Leveraging a Communication Approach to Understand Sport for Social Change in an SDP Setting

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While Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) organizations recognize the impactful contributions that sport can make towards individual and social change (Coalter, 2013; Green, 2008; Sugden, 2008), scholars have also noted the limitations of using sport to achieve transformational outcomes (Hills et al., 2019; Schulenkorf, 2017). In order to maximize the impact of SDP organizations, practitioners and scholars use theories of change to examine the processes and designs embedded within SDP contexts and objectives (Coalter, 2012; Hills et al., 2019). However, these studies tend to overlook the valuable role of communication in sport. Sport shapes community interactions and affects which voices participate in those interactions. Scholars have recently started to consider the voices of more stakeholders involved at multiple levels of the organization, including mentor leaders, program directors, teachers, and principals (e.g., Dixon & Svensson, 2019). Still, peripheral voices, such as non-participants, community members, and parents of participants, continue to be muted in the analysis of social change implications. These peripheral voices are important to acknowledge because they can challenge assumptions about small or large impacts of organizations and highlight both trajectories and barriers for social change initiatives.

This study aims to understand the ways that communication around sport impacts social change objectives in a faith-based SDP organization in Africa. Using structuration theory (Giddens, 1986), we provide a lens to understand how communicative practices can enable and/or constrain the ability of an SDP organization to enact social change. Structuration theory specifically considers the ways individual agents produce and reproduce societal structures through social practices (Giddens, 1986).

Utilizing an ethnographic case study method, we conducted 30 formal and informal interviews with a diverse spectrum of stakeholders including program providers, mentors, community members, participants, parents, and school personnel (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). We then employed a grounded theory approach in order to code, conceptualize, and categorize emergent themes, starting with the basis of agents and structures, yet allowing themes within these categories to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis is not complete, but initial themes reveal that communication in a faith-based SDP organization both facilitates and hinders individual and social change through discourses and social practices. Much of this discourse is embedded in the everyday language of the organization, yet is not necessarily agreed-upon or adopted by those peripheral to the organization, which shapes the ability to affect change beyond the participants themselves.

Within the field of SDP, our research emphasizes the importance of a communication lens in field settings. Further, an understanding of the underlying tensions within these discourses and social practices will contribute to building context and richness to the scholarly discourse around sport as a site for social change. Practically, the findings also provide guidance to this and other SDP organizations regarding the ways that individual change may or may not be reproduced or extended to social change within their surrounding context or community.