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Racial Segregation and the Influence of Sports Selection in Youth

Introduction:

In a discussion of youth sports, it is important to analyze the factors influencing the choice of sports and sports education. There are various reasons why a youth may choose a sport to play, but the decision-making process is generally based on individual's social and cultural context. The perception of any sport derives from different cultural circumstances, including available financial support, encouragement of athletic participation, and the aspirations of the individual player ("The Social and Cultural Context" 58). While education begins with socialization through physical education and sport programs, socioeconomic limits in areas with insufficient school funding decreases the likelihood of proper academic and physical education. Middle-class children have more opportunities to excel academically and sufficient financial support to fund any sport desirable. Just as socioeconomic class impacts the choices that are available, environmental social interactions contribute to prejudgments when the media furthers an image of what a "typical player" looks like. Racism, deterrence, and prejudice, often based on geographic and social factors, limit sports involvement when there is a fear of rejection or being ostracized based on physical appearance. Looking specifically at ice hockey and basketball, dominated by Caucasians and African Americans respectively, one can see that behind every sport is a stigma or prejudice regarding what kind of players make the sport

whole. Analyzing how youth choose a sport reveals the limitations and damaging effects that racial discrimination places on sports participation.

Youth Sports Education– Physical Education and Sport Programs at Inner City Schools

Options for low-income city neighborhoods are undoubtedly an issue when it comes to academics, including physical education. Children in these low-income communities need an alternative outlet to get them off the streets, focus on something productive, and promote overall health for the mind and the body. This is even more important for youths in urban cities and low-income neighborhoods, as an ideal and necessary location for the promotion of sports and education. Unfortunately, while these programs could help lead youth in the right direction to channel positivity, there is a lack of sufficient school programs or sports clubs/recreation in these communities. A case study interviewed eight teachers and fifty-nine children, from an inner-city school, with a mission to promote positive behavior consistently through youth development, to examine perceptions of the school's physical education (PE) and sports teams. The results varied, showing factors that impacted youth development across different platforms, such as the importance of a specialist PE teacher to create clear, informed choices for youth in sports selection. Children responded they enjoyed intramural sports but that there weren't enough opportunities to develop the proper atmosphere to succeed during these sessions. The lack of attempts to create this developmental atmosphere actually led to a negative student interaction with intramural sports. The findings suggest concentrating more on the developmental orientation of PE classes, fun intramurals, and "life skills" that focus primarily on the sports teams. It also reinforced the need for a school -wide integration approach in order to require and help the overall promotion of positive youth development (Holt 97-99).

It is important for inner-city children to have access to practical programs like Sports United Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER), a sports-based intervention that helps educate children with life skills (Holt 99). It is vital for the youth to understand taking initiative, having respect, and utilizing teamwork and leadership in order to succeed in life and in sports. Their Educational outreach increases the participation numbers in youth sports teams as a whole. With more education on the importance of physical education, the more likely it is for the youth to want to succeed. More schools in inner-city communities need the push and the additional funding to create and promote programs that may enrich their students with new ideas.

Socioeconomic Status and Cultural Context

The initial choice or selection of youth sports derives from differing cultural contexts from which individuals and groups view sports, such as financial support and stereotypes (“Social and Cultural Context” 58). While racism and stereotyping cannot be measured, the feeling of systematic exploitation and ostracism plays a large factor in sports and sports history. A white coach is raised in a white culture, it automatically creates social privilege, which may deter an African American child from engaging with that particular team, sport, or coach (“Social and Cultural Context” 66). White coaches are unable to recognize and conceptually comprehend the life experience and history of an African American child, which may steer the child further and further away. The social privilege this white coach perpetuates can in turn develop and create a large disadvantage for African American athletes as a whole. Conversely, a white child involved with a white coach gives that child more encouragement and support while maintaining the status quo (“The Social and Cultural Context” 67). Stereotyping in primarily African American communities pertains to the push for youth sports as a means to train and become a professional athlete, perceived as a physical and financial advantage (“The Social and

Cultural Context” 67). The push to become a financially successful athlete may actually be setting the child back if it sacrifices education for an athletic scholarship. Limited opportunities in urban cities and other sectors of the economy leaves sports one of the only public outlets. Messner’s study found that involved high school boys who were from white middle- and upper-class societies actually shifted their aspirations away from athletics, as there were more choices for long-term educational and professional aspirations (“The Social and Cultural Context” 67). He concluded that minority boys view sports as a source of respect in a system of constrained opportunity where the wider educational and professional choices were just not as apparent or readily available. The lack of African American role models in schools such as coaches, administrators, or sports counselors, has a direct negative effect on the African American students trying to thrive academically and physically.

