken-for-granted resources. For instance, several scholars and research studies have addressed the need to investigate the environmental impact of the sport industry (e.g., Chalip, 2006; Wheeler & Nauright, 2006). Despite all having a vested interest in maintaining a stable living environment, a gap in research concerning managing the environmental impact of sport organizations exists (Mallen et al., 2011). A gap also exists in addressing the harm inflicted upon non-human sentient beings as a result of their exploitation. Events like bullfighting, cockfighting, animal baiting, foxhunting, dog racing, and dogfighting all occur under the guise of “sport” yet the don’t ask, don’t tell culture of the animal sport industry has lead to preferred ignorance (Atkinson & Young, 2008). To the extent that animals do feel pain and suffer when they are involuntarily entered into what Young (2001, 2007) refers to as ‘blood sport’, there exists a shared responsibility within the sport management discipline to question the processes by which this exploitation is allowed.

The very first Zeigler address, given by Dr. Zeigler himself, challenged the field of sport management to “strive consciously to bring about a steady improvement in the quality of our lives” (Zeigler, 1992, p. 211). Thus, Dr. Zeigler was assigning a great deal of responsibility to those within the sport management discipline. The primary focus of this symposium will be to discuss the ways the sport management discipline can work toward creating quality lives for all present within sport by embracing its responsibility to incorporate issues of fairness, harm, exploitation, and social justice within the field.