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Cultural Meanings and Motivations for Sport: A Comparative Case Study of Soccer Teams in the United States and Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the meanings and motivations for sport participation of male soccer players in two distinct cultural contexts. The basis for analysis is two years of participant observation with a college team in the United States and a comparable team in the Republic of Malawi. Using qualitative methods, interpretation of the data focuses on several contrasting meanings and motivations for sport between the two groups. The US team members tended to understand sport as a competitive proving ground, an expressive outlet, and a site for self-improvement. These prominent Western meanings for sport were not as significant to members of the Malawian team. Instead, the Malawians tended to make meaning of sport as a demonstration ground, a pastime, and a site for innate self-actualization. These contrasts relate to more broadly contrasting cultural meanings and models tied to the local settings. The findings are discussed as demonstrating the usefulness of understanding sport as an empty cultural form that is given particular meanings in local contexts.

Introduction

Superficially, it is easy to assume that a sport like soccer is identical around the world. The rules, the playing field, the objectives, the number of players, the skills required for success, all seem to cross national and cultural boundaries. When moving beyond the superficial, however, differences emerge. When one plays, coaches, watches, or follows soccer played in diverse locations by distinct individuals it becomes clear that psychological meanings for sport change

with context. People feel different emotions according to the situation, they define success differently, they bring different expectations, and they are motivated differently.

Some such cultural differences in psychological meanings for sport have been documented by empirical research. Research in cross-cultural sport psychology, for example, has found group differences in how athletes prioritize achievement motives, team affiliation, and social recognition (e.g., Kolt et.al.; 1999; Rees, Brettschneider, & Brandl-Bredenbeck, 1998; Weinberg et.al., 2000). Similarly, a large literature about sport, globalization, and cultural imperialism describes how sport associates with distinct mentalities within particular historical and national contexts (e.g., Guttman, 1994; MacAloon, 1996; Maguire, 1999; Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001).

The interaction of the global and the local makes sport a rich site through which to appreciate diversity amidst globalization (e.g., Donnelly, 1996; Houlihan, 1994). Scholars have argued, for example, that Islamic track athletes can challenge and modify emphases on individualized self-expression in international running competitions (Morgan, 1998), Dominican baseball players and fans assign local meanings to sport despite heavy American influence (Klein, 1991), and Trobriand islanders have modified cricket from its colonial emphasis on competition to a ritual emphasis on validating status (Leach & Kildea, 1973). Though there are differing approaches to such understandings of the interaction between the global and the local, most research coheres around agreement that personal meanings for sport depend on cultural context.

Nevertheless, because the most prominent global sports (such as soccer) are Western in origin and design, Western meanings are often assumed to be dominant in local practice. This assumption is evident in policy efforts by government bodies and in development efforts by sport organizations such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee. Such efforts often rely on claims that sport has the capacity to accomplish uniform goals in diverse communities, including facilitating youth development in poverty stricken communities, promoting peace in areas with ethnic conflict, or inspiring a positive self-concept for children in socially marginalized populations. These broad claims are often well-intentioned, but can be problematic when they disregard the interaction of the global and the local. Psychological meanings for sport always depend upon local social forces in particular cultural settings (Hartmann, 2001).

To better recognize how culture influences psychological meanings for sport it is useful to better learn about meanings and motivations for global sport in diverse local contexts. While existing cross-cultural sport psychology effectively demonstrates cultural difference in motivation, most such research is undertaken primarily within a Western frame (e.g., Kolt et al., 1999; Rees et al., 1998; Weinberg et al., 2000). Such research, by focusing on Western cultural traditions (predominantly North America, Europe, and Australia) and relying on pre-determined survey categories, limits the possibility of exploring fundamentally different meanings. Thus, the present research involved interpretive, open-ended field work investigating local meanings and motivations for soccer by comparing a team in the United States with a team in the Republic of Malawi.

Method

This study derived from participant-observation with the two men's soccer teams, one sponsored by a private Midwestern university in the United States (referred to as UA) and one associated with a government-sponsored university in Malawi in sub-Saharan Africa (referred to as UM). Because the teams were similar in regards to the relative educational and class status of their members, the two groups varied most clearly by cultural context. Qualitative data was obtained from interviews and observations gathered during two years with the UA team and a year with the UM team. The specific procedures are discussed below after providing necessary context by discussing the participants and settings.

