



Culturally Competent Sport Social Work: A Practice Perspective

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The current discussion explores and advocates for the integration of cultural competency into sport social work practice. Cultural competency in sport social work provides a philosophical viewpoint that is rooted in theory and offers a framework for working with diverse populations within the athletic context. Cultural competence enhances sport social work practice by promoting understanding, effective communication, tailored interventions, equity, and social justice within the diverse landscape of sports.

Keywords: cultural competence, cultural humility, sport social work, student-athlete, health and well-being.

Cultural competency is a vital feature of social work practice. This also extends to sport social work. Cultural competency in sport social work provides a philosophical viewpoint that is rooted in theory and offers a framework for working with diverse populations within the athletic context. Cultural competency in sport social work draws on phenomenology, critical race theory (CRT), and existentialism to explore the lived experiences of athletes from diverse cultural backgrounds. Further, cultural competency allows for an exploration of the ways in which societal perceptions, institutional dynamics, and personal identity converge to potentially influence the mental health and well-being of athletes from under-represented and/or marginalized population groups.

Culturally Competent Sport Social Work

The field of sport social work continues to grow and expand (Newman et al., 2022). Social workers are uniquely positioned to serve as a complement to the athletic context by addressing the challenges of the athletic experience and providing athletes with the resources and support needed both on and off the field to thrive in all areas of life (Bennett, 2023). However, there is a dearth of research and attention to cultural competency within this field of practice.

The current discussion explores and advocates for the integration of cultural competency into sport social work practice with African American student-athletes at predominantly white institutions (PWI's) as a focal point.

Phenomenological Grounding

Utilizing phenomenological grounding in the context of sport social work practice with African American student-athletes at PWI's involves employing a framework that centers on the subjective lived experiences of those individuals. Phenomenology provides a foundation for culturally competent sport social work practice (Schmid et al., 2022). Thus, an exploration of the unique phenomenological world of the African American athlete that acknowledges the role of attitudes, perceptions, and lived experiences provides a means by which to better understand the potential challenges faced by many African American student athletes, particularly those at PWI's.

To be sure, the experience(s) of African American athletes is unique and one that has been largely influenced by racially biased attitudes and perceptions (Harrison et al., 2002). Prior research suggests that historically, the experiences of African Americans in the athletic context have been characterized by stereotypes, racism, discrimination, and alienation (Simiyu, 2012). Even more recent studies suggest that similar phenomena continue to influence the experience(s) of African American athletes, particularly those at PWI's (Oshiro et al., 2021; Armstrong & Jennings, 2018). And so, sport social work practitioners should acknowledge the (African American) student-athlete as a critical theorist in processing historical factors, contextual cues, and social conditions that either constrain or enlarge their experiences as student-athletes.

Critical Race Theory

To further enhance cultural competency, sport social work practitioners may find critical race theory (CRT) useful in analyzing the systemic and institutional dimensions of racial bias and discrimination. This perspective acknowledges that racism is ingrained into the fabric of society and its institutions of higher learning (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017). As such, power dynamics and the perpetuation of racial stereotypes are thought to persist (Wilkerson et al., 2020). The application of CRT therefore allows for an examination of the ways in which racial bias and discrimination may influence the experiences of African American student athletes, shaping not only their social interactions but also potentially impacting their mental health status (Smikle & Trussell, 2024).

Existentialism

An existentialist lens may contribute to the efficacious practice of culturally competent sport social work by exploring the existential anxiety and identity struggles faced by many African American student athletes. The pressure to conform to racialized expectations (social and athletic) and stereotypes can in some instances lead to an existential crisis that challenges their sense of self and purpose. Existentialist concepts such as authenticity, freedom, and

responsibility thus become crucial in understanding how African American student-athletes navigate the landscape of a white institutional framework where their full humanity may not always be recognized (Whitehead & Senecal, 2020).

Dynamics of Cultural Competence

When They See Us

Identity development and formation are an important aspect of personal development. This of course extends to athletes. Prior research suggests that identity formation may pose unique threats for those athletes heavily invested in athletic success (Bennett, 2023). That is, for elite athletes, personal attributes such as determination, focus and commitment, along with high performance expectations may lead some to over invest in a personal identity that is defined by, and through athletic endeavors (Martin, Fogarty & Albion, 2014).

