

A sporting chance: Exploring the connection between social work with groups and sports for at-risk urban youth

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Abstract: *This paper assesses the relevance of social work group methods with athletics and sports programming in urban settings. Exploring the connection between sports teams, sports-related interventions, and groupwork, the authors offer a conceptualization for approaching group interventions utilizing sports, as well as sports teams incorporating social work group principles. Social workers are well-suited to support these types of endeavors, as social work as a profession seeks to work with underserved populations, provide an ethical barometer to professional approaches to well-being, and have multiple methods of addressing social and emotional concerns.*

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Introduction

Whether as spectators or active participants, much of society has become attached to the phenomenon of athletic competition and sports. Sports have long provided opportunities for leisure, recreation and competition. Sport can encompass a wide variety of activities, including team and individual sports, recreational activities, martial arts, and dance, among others. Many have also argued that there are latent benefits of sports, such as having the ability to provide opportunities for structure and socialization. A young person's involvement in sports has been known to influence multiple aspects of development, including self-esteem, leadership skills, positive socialization, and teamwork skills (Stevenson, 2003). However, sports can also be one-dimensional, and students in many settings utilize the pursuit of athletics as the 'cure-all' for life challenges, which can lead to questionable ethics and unrealistic goal setting (Majors & Billson, 1992; Messner, 2007). This can be particularly troubling with youth who are exposed to a myriad of social and ecological challenges.

Very little exists in the literature concerning athletics and social work (Gerber, 1999). Gerber in fact, is one of few authors to address the connections between athletics and social work. However, some scholars suggest that social work should look to other disciplines, including youth recreation, the arts and other non-traditional formats to explore different methods of incorporating social work principles with positive youth development (Delgado, 2000). Social workers are well suited to support these types of endeavors, because the profession seeks to work with underserved populations, provide an ethical barometer to professional approaches to well-being, and have multiple methods of addressing social and emotional concerns. To address these and other concerns, this paper assesses the relevance of social work group methods with athletics and sports programming in urban settings. This paper will address the connection between sports teams, sports-related interventions, and groupwork, offering a conceptualization for approaching group interventions utilizing sports, as well as sports teams incorporating social work group principles. This paper will also offer a beginning framework to explore social work research and group practice within this realm.

Why sports and social work?

Over 40 million young people between the ages of 5-18 are engaged in organized sports in the United States alone. Many young people are engaged in recreational leagues, mostly ages 5 to 11. In spite of the large numbers of youth overall engaged in some form of athletics, many youth do very little in the realm of sports. In a recent report out of University of Chicago's Chapin Hall (2009), over three quarters of Chicago youth were reported to be inactive or moderately active (physical activity only twice a week or less), with 16% of Chicago youth being reported as overweight (Chapin Hall, 2009).

Trends in Chicago reflect the national picture and may have implications for other countries. Obesity rates have tripled among U.S. children and adolescents in the last three decades with approximately 16% of young people aged 2 to 9 years being obese (Brownson, Chiriqui, Burgeson, Fisher, & Ness, 2010). Obesity has been associated with hypertension and high cholesterol and increased prevalence of Type II Diabetes (Brownson et al., 2010). Obesity is the result of the body consuming more energy than it burns (Brownson et al., 2010), and children may become obese because of diet and lack of physical activity. Concerns about lack of physical activity, heart disease, diabetes and obesity have many looking for answers to these serious problems. Participation in sports can provide the necessary activity to expend energy and prevent obesity (Brownson et al., 2010).

In addition to improved physical health, participation in sports can have social-emotional benefits. Sports can be an avenue for integrating intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Children learn teamwork, become more empathic, learn rules and how to handle frustrations (Perry, 2004). Fullinwider (2004) notes that young people can learn to subordinate self for the good of the group (Kavassanu & Roberts, 2001) and develop self-discipline and control (Duquin & Schroeder-Braun, 1996). Sport also lends itself to community support, where parents, community members, and other youth support and celebrate youth sports events and activities (Fullinwider, 2004). Additionally, the popularity of team sports can be utilized to mitigate the stigma of participating in a social work intervention. Children can proudly say that they play on a soccer team rather than stating that they attend a group for children in foster care.