Participants and Settings

UA (in the United States). The North American setting for this research was a competitive US college soccer team during 1999 and 2000. The team represented an elite private University with a national student body located in a major urban center. The undergraduate student body at the University is primarily from middle-class to upper-class white family backgrounds. The individuals comprising the UA team in this research were competitive athletes for whom soccer was a prioritized extra-curricular activity that took up a majority of their free time during the academic year. They were at the University based entirely on their academic merit (there were no athletic scholarships at the institution as it was part of the NCAA Division III). The UA players expected to finish their academic degrees and have successful professional careers unrelated to sport in fields such as business, medicine, law, and academia. During the interviews no UA player identified long-term professional goals related to sport. Twenty players and one coach participated in the semi-structured interviews.

Although this team represented only one segment of the United States' population, the players shared the common experience of several distinctive broad cultural characteristics that relate to Western meanings of sport. D'Andrade (1984), for example, outlined American understandings of success as follows: "Americans think that if one has ability, and if, because of competition or one's own strong drive, one works hard at achieving high goals, one will reach an outstanding level of accomplishment" (p. 95). In the contemporary United States, such an understanding relates to the "American dream," which idealizes individual success as a measurable product of competition and self-improvement (Hochschild, 1995, pp. 22-41). Max Weber (1930) tied the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism to sport, noting that for some of the United States' earliest settlers:

Sport was accepted if it served a rational purpose, that of recreation necessary for physical efficiency. But as a means for the spontaneous expression of undisciplined impulses, it was under suspicion; and in so far as it became purely a means of enjoyment, or awakened pride, raw instincts or the irrational gambling instinct, it was of course strictly condemned. (p. 112; see also Overman, 1997)

Further, in the contemporary United States, unlike most other countries, sport is integrated into formal education from the early grades through a nearly professional system of college sports that implicitly and explicitly employs a rhetoric assigning educational values to sport. These

cultural understandings, emphasizing the intrinsic value of competition, self-improvement, and rational productivity, tie to meanings of Western sport as a competitive, rationalized, educational practice.

UM (in the Republic of Malawi). The African setting for this research was a competitive soccer team sponsored by the national University in the Republic of Malawi during 1997 and 1998. Since 90% of the players on the Malawian team had some University education (it was only encouraged, not required, that a player have an affiliation with the University and the team roster varied some during the year of participant observation), they represented a tiny minority of the national population that had attained the cultural ideal of higher education. According to a 1998 census, less than 0.3% of Malawians had attended some school beyond the secondary level (Malawi National Statistical Office, 2000). The players did sporadically receive small monetary allowances for expenses related to participation on the team, but they were amateur players. Unlike most other teams in the Malawian league, the UM players expected to earn their living outside of soccer. None of the UM players indicated that they had long-term future ambitions related to sport. In general the team members were from relatively high strata of society and expected to have successful, upwardly mobile careers in business, education, and government. All the players were between 17 to 24 years of age. Twenty players, one coach, and two administrators from the UM team participated in the semi-structured interviews.

As with the UA group, this team represented only one segment of the Malawian population. The members of the team were also, however, socialized in a particular national culture. Malawi, with an estimated 1999 population of ten million people, is one of the poorest countries in the world, with an economy based largely on subsistence farming (Dolph, 2001). According to the 1999 United Nations Human Development Index, which is based on aggregating national levels of education, life-expectancy, and income per person, Malawi ranked at 151 out of 162 nations (United Nations Development Programme, 1999). Though bleak statistical indicators accurately represent acute poverty, they do not comprehensively portray daily life in the country. Indeed, Malawi has been branded “The Warm Heart of Africa” due to the accustomed friendly and welcoming character of its citizens (Malawi Tourism Association, 2006).

During the 20th century Malawi was a British colony, subsumed into the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyassaland (along with present day Zimbabwe and Zambia). After gaining independence in 1964, Malawi existed for 30 years as a one party state ruled by an idiosyncratic dictator, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who severely limited freedom, industrialization, and access to information (Lwanda, 1993). He demanded complete loyalty, and established a prominent metaphor for the values of the nation by setting out “four cornerstones” of personal conduct: obedience, discipline, loyalty, and unity. Though democracy brought great change between 1994 and 1997, the historical importance of such values significantly contrasts with the aforementioned American emphasis on the inherent good of competition and individualistic self-reliance. While such general values are not necessarily internalized by all individuals in each setting, the prominence of these values serves to frame psychological meanings. Thus, general cultural understandings in Malawi emphasizing social order and collectivism, along with the fact that sport is not a prominent part of the education system, would predict an emphasis on sport as a pastime where one can demonstrate competence in group settings.

Procedures

This study derived from one year's participant-observation as a researcher and assistant coach with both UA and UM. The general research approach was interpretive—trying to understand meanings and motivations for sport in relation to the local cultural settings without relying on pre-determined categories. Ideally such research, involving qualitative methods, can complement, supplement, and orient quantitative cross-cultural work.

