Stressing the Student Intern: Exploring Conflicts Between Student and Worker Roles of Sport Management Student Interns in the Sports Industry

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Student internships are a crucial component of sport management education at the undergraduate and graduate levels meant to aid students in their transition from the classroom to professional careers. By the 1990s, sport management accreditation agencies NASPE (National Association of Sport and Physical Education), NASSM, and later COSMA (Commission on Sport Management Accreditation) required accredited programs to include a Professional Component in the curricula including experiential learning or internships (Jones & Brooks, 2008; Pate & Shonk, 2015). Students who do internships, however, take on a worker role, which can often be at odds with the student role—based on conflicts of time, finances, relationships, responsibilities, and priorities. This study inquires into the relationships and conflicts between the two roles students negotiate when working in the sports industry as student interns.

Literature Review
This study applies theoretical insights and research developed in the field of sociology of stress to sport management (Cassel, 1976; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Perlin, 1989; Thoits, 1991; 1995). Early sociologists of stress studied mental and physical distress (outcomes of stress) as they were connected to life events. Life events include traumatic, acute, and discrete moments in a person’s life that increase distress (Holmes and Rahe, 1967; Pearl, 1989).

By the 1980s sociologists of stress began analyzing “social stressors” including chronic strains in relation to distress (see Pearl, 1989). According to Pearl (1989), chronic strains involve the “relatively enduring problems, conflicts, and threats that many people face in their daily lives” (p. 247). To study chronic strains, Peggy Thoits (1991; 1995) used role theory, informed by identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009)—as roles were found to be a source of chronic strain, and, hence, distress (Thoits; 1991; 1995). Role theorists suggest individuals in society embody multiple roles, e.g. “father” and “husband”, “mother” and “wife”; “worker” and “student”—the meanings of which precede individuals—which might work with and against each other, and which shape identities, expectations, relationships and behaviors as individuals interact with others, social structures, and institutions. According to Thoits (1991; 1995), chronic strains can arise under five conditions: when a subject experiences 1) role overload; 2) interpersonal conflicts with roles; 3) inter-role conflict; 4) role captivity, and 5) role restructuring.

Sport Management scholars have begun exploring stress as it relates to work in the sports industry, albeit from slightly different perspectives than mentioned above (Odio, Walker, & Kim, 2013; Xing & Chalip, 2009). Xing and Chalip (2009) examined lower-level employees of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG) to understand the ways in which these workers experienced and coped with stress while organizing and delivering the Beijing games. The authors found that the social support of the workers, the symbolic and historical significance of the Olympic Games, and working for an organization that incites passion, helped them cope with work stress. Using an inductive framework, Odio, Walker, and Kim (2013) examine the stressors present in mega-event work and the coping strategies used by mega-event employees. They find the major stressors in this line of work to be workload, time pressures, role-related stress, job insecurity, and work-family conflicts.

Research on stress in the context of student interns working in the sports industry remains unexplored in the field of sport management. However, many sport management scholars have demonstrated that internships as experiential learning are essential for sport management curricula and students in the context of a burgeoning sports industry (Hager, 1984; Parkhouse, 1987; Stanley, 1989). Scholars have also analyzed the expectations and experiences of student interns (Peretto Stratta, 2004), and called into question the exploitative power relations student interns face.
(Wiest & King-White, 2013). This study fills this gap in the literature between research on social stress and student internships.

Method
This study uses a qualitative, exploratory research design composed of participation, observation, and interview methods in order to understand three key phenomena which create social strains, in the form of role conflict and change, for sport management interns. First, we used participant observation (Flick, 2009; Leavy, 2014) at three Sport Management conferences hosted annually by an Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) school in the US south. Each year, the conference features four sports industry professionals who share their experiences working in the sports industry, and they offer advice for students trying to break into the industry. The conference is a rich research site for understanding how prospective interns learn the cultural and social expectations about their future worker roles.

Second, we participated in a Sport Management Practicum Course during the fall semester. In addition to helping students attain an internship this course is an important mechanism for ensuring they learn while working. In other words, this course encourages interns to maintain their student roles while in their worker roles and is designed to help them maintain student roles in the face of industry supervisors who value interns’ labor over their learning.

Third, we draw upon unstructured interviews with six current and six former student interns to understand experiences of being a student worker. We ask about the following: what they have learned about interning and from whom/what source; their expectations and experiences interning; their role work loads; how the roles impact their personal relationships; the time they dedicate to education and work; the financial constraints and opportunities they experience being a student an (un)paid intern; the duration of their intern experience(s); their expectations for future employment; and the effects of no longer occupying one or both of these roles. The content and concepts that emerge from our participant observations and interviews will be coded using selective codes drawn from role identity and social stress theory (Thoits, 1991; 1995).

Preliminary Results and Discussion
In the presentation we will discuss the ways in which students expressed their struggles to balance student and worker roles. We will begin by expounding three culturally accepted ideas gathered from our participant observations. They include 1) “you need experience to get a job in the sports industry”; 2) “you are expected to work for free”; and 3) “it is challenging to return to the sports industry once you have left.” We will illustrate how these ideas have contributed to student perspectives on the student and worker role. Next, we will discuss the ways in which student interns expressed “role overload”; “inter-role conflict”; “role captivity”; and “role restructuring,” which contributed to uneasy student worker experiences and certain forms of distress. Finally, we will discuss how sport management administrators and internship coordinators can better mitigate the stresses to which student interns are exposed.