This approach may pose a unique threat to normal identity development and subsequently mental health. A well-established body of research suggests that crafting multiple positive identities is a common protective factor against mental illness (i.e. investing in more than one aspect of the self, such as being a successful student, professional, parent, and/or friend) (Thoits, 1991). And so, in the case of the (*elite*) student-athlete, the fewer identities one possesses, and the greater investment in those few identities, the greater the threat to mental health in the event one of those identities is compromised (Hoetler, 1983).

Identity development and formation may take on additional connotations within the context of race / ethnicity. Here, the intersectionality of race, gender, and athletic identity may play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of African American student athletes (Howe, 2020). As such, examining this intersectionality is essential for better understanding the complexities of the lived experiences of African American student athletes.

Power and Glory

In addition to identity development and formation, culturally competent sport social work practice demands an acknowledgement of the power dynamics within PWI's. Further, one must also consider how recent events (e.g. name, image, & likeness) may have begun to challenge the traditional power structure. That is, historically, college athletes have been prohibited from profiting from their own name, image, and likeness (N.I.L) due to NCAA regulations. However, with the advent of NIL rights, student-athletes are now able to monetize their personal brands through endorsements, sponsorships, and other ventures.

This shift in power now allows athletes to directly benefit from their talents and popularity, thus challenging the traditional notion of amateurism and economically empowering student-athletes. However, this shift may come with increased performance expectations which to some extent may still be couched in racial stereotypes about black athleticism. And so, these racialized performance microaggressions may have a profound effect on student-athlete

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experiences. By analyzing and understanding these power dynamics, sport social workers can perhaps better comprehend the daily challenges faced by African American student athletes and the impact on their health and well-being.

A Holistic Approach to Athlete Health & Well-Being

Culturally competent sport social work practice must also include a holistic approach to health and well-being. This involves addressing not only individual physical and psychological factors, but also systemic and institutional factors that may contribute to poor outcomes for African American student-athletes. By fostering an athletic environment that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion, sport social workers can effectively work towards alleviating the psychosocial burden carried by many African American student athletes.

Culturally competent sport social work practice, rooted in phenomenology, CRT, and existentialism, provides a nuanced understanding of how racialized contextual factors within PWI's adversely impact the health and well-being of African American student athletes. By embracing this multidimensional practice perspective, a more inclusive and supportive athletic environment may be created.

Challenging the Status Quo

However, it should be noted that the integration of culturally competent sport social work at predominantly white Division 1 college athletic programs is not without challenge. One of the primary challenges may be to ensure that staff members are culturally aware and sensitive to the needs and experiences of athletes from diverse backgrounds. Thus, the implementation of training programs and ongoing education may be necessary to develop such awareness and sensitivity among staff (Cooper et al., 2020).

Further, addressing implicit bias among staff members is imperative. Even well-intentioned individuals may hold subtle biases that negatively influence their interactions with athletes from different cultural backgrounds (Stensland et al., 2022; Moskowitz & Carter, 2018; Davis, 1994). Recognizing and mitigating these biases is a critical part of providing equitable support to all student-athletes.

Establishing a meaningful rapport and building trust between student-athletes and staff members is foundational to effective sport social work practice (Marsiglia et al., 2021). Hence, it is important to establish open and candid avenues for communication that acknowledge and respect athletes' cultural backgrounds and experiences. This can be challenging in environments where historically, certain population groups have been stereotyped and marginalized. Establishing rapport and building trust may be further complicated when student-athletes do not see themselves reflected among athletic department staff.

In addition to the qualitative and contextual aspects, PWI's may also need to allocate resources specifically for the implementation of culturally competent practices. This may include

funding for training programs, hiring diverse staff members, and developing culturally relevant programming. To be sure, hiring a diverse staff that reflects the cultural and racial diversity of the student-athlete population is a vital part of providing a culturally competent and supportive environment (Shaw et al., 2019; Fink et al., 2001).

While the current discussion advocates culturally competent sport social work practice, it should be made clear that this is not to suggest that other core social work principles should be abandoned. Indeed, core social work practice principles can and should be adapted to the athletic context to improve health and well-being outcomes for student-athletes. Previous discussions have highlighted (student) athletes as a uniquely at-risk, and vulnerable population (Bennett, 2022). Social work may be adapted to the athletic context to address the personal and contextual influences that potentially affect athlete health and well-being (Bennett, 2023).

And so, the current discussion advocates cultural competence as a means by which to further enhance the efficacy and meaningfulness of sport social work. Cultural competency is vital in any field comprised of diverse populations. This includes athletics. Cultural competence enables sport social workers to acknowledge and understand the diversity within the athletic community.