The primary qualitative method in this case was semi-structured interviewing. All research received institutional approval (from the institutional review board at UA and from Malawi's Centre for Social Research) and all interviewees signed informed consent forms. Interviews were in English, the language in which all players from both groups were fluent. Each interview was recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and ranged from 30 minutes to 75 minutes, averaging about 50 minutes per interview. The interviews were in closed rooms at each institution, most often in an athletic facility. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. In both settings everyone asked to participate did so. While it is possible that the role of the primary investigator as an assistant coach in each setting influenced participation rates, an explicit effort was made to ensure participants understood there would be no consequences to non-participation. Because the participant-observation role was similar in both settings, any experimenter influence should not differentially influence comparisons between these two particular groups.

The interview schedule was designed so that questions were primarily open-ended and relevant to each setting. Such an interviewing method is useful in cultural research attempting to allow for local meanings to emerge while still addressing specific topics such as motivation, and is particularly appropriate in ethnographic and field research (Fetterman, 1998; Fontant & Frey, 2000). In the present research, within each interview the general purpose of the study was explained and then the interviews followed a standard selection of questions originally designed by reviewing field notes. For this analysis the focus is on a selection of three questions asked during the interviews in the order that follows (moving from more open-ended to more specific responses):

1. Why do you currently participate in sport?
2. What do you see as the role of sport in the daily life of people in your society?
3. How can you justify spending public money on sport in light of so many other needs in your society?

Data Interpretation

After transcribing the interview responses, data interpretation involved three steps: a thematic content analysis of interview transcripts, examination of participant observation notes, and narrative analysis of quotes from interview responses. The first step of interpretation involved categorizing individual responses to each question according to themes. The technique used was a version of what Ryan and Bernard (2000) define as classical content analysis, where a "content dictionary" of themes is created and the ideas expressed in responses are categorized as belonging to one of these themes. As an example of the categorization process, part of a Malawian's response to the question about the role of sport in daily life reads as follows: "One thing, it gives,

it is a source of, it is a pastime activity. At the same time it is for physical fitness, it helps one's health. I can also say, probably, uniting the nation too." This response was categorized as including the themes of "pastime," "physical fitness," "health," and "uniting the nation." These categorizations were then placed into thematic groups identified based on relationships between categorizations. A large number of themes were included so that relationships had to be reasonably clear (as between "physical fitness" and "health") for separate remarks to be included in the same theme. For the above response, "pastime" was categorized as a response fitting a pastime theme, both "physical fitness" and "health" were categorized as responses fitting a fitness/health theme, and "uniting the nation" was categorized as fitting a community building theme.

To check reliability of coding, a second coder categorized the relevant responses in six transcripts (three from each group) using the content dictionary. The rate of agreement for whether an individual mentioned a particular thematic group was 87%. To determine whether the frequency of each response category was significantly different between the two groups independent sample t-tests were computed. These computations thus allow for comparison only between the two groups.

The thematic content analysis was the first step in the data interpretation because it provided a broad picture of trends in how the two groups talk about sport. To understand these trends and allow for more accurate comparison of the groups, the second step of data interpretation involved reviewing field notes from the researcher's participation in each setting. While these observations inform all of the interpretations, three specific anecdotes are included in the results section of this paper. These anecdotes contribute ethnographic context to three contrasting meanings for sport identified through the thematic content analysis.

To triangulate understandings of these contrasts, the final step of data interpretation involved analyzing segments of interview responses as narrative text. After confirming that the meanings interpreted from content analysis tallies fit with full responses made during the interviews, quotes were selected that represented and elucidated these meanings. These quotes were analyzed through close readings that treated the bits of interview responses as purposeful texts (following Tobin, 2000). Results from these three steps of interpretation are presented below.

