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SPORT AND SOCIAL INTERVENTION

Douglas Hartmann

The belief that sport is an important and almost uniformly positive arena of socialization, education, and opportunity for youth and young people has a long and much-touted history going back to the nineteenth century and the origins of modern sport itself. This concept or claim has been especially pronounced in countries (such as the United States) and institutional contexts (like schools) that lack a well-developed understanding of and/or commitment to sport for its own sake. American educational institutions, in fact, have long justified both interscholastic athletic competition and physical education as a means of building character, self-discipline, and pro-social attitudes among students. However, in schools and a host of other institutional domains, these ideals have often been understood and implemented in very different ways, approaches that seem to be connected with the populations and perceived characteristics of the populations being targeted.

For example, as historians have detailed, when competitive athletics took shape in modern industrial societies, the notion of development and life training through sports participation was largely the terrain of the middle and upper-middle classes who saw amateur athleticism as a training ground for socializing young men and preparing them for societal leadership. Sport here was both a male place and a masculinizing space. As these ideals about education and socialization through sport were popularized and expanded to the working, immigrant, and lower classes – especially ethnic and racial minorities (still mostly boys and young men) in the early twentieth century – they came to be oriented toward more rigid control and more dramatic personal level intervention. In other words, they were directed more toward the purposes of social containment, discipline, and individual transformation and change, what we might now call re-socialization or risk prevention. Eventually what emerged was a distinctive variation on the theme of sport-based education and development, a vision that focused less on cultivation and empowerment and more on intervention, re-socialization, and individual-level change. And what has become clear over the years is that this more interventionist, control-oriented vision of sport and youth development has tended to be understood and applied in ways that are racialized, gendered, and class-specific.

This chapter will provide an overview of scholarly research and thought on the latter and more specific of these two visions – namely, athletic involvement as a means for social intervention and individual-level change. It will begin by briefly elaborating on the historical origins and contemporary organizational manifestations of sport as intervention. The second section

will then highlight some of the limitations, misunderstandings, and pitfalls of sport-based intervention that have been identified by sport scholars. The third portion of the chapter will then discuss recent theoretical innovations that lay out key principles underlying how sports-based social interventions are best conceptualized so as to best make meaningful contributions to intervention and change. The chapter will conclude by summarizing the implications for program design, policy implementation and assessment, and future research.

Historical origins and contemporary manifestations

In the United States, the ideology of sport as a positive, progressive force for social intervention and individual transformation for youth and young people who were somehow marginalized or disadvantaged took shape during the reforms of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Progressive Era. The most famous and well-researched example is the 'play movement' of the early 1900s, which was promoted by progressive reformers who saw the development of parks and recreation programs as a way to socialize and 'Americanize' the waves of immigrant, ethnic, and racial minority working classes moving into US cities (Cavallo 1981). But numerous Progressive Era organizations such as the YMCA, YWCA, and the Boy Scouts all used sports and physical activities as key to their projects of adolescent socialization, transformation, and immigrant assimilation (Pope 1997). And it is also in this period that American schools, both public and private, began to justify sporting activities as means of educating mass student populations as well as of preventing delinquent and disorderly behaviours among their charges (Levey Friedman 2013).

As modern spectacle sport exploded into an industry and consumer phenomenon during the twentieth century and came to be associated with mobility for minority communities and progress for race relations more generally (Carrington 2010), these notions about the interventionist value of sport in marginalized (and often urban) communities continued to develop and evolve, providing both rationale for youth sport funding as well as principles for program design and implementation. One of the reasons for this continued emphasis on sport for poor and disadvantaged youth is that young people in these communities have been more reliant than others on public funding and facilities for their athletic opportunities (Wilson 1994). This model has been driven less by the provision of goods to citizens and communities than by perceived public interests in organizing, stabilizing, and even controlling these communities and the people therein. And as the old millennium gave way to the twenty-first century and neoliberal transformations in social policy have taken hold, a whole new generation of such sport-based social intervention programs, initiatives, and organizations has emerged.