While the current discussion has focused on the unique experience of the African American student athlete, cultural competence also extends to differences in race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and more. By understanding and embracing these differences, sport social workers may be better able to address the needs of the respective student athletes.

Competence Versus Humility

Cultural competence and cultural humility are important concepts within the field of social work, and this extends to the context of sport social work practice. It should be noted that both concepts are aimed at improving interactions and understanding between individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. However, some have argued that there are subtle differences that should be acknowledged (Danso, 2018).

Cultural competence refers to the ability to effectively understand, communicate with, and interact with people from diverse cultures. Moreover, cultural competence involves acquiring specific knowledge about different cultural practices, beliefs, and values, as well as developing skills to navigate cross-cultural situations effectively (Danso, 2018). Cultural humility, on the other hand, may represent a more introspective and relational approach to cultural understanding. That is, it involves recognizing personal limitations as it relates to understanding other cultures and being amenable to learning from those whose experiences may differ from one's own (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015).

Unlike cultural competence, which may imply a level of mastery or expertise, cultural humility emphasizes an ongoing process of self-reflection, curiosity, and sincerity to

understanding others. Cultural humility also emphasizes building authentic relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds, acknowledging power imbalances, and striving for equity and social justice (Lekas et al., 2020).

As it pertains to sport social work practice, cultural competency helps sport social workers develop strategies to engage with constituents of the athletic community who may be from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural competency may also enhance communication and understanding between the sport social worker and the client, thereby reducing the risk of cultural misunderstandings or biases, improving the delivery of services, and leading to more effective practice.

In the context of sport social work practice, cultural humility involves acknowledging that one can never fully understand or know everything about another person's culture and experiences. Therefore, this perspective would advocate for sport social workers to approach each interaction with a degree of humility, curiosity, and a willingness to listen and learn from the athletes as well as other stakeholders. In some ways, cultural humility may promote a more equitable relationship between the sport social worker and athlete, as it acknowledges their expertise and agency in defining their own experiences and needs. To be sure, both cultural competence and cultural humility are essential for effective sport social work practice. These concepts support culturally responsive and empowering practice efforts that meet the unique needs of athletes and other stakeholders in the athletic community.

Practical Implications

Once again, cultural competence and cultural humility loom large for efficacious sport social work practice. The integration of cultural competence and humility into sport social work practice allows practitioners to value the cultural nuances of athletes, establish trust, build rapport, and create a safe and supportive environment for athletes to discuss their challenges and seek assistance.

This practice perspective may also enable sport social workers to carry out practice and intervention efforts with consideration for the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of athletes. In some instances, this may involve modifying counseling techniques, communication styles, or intervention strategies to more effectively resonate with an athlete's sociocultural background.

Effective communication serves a key function in sport social work practice (Thompson, 2024). Cultural competence and humility also play an important role in facilitating meaningful interactions with athletes. Therefore, sport social workers should be proficient in effective cross-cultural communication strategies. This may include active listening, empathy, non-verbal communication, and other nuanced forms of communication to ensure that athletes feel understood and valued.

From an institutional perspective or vantage point, sport social workers must also be aware of the systemic inequities that may impact athletes from marginalized groups. This may

include limited diversity across the broader institution including faculty and/or staff outside of the athletic department. By incorporating cultural competence and cultural humility into sport social work practice, practitioners can better meet the needs of diverse athlete populations and contribute to their overall well-being and success both on and off the field.

Conclusion

Cultural competence allows sport social workers to tailor interventions to the cultural needs and preferences of athletes. Understanding cultural attitudes towards help-seeking can inform the design of interventions aimed at addressing psychosocial challenges prevalent among student-athletes.

And so, as the athletic enterprise continues to grow and expand, it will become increasingly important for sport social workers to be effective communicators with athletes from various cultural backgrounds. This involves being aware of and respecting cultural norms, beliefs, and modes of expression. Moreover, effective communication helps to foster trust and rapport between the social worker and the athlete, thus leading to better holistic outcomes.

Cultural competence is instrumental in the elimination of stereotyping and biases that may affect interactions with athletes. It requires recognition of one's own biases and prejudices. Therefore, it is imperative for sport social work practitioners to strive for cultural competence and continuously reflect on their beliefs and attitudes, thus ensuring that they do not allow any such biases to negatively influence their interactions with student-athletes. By recognizing their own biases and challenging stereotypes, sport social workers can help to provide more equitable and culturally sensitive support to student-athletes. Finally, cultural competence enhances sport social work practice by promoting understanding, effective communication, tailored interventions, equity, and social justice within the diverse landscape of sports.

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