Results

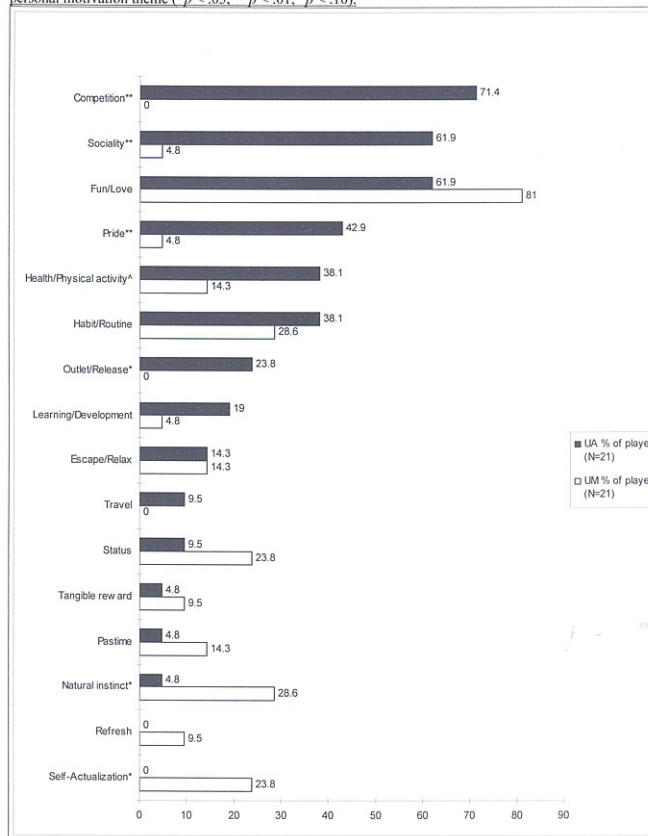
In general, the results discussed in this section demonstrate significant trends toward shared meaning in the UA group. The trends are not as clear for the UM group. This is particularly noticeable in the content analysis, where UA responses tend to more consistently cluster around particular themes than UM responses. Potential reasons for this difference are considered in the discussion section. For purposes of explicating results and providing counter-points to the UA responses, however, the presentation of findings focuses on contrasting UA meanings with UM meanings.

Content Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates responses to a question about why players spend so much of their time on

sport. In their responses, members of both groups identified several themes with similar frequency. These themes included health and physical activity related sentiments, the possibility of elevating mood (i.e., “Fun/Love”), and the idea that sport is often merely part of a habit or a routine. Such understandings of sport were fundamentally similar across both settings. That is, the ideas that physically exuberant games are good for one’s physical health, can elevate mood, and are ritualistic seemed basic to the experience of sport in these two communities.

Figure 1. Percentage of individuals from both the UC and the UM group who mention each personal motivation theme (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ^ $p < .10$).

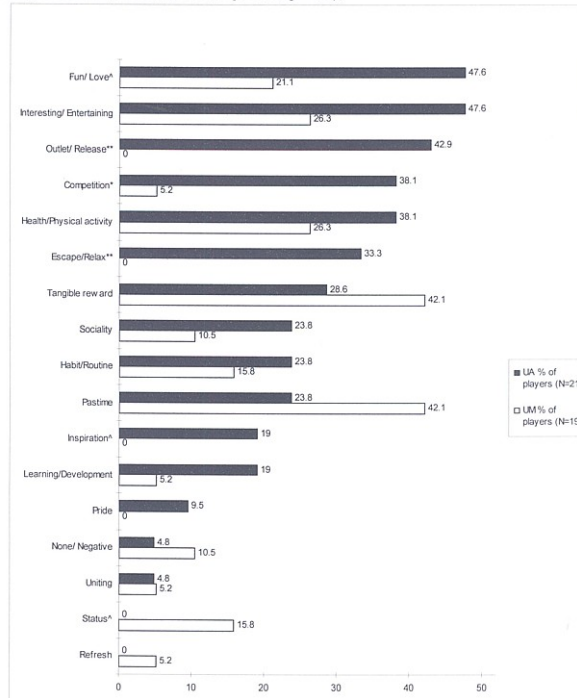


The largest contrast in Figure 1 is the UA emphasis on competition and proving one’s abilities by winning and bettering others. Competition was the most frequently identified motivation for UA players, at 70%, while no UM players talked about competition as a motivation. In a related result, UA players more frequently talked about playing soccer to develop pride, which was defined as including the enhancement of a positive identity through the internal satisfaction of accomplishment. These findings suggest that UA players made meaning of sport as a ‘competitive proving ground.’ That is, the UA players were guided by an understanding of sport participation as an opportunity to test one’s self and develop abilities through direct challenges. Conversely, Malawians more frequently identified status as motivating, and tended to talk about sport as a chance to demonstrate their worth through exhibition. Such motivations suggest that the UM players made meaning of sport as more of a ‘demonstration ground.’ That is, the UM players were guided by an understanding of sport participation as an opportunity to exhibit abilities regardless of competitive success.

Figure 2 illustrates results from the question about the role of sport in the daily life of their

respective societies (i.e., not just for the top professional leagues). The results show that the UM group tended to talk about sport as a pastime while the UA group tended to talk about it as an outlet. Quite often, those were the exact words used, with “pastime” being almost exclusive to UM and “outlet” exclusive to UA. The words themselves are instructive in representing the way each group thinks about the role of sport. A “pastime” equates with folly, meaning sport is essentially a diversion to pass the time. There is no instrumental value to sport in such a definition. Conversely, an “outlet” is a means of expression, and suggests instrumental value in allowing someone or something to become more than it is.

