Applying Social Work Values to Practice in Sport: Perspectives of Licensed Social Workers Employed in Collegiate Athletics

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Abstract: *Social workers are beginning to be hired in collegiate athletic departments to meet the holistic needs of student-athletes. The limited research that has examined social work practice in sport has not explicitly explored ways in which social work values manifest in practice. The current study explored how the values of the social work profession are applied when providing mental and behavioral health services in collegiate athletics. Using a qualitative design, nine licensed social workers employed in athletic departments were interviewed. Data were deductively coded using the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics' six values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Social workers recognized student-athletes as a vulnerable population, worked on social justice issues, placed an emphasis on the diversity of student-athletes, built relationships with both student-athletes and sport staff, and advocated for social work values in athletics. They also called for more opportunities to increase knowledge of social work practice in sport settings. Results support the need for social work programs to prepare students for careers in sport through efforts such as offering elective courses related to social work practice in sport and providing sport-specific practicum opportunities.*

Keywords: *Social work values; social work in sport; collegiate athletics; social work education; competence*

Sport "represents a microcosm of societal issues, a platform to advocate for awareness of pertinent social justice issues, and a tool that can be used to promote the well-being of individuals and groups" (Newman et al., 2019, p. 160). There has been increased visibility of mental and behavioral health needs (Henriksen et al., 2019), as well as a variety of social justice issues (Love et al., 2019) within a variety of sport systems and settings. For instance, star tennis player, Naomi Osaka, withdrew from the French Open citing the need to protect her mental health related not only to the pressure of elite athletics but also the heightened pressure of being a female athlete of color, and star gymnast Simone Biles chose to not compete in several Olympic events during the 2021 Toyoko Games due to mental health and mental performance concerns (Silva, 2021). Societal awareness has led to a paradigmatic shift in the provision of athlete care. Sport organizations once favored treatment through a traditional medical model, but there has been a transformation towards the use of holistic care to effectively serve the diverse needs of athletes (Waller et al., 2016). Holistic care considers not only the physical health, but also the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health of athletes. This comprehensive model of care requires an interdisciplinary team. Social workers, who often take an ecological systems perspective

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(Ungar, 2002) and biopsychosocial approach (Saleebey, 2001), are optimally educated and trained to work in holistic care teams within diverse systems and settings. Indeed, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) recognized the defining feature of the professional as being focused on "individual wellbeing in a social context and the wellbeing of society" (para. 2).

Newman et al. (2019) discussed the potential for interprofessional collaboration between social workers and other professionals within sport systems and settings. In fact, social workers are being hired as youth sport program administrators, high school and collegiate coaches, and mental health providers in professional sport leagues. However, one of the most visible roles for social workers in sport are those who work within collegiate athletic departments providing mental and behavioral healthcare services (Beasley et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021b). For example, findings from a survey administered through the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports email listserv indicated that among social work participants who responded (n = 84), 45.2% indicated that they worked in the area of collegiate athletics (Newman et al., 2020). Even so, much remains unknown about the roles of social workers and the services they provide within sport settings, particularly collegiate athletic departments. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore how the values of social work are applied by licensed social workers to the scope of practice in collegiate athletics.

Emergence of Social Work in Sport

The social work profession aims to enhance the wellbeing and basic needs of all people, but there is particular attention given to populations that are vulnerable, oppressed, and marginalized (NASW, 2017). The case for recognizing athletes—of all levels—as being a vulnerable population, for which social workers should provide services, has been established within the social work literature (Dean & Rowan, 2014; Gill, 2008). For instance, research in youth sport has indicated that sport itself can act as a catalyst for not only positive (e.g., life skills) developmental outcomes (Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021), but also behavioral health problems, such as aggressive and violent behaviors (Newman et al., 2021a).