There are other positive aspects of sports with young people. Research has suggested that sports can be used to develop a positive self-concept and self-esteem (Bonhauser et al., 2005; McHale, 2005; Pedersen & Seidman, 2004; Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009), to address trauma (Henley & Colliard, 2005), and to address aggression (Stevenson, 2004). Team sports can provide a fertile ground for adolescent self-esteem development, because teams provide opportunities for adolescents to work closely with adults and peers toward common goals and to foster collaboration, responsibility-taking, and self regulation at a developmental stage when these opportunities may be limited (Coakley, 1997; Fullinwider, 2004; Larson, 2000). Students who serve in leadership roles or acquire new skills in sports also display higher levels of self-esteem (Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009). Sports can also assist in building character and civic engagement (Fullinwider, 2004). However, sports have not always been linked to positive aspects of development. Critics argue that sports promote aggression and callousness, violence, and militarism and can be emotionally and philosophically abusive with high levels of parental misconduct (Fullinwider, 2004). Sports and social intervention related research also is largely inconclusive; many researchers have difficulty assessing causality, with many students self-selecting into sports and athletic teams.

However, sport programs can be very effective as a form of positive youth development. These programs engage the interest and initiatives of youth to enhance socialization and provide enriching experiences (Larson, 2000). Positive youth development is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. It focuses on the broader developmental needs of youth in contrast to deficit-based models that focus on youth problems (Larson, 2000; Witt, 2002). Structured youth development activities, such as organized athletics, are characterized by regular participation schedules, rule-guided engagement, direction by an adult leader, an emphasis on skill development with increasing complexity and challenge, and performance expectations that require sustained attention and clear feedback (Keller, Bost, Lock, & Marcenko, 2005). Programs like the National Football Foundation's 'Play it Smart' utilize positive youth development practices to work with high school athletes

to develop positive life outcomes beyond athletics, including improved academic performance, university enrollment, and civic engagement (www.playitsmart.org). Other programs, like Chicago's 'Girls in the Game' offer leadership development, health and fitness through sports programming. Youth who participate in such activities benefit from opportunities to establish supportive relationships and a sense of belonging, to build a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy, to adopt social norms and values, while developing a positive sense of identity and purpose (Beets et al, 2009; Keller et al., 2005). However, many youth struggle with challenges that prevent them from engaging in positive youth development activities, including sports.

In urban environments, many youth are dealing with being exposed to community violence, and suffer from poor emotional regulation at school and related activities. The immediate and long-term consequences of children's exposure to maltreatment and other traumatic experiences are multifaceted. Emotional abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence, as well as being exposed to conflict such as war and atrocities, can interfere with the development of a secure attachment within the care giving system (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford, Lanktree, 2005). Some common effects that surface in traumatized youth are social isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and difficulty with emotional self-regulation. Disruptive behaviors, such as poor modulation of impulses, self-destructive behavior, aggression and oppositional defiant behavior, are also prevalent in traumatized youth (Cook et al., 2005).

Psychosocial sport and play programs such as 'Sport and Play for Traumatized Children and Youth in Iran' (Kunz, 2006), which began after the earthquake in Bam, Iran, in 2003, can be an important development in potentially helping children to manage and thrive in the aftermath of traumatic or severely stressful experiences (Henley, Schweizer, Gara, & Vetter, 2007). Although many psychosocial sport and play programs provide children with the chance to get involved with others through joining competitive teams, the context of social interventions is primarily focused on the process of helping children to restore their psychological and social functioning in a cooperative environment (Henley et al., 2007). In many of these programs the competitive aspect of sports is not central in psychosocial sport programs. Rather, the 'active ingredient' of these programs is in the

enhancement of children's resilience processes (Henley et al., 2007), which is vital because a major component of overcoming trauma depends on their level of resilience.

Research on resilience has identified key protective factors in a child's life that can buffer and prevent the impact of such risk factors as severe stress or trauma. The most significant protective factor is the child's connection and attachment to beneficial friends, family, and unrelated adults. Experiences with caring, accepting, and encouraging relationships with family and non-family adults, such as teachers, coaches, and mentors, have a significant and positive impact on a child's development (Henley et al., 2007). In older children and teenagers who have been exposed to trauma, the late establishment of healthy adult-child relationships can help intercept a child's negative life trajectories and prevent future exposure to high-risk situations (Henley et al., 2007). In short, sports programs implemented properly can provide traumatized youth with structure and emotional safety allowing room for healing and growth.

