Moving Toward Social Justice In Sport: A Comprehensive Study of Social Justice Advocacy in Sport

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In this society, people continue to encounter numerous social injustices on many levels, such as injustices on race (Hylton, 2009; Singer, 2005), gender (Schmitt, Ellemers, Branscombe, 2003; Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), sexual orientation (Thomas, 2013; Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010), and social status (Greenya, 2013). Therefore, many scholars and athletes have realized that social change effort within their field of interest is desirable. They have used their positions of fame and popularity to encourage their fans and/or students to get involved in social justice advocacy. These social justice advocates have influenced our society and changed social injustices. Given that, it is crucial to encourage more people to commit to social change and participate in social justice advocacy. However, the factors that influence one’s attitude toward social justice advocacy have not been fully examined. By understanding the experiences of those who are active social justice as well as how they first got engaged in social justice advocacy and what factors encouraged them to tackle social issues, we can suggest ways to inspire more people to become similarly engaged. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the psychological processes associated with activists’ interest in and commitment to social justice and why they get involved in social justice advocacy.

In drawing from Moeschberger and his colleagues’ model for awareness and engagement (Moeschberger, Ordonez, Shankar, & Raney, 2006) and the five-factor model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992), we developed a theoretical framework. First, we argue that social justice advocates may define social justice advocacy differently (RQ1). To be consistent with the first factor in Moeschberger et al.’s (2006) model, we questioned whether individuals may learn about injustices through direct experience or through indirect experience (RQ2). The next factor in the model for awareness and engagement is the increased awareness. We argue that following an individual’s contact with an issue of injustice, those individuals tend to increase their awareness through an understanding of a historical or cultural context regarding the origins of the injustice (RQ3). In addition, the final piece of the model proposed by Moeschberger and his colleagues (Moeschberher et al., 2006) involves identifying and engaging in advocacy. Thus, current and former athletes and scholars have been involved in social justice advocacy in many different ways (RQ4). Finally, we were aimed at examining the potential relationship between social justice advocacy interest and commitment and some combinations of his/her personality traits (RQ5). In assessing personality traits, we refer to the five-factor model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

RQ1: How do activists define social justice advocacy?
RQ2: How do activists learn about social justice?
RQ3: How do activists get involved in social justice advocacy?
RQ4: What activities advocates are involved?
RQ5: How does activist’s personality play role in their activism?

As the purpose of this study was to examine the factors that can be associated with social justice advocacy in sports and we chose to use the purposeful sampling approach as suggested by Morse (1991). We selected potential interviewees purposefully since this study is aimed at examining why and how individuals engage in social justice advocacy in sports. Then, we implemented snowball or chain sampling to gather names of potential participants who could provide rich information. Especially, in regard to social justice advocacy, selecting active social justice activists within the field of sport would allow the participants to share their experience, thoughts, and strategies. Then, the participants were asked to recommend other activists for this study. In this manner, we were able to include potential participants who were endorsed by their colleagues or peers.
In order to locate the themes for this research, open coding was used. We then used research questions as guides to come up with general themes, which were then broken up into more concrete concepts. If themes were similar and could not be used alone, they were combined in a process known as axial coding which relates initial themes to one another (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In this study, we interviewed 12 social justice activists (current and former) in the field of sport or scholars studying the sport industry. The participants were asked what factors have influenced their social justice advocacy and why they got interested in social justice endeavors. First, participants offered their definitions of social justice advocacy. Two major themes emerged. The first theme identified was the Social Conscience, which is a sense of responsibility or concern for the problems and injustices in society. The other theme was labeled as Champions of a Cause, which was applied to the activists’ engagement in advocacy for people who are unable to stand up and speak for themselves. Next, the second research question asked participants how they learned about the injustice which had inspired them to become activists in the first place. Three clear themes were identified, direct experience, indirect experience, and indirect contact. In addition, the third research question focused on exploring how activists got involved in social justice advocacy. Three factors were identified, including increased awareness, atypical experience, and emotional responses. Importantly, we found two factors that expand Moeschberger et al’s (2006) conceptual framework. Moreover, research question four focused on what activities participants are engaged in. Three major themes emerged, raising awareness and changing attitudes, engaging in activity, and encouraging others. Finally, the last research question focused on how activists’ personalities play a role in their activism. In drawing from the big five personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992), we identified extraversion, empathetic, and conscientiousness as influential personality traits.

There are several key findings and practical implications from this study. First, the participants provided enlightening narratives regarding social justice advocacy and therefore, we were able to suggest a definition of social justice advocacy based on their narratives. Second, as we learned that direct and indirect contact with a social injustice were very important for advocates, individuals in a position of leadership in sport could employ to both raise awareness of a social injustice and to motivate others to get engaged in social justice advocacy.

This study makes several important contributions. Most of the research focusing on social justice activism concentrates on one specific issue or type of activist. However, in this study, we interviewed activists from different fields, including former and current athletes and scholars.