Masculinity, Sexuality, and Soccer: An Exploration of Three Grassroots Sport-for-Social-Change Organizations in South Africa

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Abstract
Programs that utilize soccer as a tool for social change are steadily emerging throughout townships and rural areas in South Africa, the most economically disadvantaged areas of the country. In South Africa, grassroots sport-for-social-change organizations are compensating for failed government policies and programs that seek to help at-risk youth. As a result, program staff are often members of the community who are not versed in academic critiques of the use of sport in development initiatives. Additionally, much of the existing literature on sport-for-social-change champions the advancement of specific projects without asking critical research questions, which should include the appropriateness of the modality within a given context. In this case, the complexities of using soccer (e.g., its practices, historical significance, and gendered meanings) have not been thoroughly investigated. Soccer is not a "genderless" tool for social change. Participation in violent sports such as soccer has been used to bolster claims of a naturalized dominance of men over women. Although participation by girls and young women in soccer programs (professional and recreational) is increasing in urban townships and rural areas, soccer pitches remain largely "masculinized spaces."

In this study, I use qualitative research methods to show how gendered discourses organize sport-for-social-change programs. Using Ashcraft and Mumby’s theory of feminist communicology and Connell and Messerschmidt’s reformulated theory of hegemonic masculinity, I examine three sport-for-social-change organizations in South Africa through an applied lens with a feminist standpoint. Semi-structured interviews with twelve key informants were conducted over a three-month period between May and August of 2009. All three organizations studied are grassroots organizations that work within a particular area of South Africa. They each target male children and youth between the ages of 6 and 19 from economically disadvantaged households and use soccer as a modality for social change, yet each organization operates within a different cultural context primarily based on participants’ racial, regional, and ethnic identities. My research found that masculine discourses were constructed, maintained, and contested in sport-for-social-change organizations through: (a) (Not) Engaging in (Social) Fatherhood, (b) Challenging the Temptation to Lead a Gangster Life and Have a “Gangster” Attitude, and (c) Challenging Patriarchy, Physical Assault, and
Cultural "Traditions." Discourses also created paradoxes that worked against the goal of contesting local hegemonic masculinities, although these paradoxes were not typically identified by organizational members. Although I found similarities in the influences of local discourses on organizations such as the lingering effects of The Group Areas Act on urban migration that influenced men's roles within their families; the desire to create positive male role models that rejected characteristics associated with exemplars of hegemonic masculinity identified in each case study; and concerns about stopping the pattern of domestic violence prevalent in some communities, an issue that is also related to spread of HIV, I also found differences. Differences were based primarily on racial, regional and ethnic signifiers and affected the goals of each organization as well as the design of programs aimed at achieving these goals.

This study expands the literature on gender issues in sport-for-social-change programs, particularly the designation of public spaces such as soccer pitches as masculinized spaces where women take on the role of visitor rather than welcomed participants. The history of soccer in South Africa proves that changing the gender dynamics on the soccer pitch can lead to significant changes in people's attitudes. Although women in South Africa now also hold important seats in government, the "politics of the pitch" continues to reflect discriminatory practices based on gender. This study shows how Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulated theory of hegemonic masculinity can be used as a lens to examine the "gendering" (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004) of organizations through discourse, and some of the repercussions of gendered organizing.

Additionally, although this study identified exemplars of hegemonic masculinity that endorsed violent, sexist practices that worked to subordinate women and privilege men, the theory of hegemonic masculinity leaves open the possibility of identifying exemplars of masculinity that also endorse feminist ideals. For example, this study found that discourses surrounding soccer challenged the violent "Body as Weapon" mentality often endorsed by players during football matches. Participants also resisted deeply entrenched cultural beliefs about gender norms by endorsing an ethic of care. Therefore, future case studies of sport-for-social-change organizations may wish to focus on identifying discourses that reject patriarchal beliefs rather than endorse them.

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