Uncertain Mobility: Adaptive Sport Programming for Participants Living with Homelessness

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(including questions)

The purpose of this presentation is to understand how changes in one’s capacity to move, that results from changes in their environment, affects their participation in a sports and physical activity program. To shed light on this, we specifically examine a case study of a sport and physical activity program at a homeless services center. During the research period, however, this center was relocated 3.5 miles away, which impacted the ability of clients to use the program in numerous ways. Therefore, this particular case study is useful in demonstrating how sport programmers can address changes in the external environment, particularly those that directly affect clients’ motility, or capacity to be mobile (Kaufman, Bergman, & Joye, 2004).

Research in this area tends to focus on the role of sport for development (e.g., Lyras & Welty-Peachey, 2011; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008), sport as a tool for social inclusion (e.g., Inoue, Funk, & Jordan, 2013; Magee, 2011; Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Sherry, 2010; Sherry, Karg, & O’May, 2011; Welty-Peachey, Lyras, Borland, & Cohen, 2013), and public health (e.g., Södergren, McNaughton, Salmon, Ball, & Crawford, 2012; Neale, Nettleton, & Pickering, 2012; Randers et al., 2012). Researchers have also explored the economic, physical, and social barriers faced by homeless populations, which obstruct access to shelter, food, clean water, and hygienic products as well as participation in sports and physical activity. Additionally, homeless populations disproportionately experience physiological and psychological disorders (Donohoe, 2014; Feldmann & Middleman, 2003; Martens, 2000), further impeding their ability to meet basic needs and participate in sports. Our research seeks to advance these scholarly discussions as well as provide support in the form of enhanced physical activity and motility among a local homeless population.

The framework used in this study is the “mobility paradigm” (Urry 2007; Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). The mobility paradigm is a perspective that can help sport management researchers understand how changes in the urban environment affect people’s ability to participate in sport, and, therefore, how sport practitioners can respond to environmental changes. This is a novel approach to understanding sport management, which has tended to focus on psychological variables (e.g., Milne, McDonald, & Hong, 2002), service-marketing (e.g., Yoshida & James, 2010, 2011), and internally orientated organizational perspectives (e.g., O’Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Washington, 2004; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). Specifically, a mobilities approach illuminates how the sport participant’s capacity for movement in a facility is directly connected to their mobility outside the facility (not just directly outside, but everything they do when not at the facility). Thus, such a perspective can be used by practitioners to understand how prospective sport participants differ, not just in terms of their psychographic “market segment” traits, but also in terms of the route they took to get to the facility, the resources they used to get there, and the places they go to next.

In 2014, faculty and students of the Center for Sport, Health, and Equitable Development (SHED) at Florida State University began a partnership with an urban Consolidated Emergency Services Center (CESC)—a combined shelter and services center for the homeless. Their role in the partnership was to provide the CESC with sports and physical activity programs for their clients in order to support their organizational objectives. This project continues as a work in progress that incorporates qualitative and quantitative data collected over the first two years of the partnership.

The qualitative research component was ethnographic and participatory involving sports and physical activity programs at the CESC in which nearly 1,000 clients participated. These programs included basketball games twice
per week and yoga sessions one to three times per week. Reports and documents produced by city officials, city redevelopment agencies, and CESC directors were also analyzed.

After the first year of research, city officials decided to relocate the center across town in an industrial suburb. In anticipation of the move, survey data was collected in the months prior to discern how the move might influence clients’ everyday routines. Thus, the quantitative component of this study assesses the structural impact of the move. Spatial information collected during the survey about the places clients most often frequent was input into ArcGIS—a recognized digital technology for managing and analyzing geographic phenomena, processes, information, and knowledge (Chrisman, 2001; Cope & Elwood, 2009; Fotheringham & Rogerson, 2013; Pickles, 1995)—to explore the ways in which the relocation altered clients’ movement about the city.

This presentation has three primary objectives. First, the survey data will be used to estimate the change in clients’ capacity to move, resulting from an environmental change (i.e., the center’s relocation). Using the locations from which clients came to access the center and the locations they were going to next, in relation to the original and new center locations, changes in each client’s “mobility system” can be estimated. From this, average distance, average cost, average time, and average energy expended can be calculated for each center location. These findings will be used to estimate how the average client’s motility was affected by the center relocation. Given that this population must spend more time and energy navigating urban space, and considering that the majority of clients are restricted to fixed caloric intakes set by food provision services (i.e., shelters and churches), a change in their mobility requirements is likely to have a much greater impact on their ability and desire to participate in sport programs than for other populations. Discussion will then turn to the ways in which the move strained or severed social networks that were built around the original location—which served as a significant landmark in myriad ways—and how this resulted in a change in the number and range of sport participants at the new location.

Second, following a description of these environmental changes (in terms of the mobility status of clients), the specific effects on the sport program will be described and discussed. In this section, critical analysis will focus on the benefits of the new facility (most importantly, the opportunity to build a permanent basketball court) alongside the costs of the move (e.g., barriers to access and participation).

Finally, this presentation will describe and evaluate what the CESC and SHED did to mitigate the negative effects of the move. In this section, implications for other sport programmers will be discussed. This case study provides an in-depth perspective on how client motility (e.g., sport participation) can be influenced by changes in their larger mobility system. This is a feature that has previously been given little attention because most sport participants have resources they can use to traverse the urban environment quickly and with little energy expenditure (although they do cost money). Therefore, the findings of this study are predominantly applicable for programmers seeking to provide sport and exercise in similar contexts. However, it is worth noting the homeless are not the only people in society who face mobility impediments. Furthermore, many people, especially children, are dependent on the mobility resources of others and, as such, the findings have implications for sport programs in a variety of contexts.