Stereotyping and the lack of African Americans in leadership roles are notable factors in youth sports and the world as a whole. Socioeconomic class also plays a big part in why children pick certain sports. There is immense pressure on youth to succeed and drive themselves into the ground in hopes of becoming famous from the sport they choose. Coleman argues “that sports offered boys an avenue of upward social mobility: research findings suggested that males from lower SES backgrounds viewed professional sports or obtaining a college scholarship through excelling in sports as a way out of poverty” (Shakib, Veliz, Dunbar, Sabo 307). Similarly, Hoberman argued that the black community embraces sport more as a career option for young boys rather than a child on a higher socio-economic scale (Shakib, Veliz, Dunbar, Sabo 308). Recognizing the connection between race and sports, and subsequently analyzing how black youth view sports, reveals the lack of representation in sports participation for African American boys in America.

Influence Media Has on Sports

While socioeconomic class is significant in the selection of youth sports, the impact of media and the history of sports is also important. Sports, as a social institution, is central to American society. Bloom and Wilard wrote “it is a complex cultural form that operates on many levels simultaneously, gaining new meanings as they are experienced and read within different historical, political, and social contexts” (Primm, DuBois, Regoli 22). However, the American system is also concerned with the concept of racial stratification or the inequality of groups’ membership such as race, religion, or national origin in the ranking of social positions and differential rewards (Primm, Dubois, Regoli 22). Bloom and Willard believe that “sports in the twenty-first century have become a critically important terrain on which most racialized groups have contested, defined, and represented their racial, national and ethnic identities” (Primm, Dubois, Regoli 223). For a very long time in our history, professional sports were segregated, banning people of color. Sports were usually reserved for “whites only”, and were utilized in maintaining the status quo, reserving white power and dominance over subordinate groups. However, sports became one of the first social institutions to accept minority participants, permitting minority players on once- all- Caucasians teams (Primm, Dubois, Regoli 223). Patrick Miller reports that “these pioneers were so significant because black athletic success offered a measure of hope to those who sought often racial prejudice and advance the cause of social justice” (Primm, Dubois, Regoli 223). It was a pivotal moment in society when desegregation was enforced in sports since it continues to have a direct influence on the youth and how they view sports and its history. Choosing a sport that is dominated by one race, as portrayed either in the media or in reality, is intimidating for a child. To this day certain sports

like ice hockey, golf and lacrosse have higher participation rates with Caucasian players rather than African American players.

One reason why we view a particular race as a certain position on the field or court is “positional segregation:”, where players from one racial or ethnic group are either over- or under-represented in certain positions in team sports. For example, Caucasians have traditionally dominated positions such as: quarterback, center, and middle linebacker in football; pitcher and catcher in baseball; and point guard in basketball (Primm, Dubois, Regoli 225). These positions have been perceived to require greater intelligence, decision-making abilities and leadership skill (Primm, Dubois, Regoli 225). African Americans have been found to occupy the positions of: running back, receiver, and defensive line in football; outfield positions in baseball; and forward in basketball. These positions clearly involve dominant physical skills, such as greater strength, speed, and agility. Traditional views, history, and media have all an influence on the idea of positional segregation, which represents discrimination in sports. African Americans are not any less smart than Caucasians and vice versa. It solely has to do on our social interaction, where we attend school, genetics that gives us the ability to be strong on the field, and the access to additional training. While it is not as prominent as it once was, this positional segregation still exists without realizing or analyzing the causes.

Financial Strain of Ice Hockey

Ice hockey, one of America’s and Canada’s most loved sports, has become increasingly popular over the years. However, there is clearly a lack of diversity in the sport since Caucasians predominately make up the teams. There are various reasons why hockey lacks any sort of diversity, including the great financial strain the sport may have on a family. This expense is one of the reasons for a great lack of participation in low-income communities involving minorities.

Llana, a staff writer for Christian Science Monitor, concludes that “part of youth hockey’s problem is the availability of other sports like basketball, especially after the Toronto Raptors’ NBA championship last season” (Llana). While the total cost of purchasing new youth hockey equipment over a lifetime on average is roughly \$6,430, team fees can range anywhere between \$400 to \$2,500 per season, and the initial cost of introducing the child to the game of ice hockey is anywhere between \$680 and \$3,500 (Rob). Travel hockey is extremely popular, where youth can truly experience competition and learn different and new skill sets each and every game; however, a typical tournament can cost anywhere between \$200 to \$500 per player. The travel involved with ice hockey increases the overall cost of the sport with the concern of hotel rooms, flight expenses, and gas for transportation, in addition to the food and drink cost of living while away. It is also a sport that requires a lot of additional training and ice hockey rinks are not accessible in low-income neighborhoods. Professional coaches are usually required, since with an increase in commitment comes with an increase in price (Llana). Ice rinks have a cost to play or even skate freely for an hour, while sports like basketball have free access; all the child needs are a ball and a hoop.