Athletes at the collegiate level also face many risk factors. Student-athletes in revenue-producing sports (i.e., football and basketball), and student-athletes of color in particular (Hawkins, 2010), face economic exploitation as an unpaid labor force that is denied the right to unionization. This has had heightened health and safety implications during the COVID-19 pandemic (Edelman et al., 2020), as many student-athletes continued to compete for their schools without the safety precautions taken by many professional teams, such as creating a bubble for athletes or not allowing fans into stadiums. There are also on-going congressional conversations about student-athletes' right to profit off of their name, image, and likeness, which many have argued is in contrast to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) notion of amateurism (O'Brien, 2020). Due to advocacy efforts of many stakeholders and student-athletes themselves, the NCAA recently adapted a temporary name, image, and likeness policy allowing student-athletes to profit from their personal brand, contingent on the specifics of state laws (Hosick, 2021). Due to these

varying pressures, elite athletes at all levels are at an elevated risk for anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Taken together, research suggests the needs of athletes are often dynamic and complex.

Historically, social workers have been working in and engaging with sport since Jane Addams and the Hull House settlement. In the 1890s, the Hull House sponsored both boys' and girls' basketball teams and used sport and recreation programs as interventions (Reynolds, 2017). Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who founded the Special Olympics in 1962, began her career as a social worker (McNamara, 2019). Additionally, there is evidence that social workers have been providing services to student, Olympic, and professional athletes since the 1980s (Chengelis, 2020; Goldaper, 1981; Hanna, 1993). For instance, Hanna (1993) explored the use of psychodynamically-oriented clinical social workers as sport consultants. Lawson and Anderson-Butcher (2000) wrote about the social work of sport, both as a profession that can serve vulnerable, oppressed, and marginalized communities through sport, as well as a form of social praxis. In 2013, the Social Work and Sport Association at the University of Michigan School of Social Work hosted a conference dedicated to exploring the intersection between sport and social work (Newman et al., 2016). Further, research by Anderson-Butcher et al. (2018), Newman and Anderson-Butcher (2021), and others have demonstrated how a sport-based positive youth development program, as a social work intervention, is capable of promoting the healthy development of all youth, a goal set forth by the Grand Challenges for Social Work (2021).

Applying the Code of Ethics to Social Work Practice in Sport

At the heart of the social work profession is the NASW Code of Ethics, which identifies six social work values, or beliefs, and their accompanying ethical principles, which guide the standards of the profession (NASW, 2017). The social work values are service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Newman et al. (2019) outlined how—through the NASW Code of Ethics—social workers can enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of participants involved in sport. Similarly, Moore et al. (2018) empirically examined whether student-athletes believed their existing behavioral health services embodied the values of the social work profession. Study results indicated that student-athletes believed social work values were moderately prevalent. For instance, 32% of student-athletes did not report a sense of importance of human relationships, and 30% of student-athletes did not feel that service and social justice were readily present. These results should not be a surprise given the research by Beasley et al. (2021), which demonstrated that even though the presence of social workers in collegiate athletics was recognized, other professionals lacked understanding about the profession. Although there is some literature looking at the experiences of licensed social workers in collegiate athletics (e.g., Beasley et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021b), there remains a gap in the literature considering social workers' specific perspectives on what social work practice in collegiate sport entails.

Current Study

Even with the emergence of social workers working in sport, there is limited literature related to the practice of social work in sport, particularly within collegiate athletics. Previous social work literature has suggested how the NASW Code of Ethics can be used to guide social work practice in a variety of sport systems and settings (Newman et al., 2019). However, to advance the social work profession, Newman et al. (2021b) recently called for research to explicitly explore social work practice within specific sport systems and/or settings, such as collegiate athletics. Therefore, the current study takes a step forward and explores how social workers who provide services within collegiate athletics actually apply the profession's values.

