Exploring Unintended Negative Consequences in Refugee-Focused Sport for Development Programs

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The field of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) includes a wide range of programs aimed at promoting positive social change through sport in communities around the world (Coalter, 2013; Giulianotti, Hognestad, & Spaaij, 2016). Although several SDP entities have worked with broader development organizations (e.g., the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] and the United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF]) for quite some time in delivering programs for refugees (Kidd, 2008), many more initiatives have emerged recently in response to the global refugee crisis. Even so, there is still a noticeable gap in the literature concerning refugee-focused SDP efforts. Prior studies indicate these sport-based initiatives can positively contribute to improved awareness of health and disease prevention, facilitate cross-cultural understanding in conflict areas, vocational training, and development of social and cultural capital among program participants (Kaufman, Spencer, & Ross, 2013; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2011; Spaaij, 2009, 2012). At the same time, the consensus among scholars is that SDP programs can also result in unintended negative outcomes, such as potentially reduced self-confidence, discrimination, violence, or further marginalization in the community (Burnett, 2015; Darnell & Black, 2011; Hayhurst, 2013).

SDP researchers increasingly have emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces for program participants (Oxford, 2017; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to develop a better understanding of what the potential unintended consequences are for participants in SDP programs and how SDP managers can minimize the likelihood of those negative outcomes. The primary purpose of this study is to explore potential unintended negative consequences in refugee-focused SDP programs. Several scholars have also noted the importance of including participants in the decision-making processes regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs as a means for achieving more meaningful outcomes since doing so can help uncover underlying managerial assumptions about program participants (Kay, 2012; Hartmann & Kwaak, 2011; Hayhurst, 2013; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Straume & Steen-Johnsen, 2012). The secondary purpose is to explore how including program participants in decision-making processes may help minimize unintended negative outcomes. More specifically, the purpose of this study will be addressed through the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the unintended negative outcomes of SDP programs for refugee participants?

RQ2: How do SDP practitioners work toward minimizing those unintended negative outcomes?

RQ3: How can participants involvement in decision-making processes help minimize potential unintended negative outcomes of SDP programs?

A qualitative research design has been chosen given the exploratory nature of this research project. This approach is useful for developing a more detailed understanding of a complex research problem (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The researchers will collect data from organizational staff members involved with refugee-focused SDP organizations. In-depth semi-structured interviews will be conducted via Skype or phone with participants identified through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007; Gillham, 2000; Hays & Singh, 2011). A total of 26 potential sample organizations have been identified. The interviews will be conducted with staff representatives from these organizations during November 2017 – January 2018 to gather their perceptions of potential unintended negative
outcomes of SDP programs for refugee participants, how they attempt to minimize those potential negative outcomes, and what role they see local voices having in reducing the likelihood of unintended outcomes in SDP programs. An interview guide to elicit this information has been developed based on previous literature on SDP programs (e.g., Burnett, 2015; Coalter, 2013; Coalter & Taylor, 2010; Darnell, 2012; Giulianotti, 2011; Guest, 2009; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012; Sugden, 2008).

The interviews will be recorded using digital devices; the researchers will also take notes during the interviews to help formulate follow-up prompts and additional questions. After each interview, the research team will review and discuss their interview notes. This review process will help in developing follow-up questions for the next interviews and for subsequent data analysis (Patton, 2002).

Interview recordings will be digitally transcribed. Then, they will be analyzed through a two-step inductive coding procedure (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). The researchers will use detailed qualitative coding techniques to inductively develop the themes from the qualitative data (Crotty, 1998). First, multiple members of the research team will independently review and code each transcript. Initial coding strategies designed to identify emergent concepts will be employed in this phase (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Second, all researchers will compare initial codes and discuss how they interpreted the interview data. Any potential discrepancies will also be addressed at this point. Last, each coder will independently complete a more focused second stage of coding to identify emergent conceptual themes. The use of multiple coders allows for triangulation across researchers and is critical for ensuring the quality of findings from this qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2010). In addition, member checking will also be utilized to strengthen the trustworthiness of findings (Creswell, 2013).

Findings from this study will contribute to the SDP literature in several ways. First, the findings will likely identify potential unintended, negative outcomes of refugee-focused SDP programs based on the experiences of SDP practitioners. The collected data will help in developing a greater understanding of the nature of program outcomes in SDP programs and respond to calls for a greater emphasis on protecting against the negative unintended outcomes of SDP efforts (Burnett, 2015). Second, identifying how (if at all) SDP practitioners are attempting to minimize unintended negative outcomes provides a nuanced understanding of safe spaces in SDP (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014) and the management of SDP efforts (Schulenkorf, 2017). Finally, the findings from this study will also enhance our understanding of how including program participants in the design, implementation, and evaluation of SDP programs may help minimize unintended negative outcomes in SDP (Kay, 2012; Hayhurst, 2013).