Figure 2. Percentage of individuals from both the UC and the UM group who mention each role of sport in society theme (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ^ $p < .10$).

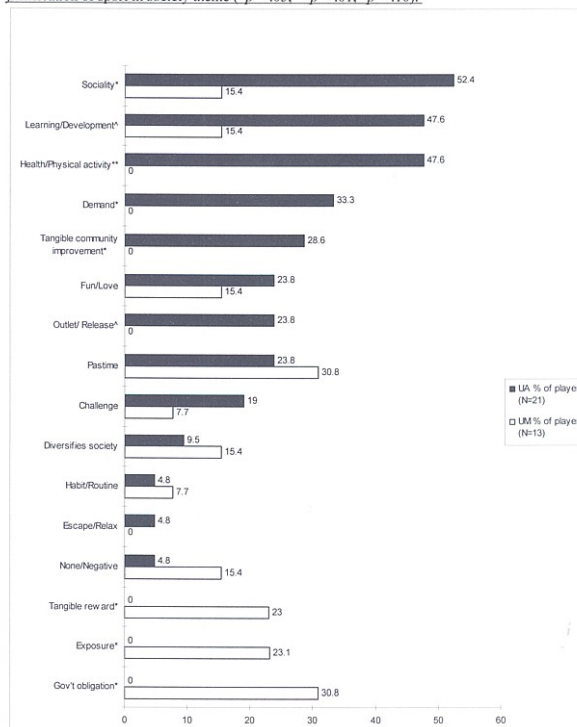


The frequencies represented in Figure 2 also exhibit how a relatively large proportion of players in both groups (29% for UA, 42% for UM) emphasized sport as a practice that provides tangible rewards—most often talking about as sport offering an uplifting career opportunity for people in society who do not have other talents. It is meaningful, however, that more Malawians talked about this role than talked about the non-material developmental capacities of sport, as represented by only 5.2% of UM players mentioning the “Learning/Development” category, despite the fact that neither the UM nor the UA players expected to make a career of sport. It was only the UA team members who, when talking about learning and development, seemed to invoke a powerful cultural script that recurred throughout different questions. The script involved a list of the lessons, from cooperation to discipline, that sport could teach. This script was part of the way UA players made meaning of sport as a site for learned self-improvement. In this understanding, one’s performance is a product of characteristics learned through intentional and properly oriented effort.

In contrast, UM players tended to talk about performance as the result of a process allowing the expression of an unknown self (hoped and assumed to be good). Figure 3 presents a

demonstration of this understanding, illustrating responses to the question of how to justify funding sport as a public institution. In response to this question, only UM players justified sport as an opportunity for exposure and tangible rewards. Further, the most prominent Malawian response category for this question was the notion that sport provides a pastime allowing a person to avoid trouble. Players often stated that sport gave something to people who were not good in school, or who would otherwise not be productive members of society. Though the general theme was mentioned by relatively equal proportions of players (24% at UA, 31% at UM), the idea that sport allows people to avoid trouble only seemed to elicit an extensive cultural script for the UM group. Thus, when Malawians cited this theme in the interviews, they tended to talk extensively about how sport keeps people from a litany of social ills (e.g., drinking, crime, drug use, prostitution). For the UA group this discourse existed, but was prominently complemented by the notion that sport provokes self-improvement and gives people an expressive “outlet.” The talk of UM players did not echo these complementary notions. The UM players seemed to make meaning of sport by assigning primary value to the opportunity for recognition, reward, and distraction. Such understandings are the foundation for a cultural meaning of sport as a site for innate self-actualization.

Figure 3. Percentage of individuals from both the UC and the UM group who mention each justification of sport in society theme (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ^ $p < .10$).



In sum, this content analysis revealed three contrasting cultural meanings: 1) sport as a competitive proving ground contrasted with sport as a demonstration ground; 2) sport as a pastime contrasted with sport as outlet; and 3) sport as a site for learned self-improvement contrasted with sport as a site for innate self-actualization. The three sections that follow each elaborate upon one of these contrasts through the use of ethnographic anecdotes and narrative analysis.

Sport as a Competitive Proving Ground Contrasted With Sport as a Demonstration Ground

The UM understanding of sport as a demonstration ground was most evident in the way the players approached important games. At one point in mid-season, for example, the UM team was scheduled to play a much publicized league match against one of the two most popular teams in Malawi—the Bata Bullets. At that point in the season Bata was at the top of the league standings and the UM team was somewhere below the middle. The UM team had also been struggling with training in the week prior to the game. The odds seemed strongly against UM. Yet, on the day of the game, the front page of the sports section in Malawi’s largest daily newspaper featured a quarter page picture of the UM team manager. The banner headline read: “‘We’ll stop Bullets’.” From an outsiders perspective this confidence made little sense.