Methods

Data Collection Procedures

Potential participants for this study were identified through review of online university staff directories of NCAA Division I (DI) athletic departments. Social workers employed at DI universities were chosen as DI athletics are the highest level of competition at the collegiate level and offer the most athletic scholarships to student-athletes (NCAA, 2020). To yield rich qualitative data (Patton, 2015), purposive sampling criteria included licensed social workers who were embedded within a DI athletic department. In total, 15 licensed social workers were identified, representing nine different DI institutions that were primarily located in the Northeast, Midwest, and Southeast regions of the United States. Each of the 15 licensed social workers were recruited via email, with nine social workers initially responding and providing consent to participate in the study. In an effort to maintain confidentiality—due to the limited population of participants—demographic information is reported as a group (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). The majority of the participants self-identified as White and female and were an average age of 40 years. All the study participants held a master's degree in social work, were licensed to practice in the state in which they were employed, and all had been in practice in collegiate sport, as a social work intern or licensed social worker, for a minimum of one year.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used for data collection. A semi-structured interview guide with 21 questions related to the participants' career paths and professional experiences was created to guide the conversation with the goal of facilitating an in-depth discussion of the social worker's experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Questions included, "What does your average workday look like?" and "What prior training, if any, did you have to work specifically with athletes?" Two questions specifically touched on the values of competence and service, but no questions explicitly addressed how social work values and ethics manifest in practice. Consent forms were signed by each participant before participating in the interview. Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher in-person (n = 2) and via telephone (n = 7). Saturation of themes was determined to be met after the ninth interview, so the researchers chose to not continue to follow-up with the remaining identified participants(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes with an average length of 43 minutes.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by the lead researcher onto a Microsoft Word document, which helped to manage the data during the iterative analytical process. Member-checking was also employed as participants were sent a copy of the initial transcript to check for errors and verify its accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Three participants returned the initial transcript with edits, and one participant requested that no direct quotes be used in dissemination of results for confidentiality reasons. Additionally, the lead researcher kept a researcher's journal to remain reflexive during the interviewing and data analysis process (Jasper, 2005).

Three main processes were conducted when performing the data analysis. First, interviews were reviewed through a close reading, and initial/open coding was completed by the lead researcher (Saldaña, 2016). The lead researcher, due to their positionality as a licensed social worker, was sensitized to the presence of experiences related to the six core social work values. Thus, "social work values" was one of the initial codes of the complete data set. Data that did not fit into this constructed theme were ultimately coded in a separate analysis and were not included as a part of this study. Second, the data coded in the initial "social work values" code were then deductively categorized by the lead researcher using the six core values of social work. Third, the lead researcher engaged in a peer debriefing session with the other members of the research team. Specifically, the research team discussed the construction of themes within each category until agreement was reached to ensure investigator triangulation (Saldaña, 2016).

Positionality Statement

Due to the constructivist epistemology of the study, acknowledging the research team's positionality related to the research topic was needed, as the researchers themselves are the primary instrument of data collection, transcription, and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this way, the researcher's interpretation of participants' experiences is the base of qualitative methodology. None of the authors were collegiate athletes themselves, but all have professional knowledge and experience in elite athletics, ranging from coaching experience to working with administration in athletic departments. The lead researcher is a licensed social worker, has a graduate degree in sport psychology and motor behavior, and is pursuing graduate work in sport management. The second author earned graduate degrees in both social work and kinesiology. The third author has a graduate degree in sport studies and an academic background in sport management. Together, the researchers approached the research with a critical, transdisciplinary perspective. They remained aware of their unique and intersectional positionalities related to the study's topic and participants through reflexive discussions during peer-debriefing (Saldaña, 2016).

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the current study are presented in six sections which align with the core values of the social work profession: service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Service

The value of *service* refers to the social work profession's ethical principle to "Help people in need and to address social problems," particularly populations that are vulnerable (NASW, 2017, para. 22). Participants commented that many of their peers (both in and out of social work) did not view student-athletes as a population that could benefit from this social work perspective. Participant 3 summarized, "Unfortunately, even in social work, there are a lot of people who don't think they [student-athletes] are vulnerable, so they don't take the time to learn [about] the population." However, contrary to this notion, the social workers involved in this study described many different vulnerabilities of this population.