Segregation in Hockey: The Why Answered

While the economics of ice hockey are a clear contributing factor in limiting low-income youth participation, it is not the only reason. Ice hockey does not have a history of African American inclusion like basketball, football, and baseball do in America. Even though ice hockey once had an entire segregated league solely for African Americans to play, called the Colored League of Maritime, hockey is still primarily seen as a white sport. Racism is an unfortunately large factor in deterring young African Americans from playing youth ice hockey. There have been countless instances of racism and racial taunts on the ice; as such, “Everyday

racism in name-calling and fights paired with institutionalized racism can be a strong deterrent from certain ‘untraditional sports’” (Keith). Just as African Americans may not choose to play the sport due to the racism, another contributing factor is channelization, where young African American boys gravitate towards sports that are common or familiar to them. (Keith). This goes back to the isolating effects of ostracizing youth, making them feel like they do not belong.

In addition to channelization and racism, the aforementioned influence and prejudgment of the media and history have may deter black communities from ice hockey, seen as predominantly a “white man’s sport”. An African American child who chooses to play ice hockey can be deterred by his or her community due to the stigma of hockey as a white sport. Anson Carter, a professional African American ice hockey player, reported that he was frequently taunted by his black peers for playing a sport that was predominately white. He said, “They got on me and said I shouldn’t be playing a white man’s game. It was like they’d become too black to play hockey” (Keith). It makes sense that a youth would choose a sport that he or she is familiar with to be abused with racism by other players when that child decides to step out of the box and play a sport like ice hockey.

There needs to be diversity in hockey or it won’t be able to maintain its popularity for future years. There are programs that are helping to bring the awareness to the lack of diversity in ice hockey for children. In New York, the program Ice Hockey in Harlem provides athletic activities, academic assistance, and services for around 275 inner city youth (Keith). There are over forty programs across the nation with the specific aim in diversifying ice hockey. Will O’Ree, a former professional African American ice hockey player, currently serves as the Director for Youth Development for the NHL/USA Diversity Task Force in order to help provide assistance, such as free equipment and ice time, to kids from inner cities. Anson Carter is making

it his mission in the off-season to frequently visit schools and community centers in the US and Canada to talk with young people about life and ice hockey. Ice hockey is just one of the many sports that needs an analysis in terms of existing barriers like economics, cultural hegemony, racism, and channelization (Keith). With proper education, resources, and strong advocacy there can be an end to marginalization of minorities in ice hockey. A human being of any race should never feel like this racism or ostracization is a way of life that he or she must become accustomed to; our society can and should be much more than that. Apollon, an African American hockey father to his son Divyne said, “And you kind of keep moving on and finding—we find other ways to deal with things, so it doesn’t get to a point where I become the, quote-unquote ‘angry black guy’” (King).

Low Finance in Basketball: Greater Productivity and Popularity in Youth

Compared to the financial burden ice hockey has basketball has a more cost-effective approach and historically has been popular with African Americans. Rafik said, “it is no understatement to say that black men have defined basketball as we know it today” (Rafik 5). When this ideology of basketball being a “black man’s sport” was formally established and normalized, the court for the youth became one of the few places that in American society where embracing “blackness” was socially permissible (Rafik 116). Basketball, requiring only a pair of sneakers, a ball and a hoop, is an extremely cheap and easy sport to introduce children to. This low-cost sport may increase popularity with the low-income youth based on pricing and accessibility. In most urban neighborhoods there is a blacktop with a basketball hoop, which can easily draw children into the game. The easy access to a court may obtain a larger popularity rather than ice hockey where an ice rink is required. On the accessible location of blacktops, a child may practice basketball virtually all year round, while ice hockey requires either access to a

pond- most likely in a suburban neighborhood-or the ability to pay for ice time in a rink. In basketball the child may increase competitiveness without the worry of financial increase as they progress in skill level.