As expected, UM lost the game decisively in front of thousands of local fans. At first, facing jeers from the crowd, the manager and the players sat silently, seemingly mourning their brush with status. Then, as always seemed to happen after a loss, life quickly and suddenly moved on. The players started to laugh and joke again; the team administrators reveled in the glory of the day.

Later, I asked the manager about this fast recovery, and whether he was embarrassed about the inaccuracy of his prediction. He told me, “When you lose, there will be next time. If we lose, and we keep on angry, very annoyed, some people may commit suicide, like in America...that is the attitude.” Despite their poor preparation and seemingly irrational optimism the team had displayed a certain poise and vigor. Those characteristics, however, derived largely from the meanings the UM players made of the event. Rather than taking the loss as a statement about the UM team’s value as players and people, they had taken the loss as a temporal disappointment with little enduring significance. Rather than looking at the game as a competitive proving ground, they had looked at it as a demonstration. These meanings came out again in interviews, as when a UM player responded to the question of what he enjoyed about being involved with soccer:

I like playing football because it shows how skillful some person can be. It’s not a game you play because you like [it], you have to have the skills, you have to have the talents, so you can play well. If you don’t have these two things, skills and talents, it is quite difficult to achieve much in football. But you have to expose them to the people. I like the game of football because it shows how somebody can think within a very short period of time...you have to think so that you should do the right thing so that you should not embarrass the players of your side.

For this player football is a setting where a person brings set “skills and talents” and “exposes them to the people.” There is no sense that football is changing the person, rather it is mostly just demonstrating their worth. Further, that worth is tied to “doing the right thing” so that you do not “embarrass” the people on your team. It is not about embarrassing yourself, only your teammates.

These sentiments contrast to the following response from a UA player about why he plays soccer at the University:

There’s a more inner meaning outside of anybody applauding you. It’s just a direct competition.

I'm better than that goalie that I just scored on, that sort of thing. [the interviewer asks: 'what makes that enjoyable?'] Causing the demise of others? What makes it enjoyable? It's just, you practice so long, trying to be able to do something, and you work on crosses, and trying to make that assist to someone doing that, and you try to perfect that. Game time is probably the best example, where you can, I don't know the word I'm looking for, like self-realization of what you've accomplished, and, when you complete that pass, and you do it with perfection, it's just total satisfaction. Like I tried to do something, I built up to that point where I can do it now, and it's just setting goals for yourself and trying to meet those goals.

For this player the idea of having “accomplished” something connects to a long process of practicing and developing one's skills. Unlike the UM player, who exposes his talent, the UA player uses soccer to understand his abstract self. In fact, for this player “self-realization” comes through a process that starts with defeating someone, continues through a meritocratic notion that victory is a direct result of time and effort invested, and then manifests in the “total satisfaction” that one's “self” is exemplary. For the UA player, one gets the sense that the only potential for embarrassment comes from a failure to prove oneself through competition.

Sport as a Pastime Contrasted With Sport as an Outlet

The diverse understandings of sport as either a pastime or an outlet were often evident in interpersonal relationships. In both the UA team and the UM team it was common for players to share dorm rooms or apartments. Frequently, in both Malawi and the United States, living together caused interpersonal tension. Traits that were once inconsequential to a relationship became overwhelming when sharing a roof. With the UM group those tensions were occasionally present, but never seemed to manifest on the field. Soccer was a separate place, disconnected from domestic concerns. Things did not come out on the soccer field. This was not true with UA.

Several times during the UA season different pairs of players who lived together had confrontations on the field. For example, in a practice session, after conceding a goal, a goalkeeper responded by screaming at his defender, with whom he also shared an apartment. The defender then responded by verbally challenging the goalkeeper's ability: “Don't blame me you big baby—you need to get up off your line.” Everyone at practice noticed the tension in the exchange. After the incident the defender explained, “He's an asshole, but don't worry. We live together. We need to get this out. We have an understanding.” The understanding, the tacit pact that the UA players distinctively agree to, is exactly that: Sport is a place to get things “out.” For the UA players sport settings allowed expressions of emotion, aggression, and conflict that were inappropriate in other settings. UA players understood sport as a place that guided them to express themselves, learn, and develop their relationships.