Further, participants discussed vulnerability as being related to the high demands and immense pressures on student-athletes. Participant 8 stated the student-athlete population is at a particularly high-risk for adverse outcomes due to "The demand, the attention, the pressure to perform at a really high level, and the lack of free time that they have." Participant 7 mirrored this sentiment detailing the risk of over-identifying with one's athletic identity:

> *Just the pressure of youth sports now is insane, and in eighth grade, you are being recruited, and mom and dad, whoever, put all this money into you, so you have to go to school, and by the time you get to college, you hate your sport….and yet you feel like you don't have any other choice, you don't have any identity, you don't have any other friend outside of sport, because you have been doing it every day for the last ten-years.*

Additionally, participants pointed to how the collegiate athletic culture can limit the development of interpersonal skills and put student-athletes at risk of abuse. Participant 8 stated, "[Student-athletes] can sometimes be in situations where coaches are [pause] are not coaching them in the appropriate way." Participant 4 further described this issue:

> *They are a population that has been really primed to do what they are asked to do, follow directions, and that…we see from a sexual predator perspective puts them at risk. You know, they don't know how to advocate for themselves, they often take abuse, and then it's interesting because when they are in interpersonal relationships, they have some really unhealthy interpersonal relationships, because they have a lack of healthy experiences with being valued for having a different opinion: you don't talk back to your coach, right, you just line up and do what you need to do otherwise you are going to work out more.*

The social workers in this study maintained the social work profession's ethical principle of providing services to populations in need with attention to the various

vulnerabilities of the student-athlete population. Their statements further the call from other social work scholars that, contrary to popular belief, student-athletes are a vulnerable population who could benefit from social work services (Dean & Rowan, 2014). Specifically, the social workers in this study provided case management, clinical, and advocacy services to empower student-athletes and enhance their overall well-being.

Social Justice

The value of *social justice* relates to social workers' ethical principle to challenge social injustice in any form (NASW, 2017). Sport has long been a space of social justice advocacy (Love et al., 2019), even predating Kathrine Switzer competing in the Boston Marathon in 1967, Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics, and Billie Jean King's victory in the "Battle of the Sexes" in 1973. More recently, athletes have used their platform to advocate for racial equity and anti-racism (e.g., Colin Kaepernick, Lebron James, Bubba Wallace, etc.), equal pay for women (e.g., the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team, Allyson Felix, Venus and Serena Williams, etc.), LGBTQ+ inclusion (Megan Rapinoe, Hudson Taylor, Breanna Stewart, etc.), and mental health and mental illness awareness (e.g., Simone Biles, Kevin Love, Michael Phelps, Aly Raisman, etc.), among other social justice issues. Reflecting this movement, social workers in the study described how they have challenged social injustices on their campuses. As Participant 1 explained, they intentionally make their office a "really different kind of space" than the athletic department and athletic culture as a whole by having a large "Black Lives Matter sign right out front" and "Me Too things up on the wall."

Participant 8 described a moment wherein they had to advocate to let an opposing team peacefully protest in their university's gym, although administration ultimately did not allow the protest: "As a social worker, I'm like let these young men, who are mostly Black, come into our gym and talk about why they kneel." Attention to the intersection of race and college athletics is an important social justice issue. Specifically, scholars have examined the many ways in which college sport exploits the physical labor of student-athletes of color, many of whom are Black athletes in the sports of football and basketball, to make money for coaches, athletic directors, and university administrators who are predominantly White, cisgender men (Hawkins, 2010; Rhoden, 2006). This has become even more apparent during the current COVID-19 pandemic, as some universities have decided to continue to play both football and basketball, even at the risk of the health of student-athletes, almost certainly to maintain revenue (Edelman et al., 2020). Thus, advocating for the right of these student-athletes to have a platform and voice to fight this injustice is an important role not only for the social workers in this study, but also for the social work profession as a whole, especially in athletic organizations that generally lack diversity. General demographic data at all DI institutions indicate that 60% of administrative positions are held by men, and only 15% are held by people of color (NCAA, 2019). By comparison, the student-athlete population of DI institutions are 55% male, and 33% of student-athletes throughout the NCAA identify as persons of color. Indeed, Moore and Gummelt (2019) point specifically to social work's value and belief in social justice as a unique contribution to the care and support of athletes.

