Putting the “Social” in Social Change: Moving Forward in Research and Practice of Managing Sport for Social Change

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The prevalence of research examining the potential of managing sport for social outcomes has increased dramatically since the year 2000. This trend is evidenced by growing numbers of publications including review papers (e.g., Edwards, 2015, Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016) and special issues (e.g., Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Chalip, 2015; Welty Peachy, Schulenkorf, & Spaaij, forthcoming) focused on both the social processes and outcomes of managing sport. While these publications document and critique the various ways that sport can be managed to produce outcomes (such as the social inclusion of marginalized groups, positive youth development, and the (re)production of social capital), few have endeavoured to explore the way that sport management can be implemented into broader processes of systemic social change. Further, few authors have explicitly defined social change or provided a clear theoretical framework for its investigation or interpretation. As a result, social change has become somewhat of a nebulous term, used to describe many processes and outcomes without a clear or concise meaning within sport management scholarship.

In this paper, we address this ambiguity and attempt to situate current sport management research within broader theoretical literature pertaining to social change. We do this by drawing from established theories of social change to highlight the ways that sport management scholars can more clearly situate their work in a social change agenda. Thus, we have two main objectives with this paper: 1) To provide a research synthesis of how the extant sport management literature articulates and co-ops the social change agenda. In this way, we outline the ways that the sport management literature has (and has not) aligned with the scholarly work pertaining to theoretical constructs of change, and; 2) Drawing from the broader social change literature, we offer a theoretical framework within which future sport management scholarship can be situated in order to articulate the roles and processes of managing sport for positive social change.

Fundamental to understanding the concept of social change is the notion of change itself. Change is a modernist concept associated with related notions of development, progress, revolution, transformation, modernization, secularization and urbanization. In line with this thinking is the understanding of these ideas as overtly positive (and progressive) in nature, where the idea that sport will inevitably lead to better, more equitable societies has been heavily criticized. In discussing the concept of social change, it is also critical to consider the nature and extent of change being sought and the most effective means of achieving it. These factors could include scope/magnitude, time span, direction, and speed/rate. Further, it is critical to understand how social change occurs, what are the main characteristics of successful social change programs, and who benefits from this change. This requires a multi-layered approach which considers hierarchies and levels of analysis in order recognize the processes associated with this agenda. Strasser and Randall (1981) provided a useful framework for thinking about the level or unit of analysis (individual, interaction, or group/organization) and the profile of change being sought. We use this as a starting point to consider how sport management researchers have conceptualized social change.

Discussions of social change have explicitly been present in the sport management literature for over twenty years. Notably, early work (Chalip, 1997) distinguished the way that social change could be addressed both within the sport system (e.g., through policy making and program design) as well as by addressing inequities that preclude participation in sport and recreation. While these hierarchies and levels of change have been addressed in the context of managing sport for development (e.g., see Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011), few authors problematize or explicitly address mechanisms of change at various levels and the way that sport management research and practice can be implicated in these processes. A notable exception of this is discussed by Schulenkorf (2012) who outlines the role of...
organizations as external agents of change and the potential role of events within processes of empowerment in the context of sport for peace and reconciliation programs.

Within our review of the sport management literature, it became evident that the emphasis has predominantly situated on the individual level change in order to address systemic issues; for example the self-efficacy of change agents (Welsey Peache, Cunningham, Lyra, Cohen, & Breuning, 2015), motivations of volunteers (Kristianses, Skirstad, Parent, & Waddington, 2015), or accrual of social capital (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). Comparatively, many fewer have addressed the way that change can be addressed at the organizational level; for example by cultivating safe spaces (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014) or organizational cultures of diversity (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999). Further, although scholars have discussed (at length) the potential (and limitations) of sport to be implicated in broader processes of systemic change at the community and societal levels, few have considered the ways that the management of sport might be involved in these processes.

In our theoretical model, we demonstrate the importance of articulating the nature of the social change being discussed within the sport management scholarship, moving away from an over reliance on ‘sport as inherently good’ assumptions underlying much sport management research. In particular, we offer a perspective for future research to engage with the level of change (i.e., individual, organizational, social), the nature of the change being sought (i.e., scope, time, speed, beneficiaries), as well as the processes involved in the change (i.e., at the individual, group, and social levels). In this way, we also aim to reiterate that social change is not finite, but rather an ongoing process with outcomes beyond the purview of any singular research project. As such, we challenge sport management researchers to acknowledge the politics of authorship, ownership, and representation within their writing and engage with a plurality of modes of representing social change.