Investigating Challenges, Difficulties, and Strategies of Asian International Doctoral Students Majoring in Sport Management in North American Universities

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Introduction
Race and ethnicity are important elements in social studies and sport management is no exception. Although the majority of research in sport management has been based in the positivistic paradigm (Frisby, 2005), some scholars have acknowledged the significant importance of critical social sciences (Chalip, 1997; Singer, 2005). Many Asian international students are coming to North America to pursue a doctoral degree in sport management, comprising the major portion of international doctoral students in sport management (Danylchuck, Baker, Pitts, & Zhang, 2015). They may have difficulties in accommodating themselves to the culture and atmosphere of North American institutions and sport management academia, particularly including, but not limited to, their experiences in relation to perception of self as a racial/ethnic minority in this academic field and in North American society as a whole.

A recent study examined the perspectives of sport management academicians regarding their experiences supervising international graduate students (Danylchuck et al., 2015). Along with many advantages, participants mentioned language and differences of academic culture, such as the relationships between a student and an advisor, as conspicuous challenges. Since previous work only focused on perspectives of advisors, it is necessary to also investigate international students’ perspectives, in order to create a sustainable and diverse sport management education environment. Gaining an understanding of Asian international doctoral students’ experiences will contribute to developing more inclusive environments because many of these students are potential future faculty members and advisors. In this respect, the central research question of this study asks what the challenges, struggles, and strategies of Asian international doctoral students are, particularly their lived experiences that may reflect the past and current environment of sport management higher education?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework
Within sport management education, some studies have been conducted on doctoral students’ career expectations (Geurin-Eagleman & McNary, 2014), doctoral student mentoring (Chester & Mondello, 2012), and master’s students’ satisfaction with their degree program (Popp, Weight, Dwyer, Morse, & Baker, 2015). However, there has been little research regarding international students’, and in particular Asian international students’, lived experiences in terms of their challenges, difficulties, and coping strategies during their doctoral studies. Also, there has been little research in this area drawing from a critical theoretical framework.

Sport management scholars have recognized the importance and necessity of critical race theory (CRT) because it helps to identify both the good and the bad of sport (Frisby, 2005). To this end, the present study is guided by CRT. CRT has been widely used in educational research to critically examine educational opportunities, representation, and pedagogy (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Roithmayr (1999) argued that “the use of critical theory offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education—Knowledge, truth, merit, objectivity, and ‘good education’—are in fact, ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of white supremacy and racism” (p. 4). CRT opens a new path to view the past and current situation of sport management education from the perspective of racial or ethnic minorities. The present study is also guided by Asiancrit. Asiancrit was developed as a tool for understanding the racialized experiences of Asians as well as a conceptual lens through which the experiences of Asians in higher education can be interpreted (Museus & Ifitik, 2013). Museus & Ifitik (2013) suggested a set of tenets that can be a useful analytic framework, which includes Asianization, transnational contexts, (re)constructive history, strategic (anti)essentialism, intersectionality, story/theory/praxis, and commitment to social justice. These tenets are not intended to replace those of CRT. Rather, Asiancrit utilizes both CRT and existing knowledge about
Asians in the US to understand their processes of engaging in US society and higher education (Alan, 2010).

Method
The data collection method for this qualitative study is a semi-structured personal interview conducted face-to-face or by Skype with 25 Asian international doctoral students. Participants are being recruited through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012). The list of potential participants is being drawn from the presentation schedule for the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) 2016 Annual Conference, and potential participants are then being contacted by email. This study also uses a snowball sampling method. Primary contact is being made with Asian international doctoral students in the authors’ social networks. They are then introducing the authors to other participants who are eligible. Individuals have to have studied at least one academic semester in a doctoral program at a North American institution and be from an Asian country to participate. Interviews are being conducted in English. They are being audio-recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis consists of identifying a priori codes and themes based on CRT, Asiancrit and related literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In complement, an inductive analysis utilizing open coding is being employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Dependability and credibility are being enhanced through discussing and refining the results of coding and interpretations among the authors. Member checks with participants are being conducted, where they are reviewing their transcripts and study interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At present 12 interviews have been conducted, with 13 more to be completed by the end of 2016.

Findings and Discussion
Preliminary data show that one of the significant challenges is cultural differences. In particular, the Americanized sport culture in which participants tried to merge into often contributed to feelings of exclusion. Coming from an Asian sport culture that is different from the North American intercollegiate and professional sports where mainly Whites and Blacks are dominate, participants felt that they were being placed in liminal space between the two races. As Roithmayr (1999) argued, it is important to acknowledge that any cultural differences may construct racialized educational experiences among. This cultural difference is the main focus of their coping strategy as well. Participants strived to learn and assimilate into the American sport culture, such as the culture of football, because they know how important this cultural knowledge is in order to succeed and thrive in doctoral studies. Theoretically, this study shows the applicability of CRT and AsianCrit in analyzing student experiences in sport management higher education. CRT in sport management research has been mainly focused on Black athletes and their experiences. This study widens the perspective of critical study in sport management through representing Asian students’ experiences. Practically, this study provides sport management graduate program administrators with understandings about key factors that could improve the educational and social experiences of Asian international doctoral students.