Midnight Basketball League: What it Means for the Youth

A key phenomenon that connects directly with the previous content pertaining to basketball is an organization called Midnight Basketball. The program was created in the fall of 1989 when the Chicago Housing Authority won a matching grant of 50,000 from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and organized leagues in two of its notoriously troubled housing communities (Hartmann 341-342). Midnight Basketball was created in American cities for young minority boys in inner-city neighborhoods. This basketball league was initially widely accepted but it then quickly became described as a “social problems industry” (Hartmann 339). The objective of this organization was to facilitate a political discourse concerning public policy regarding at-risk urban youth, crime, delinquency, and public policy (Harman 339). Created by G. Van Standifer who was convinced that one of the key problems of poor, inner-city young men was the lack of safe alternatives during high crime rate hours, 10:00pm-2:00am. There were real numbers and progression with this program installation, “With statistics and strong support from local law enforcement officials, Standifer claimed that the program had contributed to a 30% reduction in late-night crime in his community in its first 3 years of operation” (Hartman 342). Standifer was astonished by the great success of the league and the positive publicity of the Chicago project and decided to create Midnight Basketball Leagues Inc., which eventually became the National Association of Midnight Basketball Inc. and had tremendous growth in the early 1990s. The program was not run by coaches or athletic directors, as Standifer himself was a retired computer systems analyst and town manager; it was

not about the care and love of the game, it was strictly politics and intervention. *The Chicago Tribune* described Midnight Basketball to be “not just fun and games but rather part of an innovative set of ideas to break the cycle of crime, poverty and dependence that plagues life in public housing” (Hartman 347). Gil Walker, the CHA sports director who imported Standifer’s midnight basketball model to Chicago said, “basketball transcends gang affiliation, its transcends race, it transcends economic situation, basketball transcends all of that nonsense” (Hartman 358). According to Williams, black individuals are more likely to be victimized and injured compared with their white counterparts, and black youth unfortunately are at a ten-fold higher risk of homicide victimization than white youth (Williams 1385). The creation of Midnight Basketball was a successful political discourse to prevent crime, as it rapidly helped the youth stay safe and out of violence. We can see from the analysis of this program that it did effectively help reduce violence, but it is important to recognize how basketball was used in order to garner youth attention. Programs like these only help to strengthen the stereotypes that society has inculcated about African Americans and basketball, leaving young black children today to believe that their ticket out of the hood is by dribbling a ball.

Basketball is Much More Than Just a sport for Inner-City youth

Basketball gives the inner-city youth something to be passionate about and exert positive energy towards. The pickup game of basketball is not just about playing the game of basketball, “rather it is through this medium of sport, pickup basketball in particular, that these principally young black men, consciously or otherwise, carve a collective identity out of the unforgiving physical and economic landscapes that have come to characterize postindustrial US cities” (Rafik 5). The youth are taking advantage of their place in society by finding an outlet such as basketball. The NBA and other professional sports can attest that not many special coaches or

trainers are needed to succeed in basketball (Harrison). The best competition and training is shaped on the playgrounds and the blacktops in those inner-city communities in order to train some of the best basketball athletes ever to play the game. There are still a number of white middle-class families that look at basketball as a “taint of the ghetto” (Hartman 93). We can see that basketball for the youth in inner cities may be so popular due to the economics of the sport itself.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the reasons why a child may choose a certain sport over another, through the explanation of media, the lack of educational resources, historical segregation, socio-economic class, and the comparison of ice hockey and basketball. Racial segregation is still greatly prominent within American society and we have analyzed this specifically through our sport culture. There needs to be more educational resources that inform the youth how to get involved into sports while teaching the importance of leadership and channeling positive energy into something productive. The media and historical segregation are mostly to blame for the discrimination against minorities in sports that is unfortunately still prevalent in our society. With the proper voices and programs such as Ice Hockey in Harlem there can be a change in the way society views sports racially. The existence of sports that are either Caucasian-dominant or African American-dominant can be broken. While socio-economic class is a big reason as to why the youth decide what sport to play, it is important to recognize social factors as well. It is vital to look into our sport history and be able to eliminate persisting stereotypes that have been embedded into the introduction of sports to youths.

The analysis of ice hockey and basketball has been able to give a clear depiction and example of this racial injustice. The people that make up the ice hockey community are

recognizing the disproportionate levels of diversity and change is in the near future. As for basketball, it is our job as human beings to break the stigma surrounding most aspects of the sport. If youth are provided with a different avenue, through the enhancement of enrichment programs and a clear non-judgmental predisposition, it will be easier for children to find the sport that they truly have an interest in, not what is easiest to get into based on predetermined social factors.

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