This new wave of sport-based youth interventions has come in a variety of types and sizes. Some are small, single-sport programs located in schools or operated at community centers or other public facilities. Others are city-wide, multi-sport summertime projects, and still others are run by sports experts at Olympic training centers or sports foundations. The initiatives range from police athletic leagues to afterschool programs, and use sporting practices as diverse as basketball, calisthenics, martial arts, and motocross to address an even broader array of social problems and public concerns. Numerous well-regarded youth outreach and risk prevention programs run by organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, and the YMCA that include athletic activities are also involved, although these initiatives tend not to be sport-based or even use physical recreation as a point of entry.

Several distinctive characteristics define and unify the diverse array of programs, organizations, and initiatives. One is that they still must be distinguished from other, less interventionist (though no less structured) forms of youth sport and physical activity that are encouraged and supported either for the sake of athletic development or for the sake of fun, fitness, recreation,

socialization, and health (or some combination thereof). Such programs would include youth athletic practices such as recreational sports, travel teams and leagues, interscholastic athletics as well as ordinary recreation, physical fitness, and child-centred play – all of which are sometimes lumped together under the heading of 'suburban sport,' with youth soccer providing a primary model (Andrews, Pitter, Zwick, and Ambrose 2003).

Second, this new generation of programs and initiatives does not tend to talk about intervention and social change in a general way but instead has been touted as an innovative, inexpensive, and remarkably effective approach to address a specific (if multifaceted) array of social problems and public concerns in urban and impoverished communities. This type of programming ranges from crime prevention and public health to day care, juvenile delinquency, and teenage pregnancy to gangs, drugs, and violence to education and economic revitalization. In fact, the most striking and original feature of contemporary interventionist initiatives may be their emphasis on risk reduction and crime prevention through sport. So pronounced is this orientation that some scholars have referred to this new movement as the 'social problems industry' in urban sport and recreation (Pitter and Andrews 1997). Midnight basketball programs – late-night, sport-based crime prevention programs that originated in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the first Bush administration – have been described as paradigmatic of this shift (see also Hartmann 2001). And once again: although the emphasis is not always explicit, these programs are almost uniformly targeted to poor, disadvantaged, and minority youth and young people, especially boys and young men of colour.

Both in the United States as well as in many other developed nations around the world, the recent emergence and re-orientation of sport-based social intervention programs, organizations, and initiatives under the racially charged banner of 'social problems' prevention has been driven by at least two primary structural forces characteristic of the neoliberal era. One factor involves the cutbacks and privatization of public parks and recreation facilities that began to emerge in the 1980s (Crompton 1998; Crompton and McGregor 1994; Schultz, Crompton, and Witt 1995). The other drivers are the even larger cutbacks, reorganization, and transformations of the welfare state under the conditions of neoliberalism of the same period (Harvey 2005).

The former dimension is a bit complicated. Part of the story has to do with the fact that, especially since the 1960s, youth sports provision has been defined by a market-driven 'two tiered' or 'two stream' system wherein 'people who have the access to the disposable income and free time necessary to consume these services' have their sport and recreation needs served, while 'the poor [and otherwise disadvantaged] are left with a shrinking pool of public . . . and private services, none of which they can afford' (Pitter and Andrews 1997: 86). Beginning with dramatic budget cuts to public parks and urban recreation departments in the 1970s and intensifying with rising liability costs and the elimination of 'extra-curriculars' in schools in the 1980s, funding and support for public parks, recreation, and sport provision – especially for program operation and staffing – stagnated in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ingham 1985; Shivers and Halper 1981). By the mid-1990s, according to one report (Crompton 1998), parks and recreation budgets were slashed so dramatically at both state and local levels that reliance on external resources had almost doubled in the earliest years of this period (from 14 per cent in 1974–1975 to 24 per cent in 1987–1988), and the slide continued throughout the 1990s. These pressures and dynamics forced youth sport administrators and operators to turn to problems-based sports initiatives in order to provide sports and recreation opportunities to populations and communities with otherwise limited resources and facilities. In other words, sports-based social outreach and intervention programs have afforded funders and program providers a way to provide access to sports and physical recreation for otherwise underserved communities, focusing especially on poor youth and young people of colour living in urban, inner-city neighbourhoods.