Proponents of sport as a means for developing pro-social behavior contend that sport has the potential to shape an individual's actions and thus, to contribute to the learning of pro-social behaviors (McKenney & Dattilo, 2001). Organized sports provide a forum for the teaching of responsibility, cooperation, subordination of self to the greater good and to the shaping of motivation and achievement behaviors (McKenney & Dattilo, 2001). In addition, some researchers have argued that activities such as organized sport or physical activity participation may reduce the occurrence of youth substance use and other deviant behaviors, because they reduce the amount of time available for youth to engage in such activities (Duncan et al., 2002), as well as encourage positive behaviors and health outcomes (Stevenson, 2003; Beets et al., 2009). In this regard, sport programs can operate as a healthier alternative for youth who may otherwise participate in risky behaviors. Sport offers the opportunity to explore interests, develop skills, form relationships, and practise self control (Beets et al, 2009).

Several programs exist that seek to work with vulnerable youth involving sports. Many of these programs promote fitness, healthy diet, and leadership skills, effectively targeting youth 'at risk' while reducing stigma associated with involvement within therapeutic interventions. For example, Stevenson (2003) in his evidence-based

intervention PLAAY (Preventing Long Term Anger and Aggression in Youth), utilized basketball and martial arts, along with traditional therapeutic supports, to teach at-risk youth emotional empowerment and self-control. Whether involved in helping youth to overcome trauma associated with disaster, marginalization due to poverty, or low self-esteem from poor self-image, youth are being empowered in these programs solely through the arena of sport. This lends further weight to the idea that sports can be used as effective groupwork. In fact, Drumm (2006) notes that groupwork is empowering in its avoidance of patient-therapist dependency, and sports-based programs often operate in this mold, developing an atmosphere in their infrastructures that enhances a common bond and support among the youth. Some sports do not necessarily lend themselves as easily to the concept of 'groupwork' (tennis, ping pong, golf, and so on), however, many 'individual' sports still form teams that offer support and encouragement for youth who share common goals. As Drumm (2006) also notes, groups can foster an understanding that one is not alone in their suffering by universalizing the issues that members face.

In summary, sports programs are and can be popular tools for intervening with young people, especially those who are considered 'at risk' (Hartman, 2003; Stevenson, 2003). The success of some of these programs is due in part to the fact that they utilize an activity in which the children already have an interest so that the athletic component becomes a tool for outreach and engagement -- the proverbial 'hook' (Hartmann, 2003). With its ability to create or develop an interest and draw children into a group activity, the sport group serves multiple purposes, including athletic development as well as social and emotional development. The concepts of team and sport can be the primary attraction for young people with the therapeutic benefit of groupwork being incorporated into the sport setting.

'Team work' as 'groupwork'

Given the discussion of team sports as a social work intervention, it is worth exploring the concept of 'teams' as a 'group,' or team sports as having the potential to be utilized as 'groupwork.' A brief exploration

of groupwork principles demonstrates that team sports do in fact lend themselves to social groupwork. For example, in Drumm's (2006) descriptions of the essential principles that make a group a social work group, correlations between team sports and social groupwork become apparent (see Table 1 overleaf).

Drumm (2006) notes the first principle of groupwork as being inclusion and respect, indicating that groups validate each person's voice and perspective by believing in that individual's capability to make a contribution to the group (Kurland & Salmon, 2002). The process of signing up for an inclusive team or activity, being asked to join, or making a team through a tryout process supports this principle, in that all members will make a contribution to the team. Some will be stars on the team, some will be leaders, others will play support roles, and some will provide cohesion. Cohesion can be the foundation for winning, in sports and similarly in groupwork (Gerber, 1999). The groupwork principle of inclusion and respect, therefore, is a building block for working with players of varying strengths. With the proper coaching and atmosphere, each member's contributions are respected for his or her uniqueness and value to the team. The Illinois Interagency Athletic Association (IIAA), a sports association encouraging athletic teams among youth residential facilities and group homes in Illinois, encourages inclusion through promoting rules to ensure all players, regardless of skill level, are involved in team play. They encourage what they call 'lopsided game hints' to allow participants of varied skill levels to be involved, with guidelines such as 'A coach has the responsibility to assure that both teams, his/her opponent and their team, have a successful game'. Guidelines like this help provide involvement for all levels of players. A group facilitator has to be mindful as well of involving participants with poor interpersonal skills, or less vocal members of the group.