Dignity and Worth of the Person

The value of *dignity and worth of the person* distinguishes two primary beliefs that are the foundation to ethical social work practice: (a) social workers honor individual and cultural differences, and (b) social workers work to empower clients' self-determination (NASW, 2017). Social workers in the current study described specific ethical practice behaviors that support the value of dignity and worth of the person. Concerning diversity, many of the participants described the importance of recognizing the individual outside of their athletic identity. Participant 8 stated, "Student-athletes' identity of being an athlete is so profound, [so what] does it mean [for them] to explore other identities…I feel like it's one of my roles to support them [in this]." Similarly, Participant 5 spoke about how cultural differences, especially for the international student-athletes at their institution, was a major consideration in their work around supporting student-athletes' through transitions. As Participant 5 explained:

> *We get lots of people who have come from sun-shiny places and we start getting into seasonal changes with weather here…it can be quite the shock…if you have not been around seasons and rain and darkness and not seeing the sun…it has its own adjustment period.*

In response, this social worker described working to connect the students to resources to adapt to change in climate. Thus, in work with student-athletes, social workers are not only offering clinical therapeutic services, but some also work in a case management role, connecting student-athletes to needed resources.

Social workers also described how they honor student-athletes' cultural difference in their clinical work. For example, Participant 1 developed a course on resilience for Black male student-athletes. The creation of the course grew out of their frustration with the medical model approach to mental health, which dominates sport, and that many times ignores cultural issues (Roderick et al., 2017). As this social worker explained:

> *Half of the Black men [on campus] are in the athletic program…and the level of interest in traditional clinical services is the lowest among any [other] population on campus. So, its unethical to continue to insist that these students stay within that box [of traditional therapy] … but it serves the needs of the institution and the clinicians to adhere to that, and I am all about blowing that up.*

This point is especially important considering the aforementioned social justice issues facing Black student-athletes. By conforming to traditional institutional standards and culture, student-athletes' worth as a human with intersectional identities, not just as an athlete, may be diminished. Thus, attention specifically to how these macro-level factors impact the mental health of these student-athletes is important to maintain the value of dignity and worth of the person as the foundation to ethical clinical practice behaviors, which may be lost in traditional clinical services, as Participant 1 laments.

Self-determination work was usually centered around empowering student-athletes to speak to those in authority, such as coaches. Social workers also spoke about how student-athletes would raise issues that they had with their coaches in therapy sessions. Thus, much

of the work centered on empowering the student-athletes to work through conflicts with coaches one-on-one. As Participant 4 described their approach to such conflict, "I will try to get them to talk to each other [student-athlete and coach] and say, 'That sounds like something your coach would want to know.'" In this way, the social worker empowered the student-athlete to make their own decisions and validated the student-athlete's decision to speak to their coaches, upholding the value of dignity and worth of the person by promoting the client's self-determination.

Social work's emphasis on diversity, cultural competence, and empowerment offers a unique approach to practice that may be missing from student-athlete care (Moore et al., 2018). Indeed, Roderick and colleagues (2017) observed that sport research has somewhat neglected the mental health of athletes from a cultural perspective. Recently, there has been a turn towards cultural sport psychology that emphasizes the need to attend to the sociocultural factors impacting athletes (Ryba et al., 2013), which social workers are trained to do (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). In fact, one of the competencies of social work education is understanding that diversity and difference shape the human experience (CSWE, 2015).

Importance of Human Relationships

The value of *importance of human relationships* acknowledges the centrality of human relationships as a change agent (NASW, 2017). The social workers in this study described the importance of two distinct relationships: relationships with the student-athletes and with other members of the athletic department. Both relationships were central to effective practice.