By contrast, in responding to the question about the importance of sport to daily life in Malawi, and the second question about why it might be justifiable to spend money on sport in Malawi, one of the UM players stated:

I think sports is actually part of life. It is something you cannot do without...It is a way of refreshing, for the normal health of the person. They can't do their work all the day long. They need to be refreshed...[and] I think it is very important for the youth. For me, for example, it

keeps me going, it keeps me away from so many dirty things; from drinking and from ladies. It is very important for the youth because it will actually keep them busy, rather than going into the streets drinking, engaging in drug abuse.

Instead of producing something, here sport serves to make people “refreshed” and to “keep them busy.” In this UM understanding sport is just one of many forums in which people can evoke some pre-existing quality (freshness), or be distracted from temptation. Although this meaning was also prominent among UA players, the UA players went further: they conveyed a sense that sport provides a developmental outlet to produce particular psychological character.

Sport as a Site for Learned Self-Improvement Contrasted With Sport as a Site for Innate Self-Actualization

Understandings of sport as a site for self-improvement and self-actualization were most clearly evident in larger team dynamics. Both the UA team and the UM team carried a roster of around 25 players. Barring injuries and unforeseen circumstances, the rules and norms of a soccer match dictate that only about 15 will get consequential playing time in games. How the bottom 10 players handled this differed dramatically between the UA group and the UM group. With UM, the bottom ten players were often absent from training, but ready for games. Particularly for important games, UM players often came out of nowhere with the hope of getting playing time. While they had done little to intentionally prepare for games, they were often optimistic that they could succeed if given an opportunity.

As a general rule, the process at UA was the complete opposite. The UA player least likely to get into a game or make the travel roster was one of the most dedicated practice players on the team. With no tangible reward in sight, the players at the bottom of the UA roster put in long hours at training and in the weight room. Most often, however, for important games they seemed happiest to merely be invested observers. Despite intensive preparation, when coaches indicated that they might be suddenly inserted in an important game the players at the end of the UA bench most often responded with visible anxiety.

These trends are understandable as indicators of particular cultural meanings. That is, the UA players had an understanding of self-improvement suggesting that one’s performance is largely the product of an exhibited ability learned through properly oriented effort. In contrast, the UM players had a model of self-actualization suggesting that one’s performance is primarily the expression of an unknown innate self (hoped and assumed to be good). The sport experience for UA was cumulative, while the sport experience of UM was intermittent. The UA players talked about their development as a continuous pattern of effort and training leading to self-improvement, while the UM players talked about their development as a sporadic display of innate ability dictated by opportunity. This UM discourse is evident in the following response:

I think the thing that is keeping me much in this team is because of the encouragement from others, ‘you’re a good player.’ That’s why I think, ‘ah, I should play one more game.’ That is why when I tell people that I want to resign, I don’t want to play football, they say, ‘ah, why should you do that, we like the way you play, we like this and this.’...I don’t enjoy too much. I just play for the fun of it. I just know it’s a game that I just go play. I don’t enjoy training, I just

go to the training ground to play...Sometimes, because some people are saying you can be a good player, you always want to be a good player and you don't want to disappoint them.

In this response the player's use of others' voices makes it clear that his participation is meaningful largely in relation to external expectations and observations. Sport is meaningful based on its ability to allow the player to demonstrate to others that he is talented, that he actualizes his potential and does not "disappoint them." The player also sets up a rich opposition when he directly contrasts enjoying playing and having fun. He does not enjoy playing, but he plays for fun. He does not enjoy training, he just goes to play. He personally does not get any significant enjoyment from playing himself, but he does get motivating satisfaction from having others note that he is good.

Such a meaning contrasts sharply with the talk of UA players, as represented by the following UA response to a question regarding the value of sport to participants:

They learn how to accept rules, play with others, react to others...[They learn] to strive for something you want, to improve. I mean, in life, if you don't have anything to improve yourself by, there's no reason to even live.

This response represents the extremity of this meaning in the UA group. For this player, self-improvement not only orients practice, it gives purpose to life. This seems to represent cultural meaning-making in its most powerful form. If you take away this individual's understanding of sport as something to "improve yourself by," his meaning of sport, you leave him without "reason to live."

Discussion

The most prominent trends toward shared meanings for sport in the UA group have a significant relationship with Western meanings for sport as a competitive, rationalized, educational social practice. Understanding sport as a competitive proving ground, an outlet, and as site for self-improvement makes meaning of sport by assuming the intrinsic value of competition and progress, while also imagining sport to be an active pedagogue. In the UM case, on the other hand, the most prominent trends toward shared meanings contrasted with these Western meanings for sport. Understanding sport as a demonstration ground, a pastime, and a site for innate self-actualization counters UA assumptions about competition, progress, and education.