However, a much broader and less sport-specific set of forces and interests has also been at play here. The Reagan-dominated 1980s were, after all, an era marked by the effort to privatize and scale back government services across a whole range of sectors and domains – ‘retrenchment,’ it is often called. And in many communities and for many funders, funding for sport-based social intervention was not so much about athletic participation per se as it was about trying to replace that whole range of social services and public programs that were being cut, curtailed, and significantly restructured.

This new, neoliberal policy niche helps explain the unique organizational structure of many of these initiatives: namely, how they are embedded in organizations and agencies outside the usual local and state governmental systems and operate according to a market-oriented logic based upon competition, effectiveness, and efficiency. In a more concrete, substantive sense, this broader policy context also helps account for the emphasis on containment, surveillance, and discipline that has taken hold in the neoliberal era (Simon 2007; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Wacquant 2009). The idea, in short, is that as long as participants are involved in a controlled physical activity, their energies and risk-oriented proclivities are thus controlled and diverted toward other pursuits – pursuits that are physically contained and that have the additional benefit of being exciting, challenging, and physically demanding.

This context of risk reduction and crime prevention has made the economic, gendered, and especially racialized dimensions of sport-based social intervention pronounced. Evidence suggests that these ideals and funding structures have come to provide the structural and cultural context for the participation in all manner of sport and physical activity for disproportionate numbers of poor kids and children of colour in the United States (Hartmann and Manning, forthcoming).

Scholarly perspectives and critiques

Sport scholars have been fairly critical of the whole idea of social intervention through athletic participation, whether in its earliest, idealistic forms or the more explicit, problems-based focus of the recent neoliberal period. Some of these critiques stem from the usual criticisms that sport scholars have of all sport-based education and development visions and initiatives; others are more specific to intervention and change-based programming.

In the most general terms, the role of sport participation in contributing to educational attainment and social development has proven difficult for scholars to document systematically and conclusively, whether intervention oriented or more generally developmentally based (Hartmann 2008). Part of this difficulty stems from the fact that the pro-social, developmental effects of sports participation are deeply intertwined with all of the other activities and background variables associated with involvement in athletics that are well known to shape and determine educational attainment, childhood development, and the avoidance of delinquency. In other words, while sport participation is clearly associated with positive social characteristics, it is unclear if the association is causal or simply correlational. But a further challenge is that the empirical relationships between social development and educational attainment appear to be relatively uneven and mixed in the first place, perhaps stemming from the wide variation in sport-based initiatives and programming. Some use sport effectively and work well, others do not.

A second common criticism has to do with how sport-based education and development is understood – or not understood. Part of the problem here is that coaches and program operators may employ the *rhetoric* of education and youth development, but in actual practice their programs are often more oriented toward and interested in athletic performance and the development of sporting excellence for their own sake. For all of the talk of education and

development, that is, many youth sports programs are still more about sport than they are about education or intervention.

Another variation on this theme is that even the most well-intentioned of these programs and initiatives often lacks a coherent conceptual foundation specifying both what they are trying to accomplish as well as how sport participation can be understood to contribute to that mission. The underlying assumption in many of the earliest sport-based social intervention initiatives was that the positive, pro-social impacts of sports participation happened almost automatically or inevitably without any special structure or planning. The emphasis on competition; the need for teamwork, sportsmanship, and self-discipline; the centrality of the body and physical control: these qualities and characteristics were embedded in and part of the unique structure of athletic activity. As such, sporting pursuits were expected to imbue otherwise undisciplined and disorderly young people with the principles of social order and self-control necessary to become good citizens and productive workers (Macleod 1983; see also Oriard 1991). (To a certain extent these principles and expectations applied to all youth, but they were typically viewed as even more important and in need of self-conscious application for young people from culturally distinct and socially disadvantaged backgrounds who were seen as in danger of being ‘under-socialized’.) In contrast, sport scholars have insisted that the social and developmental benefits of sports participation are not as automatic, inevitable, and consistent as is often implied or assumed. Sport, according to this critique, actually produces *characters* as much as character, and the history books, sociological studies, and sports pages are all replete with stories and evidence that belie any easy or automatic or inevitable relationship between sport and positive social outcomes. In this view, the developmental impacts of any sport-based activity depend upon the communities that are targeted, how programs are understood, designed, and deployed, and the social and institutional contexts within which they are situated.