Mutual aid involves supporting people in recognizing and voicing their own needs as well as being able to identify and respond to the needs of others, and has been considered as the most important concept of groupwork (Drumm, 2006; Steinberg, 2002). The mutual aid system is an ideal format in which to satisfy an individual's needs for affection, belonging, acceptance, self-esteem, and actualization (Drumm, 2006). Team sports supply the setting for forming close bonds and providing mutual aid between fellow teammates. Off-season training camp,

Table 1

Groupwork and Team Sports: A Comparison (Adapted from Drumm, 2006)

Groupwork principle: Inclusion and respect

Groupwork can emphasize that each individual is a contributing member of the group

Team sports can place emphasis that every member of a team has a valuable role within the unit

Groupwork principle: Mutual aid

Groupwork allows the gathering of individuals and their input in a collective setting

Team sports Allows the gathering of individuals and their ability in a collective unit (the team)

Groupwork principle: Stage management

Groupwork deals with dynamics of beginning, middle and ending stages of the group

Team sports assesses different stages of team development, including beginning, middle and ending stages

Groupwork principle: Dealing with conflict

Groupwork can encourage appropriate methods to deal with conflict

Team sports Can encourage positive ways to address and deal with conflict

Groupwork principle: Development of Purpose

Groupwork may involve working toward a shared common goal as well as individual goals

Team sports May involve working towards a shared common goal in competing as well as individual goals

Groupwork principle: Activity based learning

Groupwork encourages different activities (including the arts) to address group learning

Team sports can utilize physical activity and skill development to enhance learning

Groupwork principle: Effective problem solving

Groupwork can utilize the group to model and engage in effective problem solving to challenging situations

Team sports can encourage team members to engage in problem solving in challenging situations

practice, and regular season provide the opportunity for unity through obstacles, adversity, and accomplishments. Through this process, team members identify strengths and weaknesses and learn to support others, while they receive support from peers. The struggles and needs of one group member provide the opportunity for all group members to examine their own situations and draw on their own experiences to assist their fellow group members (Kurland & Salmon, 2006). The power of mutual aid can be harnessed to help youth assist each other with varying issues, such as addressing childhood trauma. Solid leadership can ensure that the team utilizes its collective strength and resources to assist all its players.

Management of stage development deals with the dynamics of groupwork presented during the beginning, middle, and ends of groups. Effective groupworkers understand and utilize the products and energy levels present during the course of a group (Drumm, 2006). Good coaches will understand this dynamic as well. For example, the beginning of the team is often spent defining roles, creating trust, and outlining goals. The middle consists of individual player development, addressing team and player needs, identifying leaders, and refining goals. The end of the team involves either a playoff run or looking forward to the next season, supporting player goals, and termination. During all of these stages groups and teams will face victories, setbacks, and the unforeseen; the manner in which the group handles these factors will determine the overall success of the team and the growth of individual members. The effective use of stages helps the group move from 'group' (collectivity) to 'Group' (community) (Steinberg, 2006). The effective use of stages can be utilized in a group setting paired with the appropriate area of concern. Coaches with training and insight will be able to utilize the stages to support their players in fully benefiting from the team experience.

The use of conflict can be utilized in groupwork and team sports. Facing and exploring conflict is central to the effectiveness of groupwork (Drumm, 2006; Northen & Kurland, 2001). The proper use of conflict can help members identify contradictions, commonalities, and differences (Drumm, 2006). Conflict inevitably arises in teams. Players of different ages, skill levels, personalities, and backgrounds are working closely on a regular basis. As in groups, teams often develop cliques, and at times members with different roles may be competing for control or

acknowledgement. Add the possibility of physical contact, and conflict is unavoidable. Rather than avoid or minimize conflict, team leaders and coaches can embrace conflict as a learning tool. Players will understand that conflict is normal and will use positive means for working through problems for the benefit of the team as well as for its individual players. Working together to overcome obstacles is an invaluable lesson for young people in their progression to adulthood.