Sport, in the United States male social environment, is often instituted through educational institutions and valued for its competitive nature. Further, competition and purposeful progress are valued in and of themselves in United States society (Hochschild, 1995; Weber, 1930). Thus, while there is always individual variation, the general tendency for UA players to understand sport as a competitive proving ground, an outlet, and a site for self-improvement indicates that they organized their psychological meanings for sport participation in ways appropriate to particular cultural models.

The UM meanings and motivations also seemed to fit with more general Malawian values, particularly in the emphasis on demonstrating one's ability within an established social order. In

Malawi people understood sport as a healthy distraction, and valued opportunities to demonstrate abilities, but did not think of sport as closely tied to education or abstract self-improvement. Overall, however, the trends toward shared meaning among the UM players were not as clear as the trends among the UA players. Thus, it is more difficult to identify common cultural models for the UM group.

The relative diffusion of meanings and motivations found for the UM group may also relate to cultural difference; it is possible that because the primary research was from the United States, the potential for discussing and recognizing non-Western responses was limited. It is also possible that the UM group may simply have more discordant meanings for sport than the UA group. In any case, the important finding is that the two groups tended to have different meanings and motivations for sport. This finding supports the idea that there is always some negotiation between the local and the global, whether that negotiation is framed as a 'hegemonic' process (e.g., Hargreaves & Tomlinson, 1992), as a 'creolization' (Houlihan, 1994), or as something else all together. In this case, the negotiation between the local and the global meant that the meanings UA players made for sport were largely different from those made by UM players of a similar relative status playing an identical sport.

Overall, although the exact nature of meanings and motivations for sport is illusive, the contrasting themes proposed in this research provide several possibilities for future research. It would, for example, be useful to investigate cultural understandings of sport participation in relation to local attitudes toward competition, education, and the self. It would also be important to complement quantitative cross-cultural work with interpretive methods that allow for diverse local meanings to emerge from cultural settings not usually considered in sport psychology research.

Beyond elaborating empirical findings, such research could also usefully complement theoretical work that attempts to analyze the globalization of sport. Cultural studies of sport often focus on messages and policies of larger institutions (such as sport organization and governing bodies) rather than investigating individual understandings. Of the two cases addressed in this paper, only the trends evident with the UA players fit with characteristics identified with the globalization and modernization of sport including emphases on competition, productivity, and moral education (e.g., Donnelly, 1996; Houlihan, 1994). The trends evident with the UM players, on the other hand, seemed counter to those characteristics and thus raise interesting questions about local adaptations in response to globalization.

Understanding local variations in the meaning of sport is also important for practitioners interested in diversifying the reach of sport. There are, for example, a growing number of humanitarian and social service agencies attempting to use sport to address social problems in diverse communities (for a discussion of domestic American programs see Hartmann, 2001). These efforts often make particular assumptions, often accepted uncritically, about the meaning of sport as universal. Coakley (1996) discusses these assumptions, generally related to the idea that "sport builds character," as an internalization model of socialization through sport. Though lacking empirical support, this popular idea suggests that intrinsic characteristics of sport matter more than how individuals approach sport. The findings of this research demonstrate a flaw in that idea. If, for example, sport participants in distinct settings do not derive psychological

motivation from appreciating competition as an intrinsic good or from particular ideals about abstract self-improvement, then certain sport practices emphasizing competition and abstract self improvement might need modification.

As such, the more general perspective offered by this research involves recognizing sports such as soccer as what MacAloon (1996) calls an empty cultural form: a practice that is only meaningful in its particularly local experience. This perspective could be useful for coaches, administrators, and psychologists working with diverse athletes who bring local meanings to the practice of sport. Can a coach, for example, assume that players in diverse settings will have similar perspectives on the value of competition? Should administrators take for granted that sport is associated with educational values? Might psychologists best serve sport participants by accounting for cultural differences in self-related goals? While any successful practitioner needs to appreciate individual differences in sport participants, appreciating the role of larger cultural meanings may facilitate the creation of an effective motivational climate.

In the cases of UA and UM, differences in mentalities regarding competition, the educational value of sport, and self-related goals created distinct motivational climates. While the specifics of these differences provide possible dimensions of motivation for researchers and practitioners to consider, the larger point of this research is to demonstrate how local cultures influence meanings and motivations for the practice of global sport. This influence is evident in the simple observation that the UM meanings have significant and meaningful differences from the UA meanings. In turn, the UA meanings have significant and meaningful similarities to both historically Western cultural meanings for Western sport forms and to broad cultural models. In all these cases, diverse local psychological meanings for soccer seem as intrinsic to the sport as the presumably universal rules and skills.

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