Other criticisms are more pointed and directed to sport-based social intervention specifically. One problem involves unrealistic promises and expectations. Many of the most interventionist, problems-oriented sports programs promise huge impacts in the neighbourhoods and communities in which they are enacted – expectations that are both inflated and based upon a misunderstanding of the potential community-level impacts of programs. Midnight basketball initiatives are a prime example: these programs came to national prominence and attention with claims of massive (30 percent and more) crime reduction in the neighbourhoods and communities in which they were originally located in the early 1990s. Yet more careful evaluation and assessment revealed that these trends were largely the result of a larger decrease in crime of the period and could not be attributed to programs that served at most a couple of hundred young men of colour only a few nights a week for several months a year. (This is not to suggest that the program was not successful; only that there was and is little evidence that the programs exerted the sizable community-level impact that was claimed at the time.)

The fact that ideas about intervention and prevention in and through sports are often based upon troubling racial, ethnic, economic, and gender stereotypes is another important line of scholarly critique. Such stereotypes stigmatize certain communities and populations even as they valorize and normalize mostly white, middle-class others. They also ignore the broader socio-economic conditions that account for the differences (and inequalities) that distinguish one from the other. Furthermore, sport researchers have found that sports-based programming implemented from the interventionist angle tends to be far more invasive and controlling than those targeted to more mainstream, suburban middle- and upper-class, and white populations. Children from poorer neighbourhoods and communities of colour often have their athletic involvement seen and organized as being about surveillance and control, and the need to cultivate discipline and re-socialization (Guest 2013; Hartmann 2001), often with a focus

on reducing the threat to public order or safety that these individuals are perceived to present (Cole 1996).

And then there are even more basic questions of access, availability, and rates of activity and participation. In terms of race and class and gender, some of the bigger problems for youth and young people stem from limited access to sports facilities and opportunities, the low rates of activity and participation for recreation, fitness, and leisure among low-income and otherwise marginalized communities (Halpern 2006). Whatever their other benefits, the creation of opportunities for athletic involvement in these typically poor and marginalized communities is not one of the benefits of intervention-defined programming. Indeed, because of the controlling nature of these programs, this may even discourage participation and heighten inequalities in physical activity and athletic involvement.

A final line of scholarly critique of sport-based social intervention has to do with the role and function of sports-based initiatives in the larger landscape of public policy and social services aimed at variously disadvantaged minority populations. Although sport-based interventions are often supported and funded as replacements for neoliberal retrenchment and reorganization in other realms, these initiatives clearly can't replace all social services that have been eliminated or reconstituted as neo-liberalism has taken shape in American metropolitan areas. Yet, such programs are often justified in precisely that way, used as community relations ploys by public officials trying to make it look like they are taking steps to deal with the problems of urban crime, violence, and public safety without actually committing new resources, energy, or attention to the relevant communities. Such short-sighted and even cynical visions create unrealistic expectations about the immediate influence and effectiveness of the interventionist aspects of these sport-based initiatives. Far more disconcerting, such unrealistic expectations for sport-based interventions can actually serve to reinforce and exacerbate the problems faced by at-risk urban youth by deflecting public attention away from deeper social sources of their problems. 'If we are not cautious,' as Jay Coakley (2002: 23) put it, such programs 'may unwittingly reaffirm ideological positions that identify young people, especially young people of colour as "problems" and then forget that the real problems are deindustrialization, unemployment, underemployment, poverty, racism, and at least twenty years of defunding social programs that have traditionally been used to foster community development in ways that positively impact the lives of young people'.

Conceptualizing effective intervention

In the face of these criticisms and the continued growth of intervention-oriented youth sports programming, a new, more constructive, and forward-looking body of scholarship has begun to better theorize effective social intervention and risk prevention (Coakley 2002; Hartmann, 2012; Holt 2008; Kelly 2011, 2013; Martinek and Hellison 1997; Nichols 2007; Witt and Crompton 1997). Sport-based programming, according to these researchers, can be an important part of a whole package of community-based approaches to social intervention and risk prevention, but only when understood properly, targeted appropriately, and implemented under the correct conditions.