Conscious development, use, and implications of purpose are observable in both groupwork and team sports. Agreement and definition of purpose adds to group cohesion and the group sense of self determination (Drumm, 2006). Similar to social work groups, teams work toward a common goal as identified by the coach and the team itself. Many teams assess their strengths and identify realistic long and short term goals for their season. Group members need to be an integral part of defining the purpose of the group or team. Those group members who are fully invested in the process tend to gain the most through the experience. Activities in groups can enhance group development and learning. Information and experiences in groups can be presented in various ways, including lectures, discussions, visual displays, the use of the arts or participatory activities (Drumm, 2006; Northern & Kurland, 2001). The physical aspect of sports can create awareness of the body and help regulate physical reactions to stressors. Ideally, sports allows for personal as well as athletic development.

Effective problem solving is an important part of groupwork (Drum, 2006). Supporting group members in properly addressing problems can provide a framework for addressing future problems. As in groupwork, teams utilize clearly defined rules to encourage respect and maximize the success of the group. Rules include not only practice times and uniform requirements but also expectations for behavior and interactions with teammates. Coaches can model appropriate ways to address problems that arise within the team, such as disputes between players, personal problems, or logistical concerns regarding scheduling or transportation. Coaches with effective problem-solving skills who incorporate their players in the process will provide a cognitive skill that children can utilize in addressing issues, such as trauma, throughout life. This is also an opportunity for group leaders to relinquish control and empower group members to utilize their skills. Successful groups demand that the leader relinquishes some control for the full development of the

members (Gerber, 1999). One example of this is within the IIAL, which offers a checklist for its coaches to fill out after games that includes such items as 'does the coach model exemplary behavior?', as well as items related to the sportsmanship of players (IIAL, 2010). This becomes critically important, as young people in these leagues range from higher functioning at-risk youth, to those with moderate to severe emotional and behavioral disabilities.

While some connections between groupwork and team sports have been highlighted, there are some differences between the two as well. Groups may support more individual goals in the context of the group, while sports can have the tendency to suppress individuality for the good of the group. Subject matter in groupwork may be new for members, while young people often have experience with organized sports. Finally, sports are often supported by those outside of the group and can provide a special identity to members. These differences should not detract from the power of sport as groupwork, however, and can, in fact, be utilized as assets in a sport-based intervention.

The dynamics and process of team sports reflect many of the values and principles of social work with groups. Steinberg (2006) suggests, 'heartfelt groupwork believes in people, in potential, in effort, in the value and reward of contribution, in the search for common ground, in the wealth that is diversity, in the power of 'we-ness,' of community.' (p. 39). Team sports, in the right context, support these ideals. Social work can look to team sports as an ally in the promotion of social groupwork and as an effective intervention. Groupwork and team sports bring individuals together into a community with strength and potential that is exponentially greater than the sum of its parts. The true effectiveness of using sport as an intervention to help children to overcome suffering and distress is not in competition but in cooperation, not in winning or losing, but in the process of participating in a supportive group (Henly, 2005).

Recommendations

Social workers who seek to utilize sports interventions when working with vulnerable populations should intentionally incorporate social work group practices mentioned earlier when planning, implementing,

and evaluating programs. Social work and groupwork principles can be adapted to meet the needs of both the intervention and the population served. This can include the development of interventions for youth that address such issues as trauma; anger and aggression; or social isolation with social and emotional learning; coping skills; and discipline. Also, research with kindergarten through twelfth grade (primary and secondary school) coaches and sports administrators concerning social and emotional goals and understanding group dynamics within sports needs to be expanded. This can lead toward the development of best practices for coaches and athletic teams concerning social and emotional learning and character development.

Sports-based interventions can serve as the perfect complementary service to other forms of treatment or can also stand alone *as* treatment depending on individual needs. Sports-related interventions are innovative and have the ability to appeal to children and adolescents because of their elements of fun and recreation. Team sports offer youth an opportunity to socialize with peers while engaging in an activity that may very well offer a sense of physical and emotional relief without feeling invasive. Sport and play activities can enhance resilience, facilitate emotional and social stabilization, and allow the acquisition of new skills. As helping professionals we are encouraged to ‘think outside the box’ and not be confined to using rigid forms of treatment that may not effectively reach everyone we encounter. Therefore, sports based interventions can very well have a positive impact within our field and because of their nature, also provide excellent opportunities to promote social work’s core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2008). Social work should seize the opportunity to utilize team sports as a way to meet children on their ground, to address limitations while focusing on strengths, and to support young people as they work to reach their fullest potential.

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