

Sport and Social Change: The Case for Gender Equality

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Those who are fortunate enough to work in the field of sport recognize the power of sport to transform lives on many levels. Beyond the basic skills needed to enjoy participation, sport teaches larger lessons and can act as a gateway to greater personal achievement for girls and boys alike. Sport can even act as a catalyst for social change, affecting the life of participants beyond the playing field or gymnasium by bringing people together, even people in conflict. The transcendent power of sport is apparent all around the world.

Recognizing the global influence of sport, the United Nations has incorporated sport as an important element in the pursuit of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, 2003). A number of these MDGs directly relate to girls and women (Division for the Advancement of Women, 2007). This Viewpoint focuses on sport and social change as it relates to girls' and women's participation in sport, specifically on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women (MDG #3) and how sport can play a part in achieving this goal.

Challenges

When attempting to use sport to create social change in order to achieve any of the MDGs, sport practitioners and researchers face a number of challenges. There is a lack of scientific evidence and practical guidelines about the context, philosophy, and procedures that programs using sport for social change need to follow to effectively promote positive educational outcomes (Lyras, 2007). Sport researchers acknowledge the need to develop new lines of

inquiry based on the "documentation, analysis and validation of experiences; and development of monitoring and evaluation methods" (United Nations, 2005, p. 5) of sport programs and initiatives aiming to achieve development and peace. Based on these guidelines, Lyras and colleagues implemented theory-oriented sport programs in Cyprus. These programs (collectively called The Doves Project) aimed to promote intergroup acceptance between Greek and Turkish Cypriot youths in an effort to overcome the physical, political, and social barriers of the long-lasting Cyprus conflict (Lyras, 2003, 2005, 2007; Lyras, Yiannakis, & Kartakoullis, 2005, 2006).

The Doves Project, implemented using the framework, values, and principles of the Olympic movement, was guided by humanistic and educational psychology principles as well as by organizational change and social psychology theories. During the last four years, Lyras and colleagues provided evidence that an inclusive educational sport setting (including both Greek and Turkish girls and boys) promoted intergroup interaction, acceptance, and friendship, along with a number of educational benefits (Lyras, 2007; Lyras, Votsis, Kotziamani, Charalambidou, & Ceylan, 2008). Beyond the educational benefits, the program had a significant positive effect on ethnic and gender groups, and girls and boys benefited equally from the project. Such findings can have significant practical implications, since evidence and theory suggest that intergroup acceptance can be better facilitated by (1) creating an inclusive educational sport setting and (2) following certain assumptions (Lyras, 2007).

According to Lyras (2007), one

assumption underlying successful sport and social change initiatives is the application of the intergroup contact-theory principles before, during, and after implementing sport programs. Since the purpose of this Viewpoint is to provide guidelines for sport practitioners, basic background information about intergroup contact-theory principles will be presented, along with suggestions for using the principles as guidelines to develop sport programs that improve acceptance among groups with different characteristics—specifically sport programs aiming to promote gender equality and empowerment. The guidelines provided are based on established theory (Allport, 1995; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and evidence from the field (Lyras, 2007; Lyras et al., 2008).

Principles that Can Facilitate Gender Equality

Shortly after World War II, social scientists increased their efforts to provide scientific guidelines to help prevent racism, discrimination, and cross-group intolerance. Allport (1954), who was among the first scientists to provide a substantial theoretical framework regarding intergroup contact, suggested that contact between diverse groups (any group of people with different characteristics, including sex, ethnicity, and race) is the most effective "medicine" against racism, prejudice, and discrimination. In situations in which there is a lack of interaction and intergroup contact, "prejudice and conflict grow like a disease" (Brameld, 1946, p. 245).

According to Allport (1954), cross-group contact can be positive and effective only when certain criteria are satisfied. These criteria are (1) equal status among

the members of the groups, (2) common goals as the purpose and the framework of the contact; (3) intergroup cooperation that helps all groups reach their goals, and (4) support from the authorities, structures, and institutions of a society. Recent findings add "friendship potential" as a fifth principle (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

While these principles are important factors, their presence alone does not ensure the reduction or elimination of prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These principles only facilitate the process of breaking down stereotypes and prejudice. Research lacks substantial evidence regarding (1) the development of positive emotions and cognitions toward out-group members and (2) the extent to which the positive outcomes from the cross-group contact can be generalizable to people with similar characteristics (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, these principles should be used in sport programs because they can potentially facilitate gender intergroup acceptance.

Cross-Group Contact Promoting Gender Equity

The results of the Doves Project regarding gender and cross-group contact can be extended to other sport settings to illustrate how females and males working together can lead to improved gender equity in sport. For example, the following application of the four criteria above can reinforce girls' and boys' participation when they compete together on a youth sport team:

First, having girls and boys both as starters on a team would indicate some equality. The girls should not just be the "subs" who come in late in the game because there may be a league rule that everyone has to play. Second, having common goals as the purpose and framework of the

intergroup contact is readily satisfied by the purpose of the team, which may be to win, to meet certain performance standards set by the team, or to improve on specific skills. Third, allowing all the girls and boys to have an equal say in team rules or in establishing practice times shows how intergroup cooperation can help a diverse group reach its goals. Finally, the support from authorities and structures (coaches and those establishing league rules) sets the stage for gender equality and empowerment. Having women and men working equally as coaches sets the tone for everyone on the team. Of course, we must keep in mind that this example would be viewed differently in other cultures, particularly cultures in which the concept of females and males playing together is not accepted.

These principles could certainly be used to evaluate collegiate athletic departments in their efforts to comply with Title IX. Equitable facilities, travel, and competition schedules, for example, would be signs of equal status. Members of an athletic department usually share common goals, such as fielding high-level, competitively successful teams or achieving a target graduation rate. These would be the same for both women's and men's sports. When women and men who work in the athletic department are "on the same page" in terms of achieving gender equity and cooperate in working toward this goal, the department can move closer to compliance. Finally, the climate of an organization comes from the top. When athletic directors and college presidents work together to establish a positive environment for gender equity, the rest of the organization will fall in line. Making equitable efforts at fundraising or procuring sponsors for women's and men's teams, or even hiring a woman to be head coach of a male team, would indicate the level of commitment of

the authorities on campus toward achieving gender equity. Assessing gender equity in this way can show movement toward achieving higher social objectives that could benefit all of intercollegiate athletics.

Moving Forward

These principles can help us move forward by using an inclusive setting to achieve higher goals. Many studies have examined the competition between females and males for resources and recognition. By creating an inclusive mindset, sport organizations will be able to operate on a higher level, one that embraces diversity and inclusion and maximizes the talents of all. Sport can be a vehicle for making this type of change happen—resulting in a more inclusive environment, whereby sport organizations can provide the impetus for greater social change. "Together, we will be the change that matters" (Ashoka Foundation, 2008, p. 11)

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