One of the first and most basic insights about effective, sport-based intervention is that there are many different visions of what intervention is and how sport is believed to contribute to it. For example, there are those who emphasize empowerment and skills building, others who focus on character building, re-socialization, and the constitution of self-discipline, and still others who see sport as a relatively simple means for containment and control of populations who are perceived to be disorderly and disruptive (Nichols 2004; Zarrett *et al.* 2008). These different

approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive; however, theorists insist that the most successful programs are those in which operators are strategic and self-conscious about what they are trying to accomplish and have a clear understanding of how sport contributes to those goals. Positive, pro-social outcomes through sport for any populations or communities are unlikely to happen, unless these outcomes are directly structured into program activities and goals. And here there is an irony: that the most successful sport-based interventions are usually *not* determined by their athletic but by their non-sport components.

This is a second major theoretical innovation. Time and again, case studies have revealed that the programs that are most promising and successful as for purposes of intervention and change are those that systematically incorporate non-sport, development-oriented elements (Hartmann 2003; Nichols 2007; Witt and Crompton 1996). This finding stems from the fact that sport is not automatically or inherently a positive, pro-social force but needs to be guided and directed in that fashion. That is, sport-based programming is best understood, like any other tool or technology, as an 'empty form' (MacAloon 1995) – a practice that can be positive, but can also be a problem if the energies involved in athletics are not channelled appropriately. The upshot is that the success of a sport-based social interventionist program is largely determined by the strength of its non-sport components, what it does with young people once they are brought into the program through sport. This is the 'plus sport' model which Coalter (2009) has described in the context of the literature on development discussed elsewhere in this volume (see also Hartmann and Kwauk 2011; Levermore and Beacom 2009).

A third theoretical point regarding effectiveness involves the opportunities that sport-based programs and organizations present to make connections to the programs, activities, and resources of other agencies, organizations, and initiatives working with marginalized, disadvantaged communities. Interventionist-minded sports policy makers and programmers have become well aware of the need to supplement, support, and extend their offerings and outreach by connecting with other like-minded and similarly engaged programs, agencies, organizations, and initiatives. These connections are crucial, not only in terms of generating non-sport programming in general, but in the context of limited resources and facilities and the importance of non-sport interventionist programming. Connecting with other organizations, institutions, agencies, and programming is a means of sharing knowledge, pooling resources, and intensifying and enriching programming.

For all of the emphasis on the non-sport aspects of sport-based social intervention, the sport-based components of such programs still cannot be ignored, taken for granted, or minimized. This is a fourth and final theoretical principle. Whatever else they may be, one of the most consistent characteristics of sport-based interventions is their ability to recruit and retain youth and young people in social programming. Not only are outreach and recruitment the first concern of any social policy initiative (you can't have a social program without participants), the unique ability to recruit and retain otherwise hard-to-reach populations has been true for virtually every program that has been studied. This cannot be taken for granted. There needs to be a balance between the sport-based and the non-sport-based aspects of a program, where sport is an important part of a whole package of resources and social supports requiring a level of investment and intensive, day-to-day involvement far beyond that of most sport-based intervention programs.

With all of these conceptual advances, documenting the effectiveness of sport-based intervention remains an ongoing challenge. More research is needed to see how to operationalize these principles and how programs achieve their effects – and for what populations and under what kinds of conditions and constraints programs are most likely to be successful. Fortunately, a more sophisticated framework for measurement and assessment is now in place as well (Baldwin 2000; Nichols and Crow 2004; Witt and Crompton 1997).

Conclusions and implications

This conceptualization of sport as a tool for social intervention whose influence depends upon the ends toward which it is directed, how it – and especially its non-sport elements – is implemented, and the ways it is connected (or not) with other social services and resources has a number of implications for program design, implementation, and operation. Perhaps the most basic and obvious point is that operators need to be clear and self-conscious about all of their goals and strategies. Just offering a sports program is unlikely to have any significant or systematic results. Many other factors are involved. Another key implication is that while sport has contributions to make to outreach, intervention, and risk prevention, these contributions are more complicated, intensive, and expensive than is usually believed.

The cost and complexity of sport-based intervention is important to realize because too often sport-based approaches are believed to provide a fairly simple relatively inexpensive solution to problems of socialization, development, and risk prevention. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sport-based program operators must be expert at and secure funding for both high-level, engaging sport programming as well as for extensive social interventionist activities and initiatives. They have to be both sport providers and social workers. Rather than having it easier than other youth workers, sport-based program organizers have a unique double burden requiring that they must be proficient at both sport and social intervention.

With these unique challenges and complexities in mind, it is important to stress and reiterate two final cautions about sport and intervention. One is about race. No matter what sport-based social intervention may have to contribute to improving the lives of urban, mostly minority youth in the United States and elsewhere, these initiatives do not tend to increase their access to sport and physical activity. Access to facilities and participation rates among young people from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds continue to slip, even as the number of problems-based sporting programs grows. Here it is also important to guard against the racial and economic stereotyping and stigmatizing that can happen in and through such programs, especially when young people are treated so differently in the sporting context. Too often, these initiatives can reinforce stereotypes – stereotypes about both minorities and the mainstream majority.

Second and finally, it is important not to expect too much from these sports-oriented initiatives, nor to treat them as a magic bullet or miracle elixir. Social intervention, risk prevention, and social change are complex and challenging enterprises under the best of circumstances – that is, even with abundant resources and using the most comprehensive and advanced programming. Given their typically limited resources and structure, sport-based programs by themselves, even when brilliantly conceived and properly implemented, will not always succeed. In fact, they may fail as often as they succeed. To believe anything else not only overestimates the social force of sport, it underestimates the difficulties of meaningful social intervention and change in the lives of youth and young people who have limited resources and face numerous social and cultural challenges. And as much as we strive for effective, sport-based social intervention, we must, as Coakley insisted, guard against allowing these programs to deflect public attention away from the deeper social sources of poverty, racism, and social marginalization faced by at-risk urban youth.

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SPORT AND THE URBAN

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We live in an urban world. The 2010 report from the United Nations Population Division confirmed that for the first time in human history over half of the world's population lived in cities. And while many reading this Handbook probably take both cities and the presence of sport within them for granted, it is important to remember that in 1900, when England became the first country to urbanize, the world was still 86 percent rural and what we now recognize as sport largely existed as clubs and voluntary associations. It was not until 1920 in the US and 1931 in Canada that half of the population was located in urban settlements. The growth of cities was so rapid during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the time period is often referred to as the 'urban revolution'. So, seen within the context of several million years of human habitation on our planet, cities are a relatively new social invention, having only existed for the last 10,000 or so years. The social, cultural, and economic hegemony of cities, however, is even more recent (Palen 2005).

The record of scholarly concern with cities is nearly as long as the scholarly disciplines themselves. Some of sociology's original and most fundamental questions addressed the ways in which the city shapes social life, and the discipline's evolution was accelerated by a normative academic response to the many problems and challenges of modernism, including urbanization (Nevarez 2005). Concern about the urban spatial context within the sub-discipline of the sociology of sport, however, developed much more slowly. Actually, historians of sport were the first to document, through case studies of specific cities, that sport development and urban development were intertwined, and also that early sport was promoted both as a means to escape urban problems and as a method for building urban communities (see, for example, Reiss 1981). Reflecting on this important historical research, sociology of sport scholars, informed by classical theories of social development, began to formulate broader conceptual lenses through which to analyze sport-city connections, taking into account the urbanizing landscapes and expanding capitalist economic system that transformed the societies of Europe and North America.

A rich literature now exists within the sociology of sport that addresses the urban context. My goal in this chapter is to represent some of the conceptual diversity in this area and reflect the broad trends in the sociology of sport scholarship that, much like the field of urban studies (see Bowen, Dunn, and Kasdan 2010) and sociology more generally, defy neat compartmentalization. I have constructed three themes around which to organize the material, each representing a current focus of *sport and the urban* scholarship. I explain how each theme has developed