In line with previous literature on the therapeutic dyad (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003), the social workers consistently cited the need to build positive relationships with the student-athletes. The building of this relationship seems to be especially important when working with student-athletes, as help-seeking behavior in the population is low, many times due to the culture of elite sport that teaches student-athletes to "tough it out" (Putukian, 2015, p. 147). For instance, the social workers pointed to the importance of getting to know the non-athlete identity of their clients as central to building the therapeutic relationship. As Participant 3 explained, "People forget they [student-athletes] are just people." When asked in what ways they build and maintain these relationships, Participant 4 summarized the thoughts of many of the participants that "It just…very, very, very much depends upon the person…honestly, a lot of trust building."

Additionally, participants discussed the importance of building relationships with other members of the athletic staff as key to providing effective services for student-athletes. The primary reason for developing these relationships were for referrals. Social workers in the study indicated that they gained the most referrals from coaches, athletic trainers, and academic support staff. Specifically, participants stated that they could get important collateral information from coaches and athletic trainers, as they spend the most time with the student-athletes. The social workers stated that much of their time, especially when they first took the position, was dedicated to establishing these relationships with other athletic support staff. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of their office

being located within the athletic department. For example, Participant 1 explained that having their office near the training room helped build positive relationships with other athletic staff, because they "interact with athletics people every day."

The importance of have trusting relationships with not only the student-athletes themselves, but also with other members of the student-athletes' care team has been documented with social workers (Beasley et al., 2021), but also in general literature concerning other professionals' work in collegiate athletic settings (Arvinen-Barrow & Clement, 2017). Research consistently points to the need for interdisciplinary care teams in sport (Waller et al., 2016), and, as the participants in this study reiterate, social workers working in collegiate sport should spend time developing these relationships.

Integrity

Integrity is the belief that social workers behave in a trustworthy manner (NASW, 2017), which encompasses maintaining a commitment to the values and ethics of the social work profession in one's practice. Participants pointed to the athletic departments' commitment to the mental well-being of the student-athletes as being in line with the values of the social work profession. For example, Participant 8 stated:

> *It's so important to us that we are going to have it [mental health programming] in the athletic department. That to me is the most important—what that means and what that says about your values and our ethics around student-athlete development and student-athlete support.*

Participants also gave examples of advocating for and maintaining social work values, which in turn supported the ethical standards and principles of the profession. This advocacy is especially important because sport professionals are unfamiliar with the social work profession due to the fact that mental health programing in collegiate sport settings is dominated by clinical psychologists (Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2019; Sudano & Miles, 2017). For example, Participant 8 described their experiences speaking to other members of the athletic staff about social justice issues in college sport, "I'm not saying my colleagues [non-social work colleagues] aren't completely on the same page, it's just a lot of conversations." Participant 1 also discussed similar ethical issues that present because mental health programming in college sport is overly dominated by psychologists. Specifically, this social worker described a situation where they were advocating for structural change in the athletic department:

> *My boss, a psychologist and counseling center director, said, "Look you are not there to do advocacy, that is not what they are paying you for, you have to stop doing it. They [the athletic department] get to say what they want." And I said, "This [advocacy] is in the NASW Code of Ethics."*

Overall, although participants pointed to a shift in the ethical commitment of many athletic departments, they still had to consistently advocate for and reinforce social work values in their own work and within the broader athletic department to maintain the integrity of their practice as consistent with the ethical standards of the profession. Education and promotion of social work values and ethics seems especially important in

the setting of college sports, which is dominated by the medical model, and where mental health programming is most commonly provided by licensed psychologists (Sudano & Miles, 2017). Consequently, many athletic professionals and student-athletes may be unfamiliar with social work. Social workers in these settings must stay steadfast to their commitment to the NASW Code of Ethics and be willing to educate others about the social work profession.

Competence

The value of *competence* guides the ethical principle that "Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise" (NASW, 2017, para. 37). The value of competence was somewhat contested among the participants. Participants argued that specific training in sport—either through field placements, specialized courses, or even separate degrees in sport-related fields—is needed to become a competent practitioner in collegiate sport, especially if the social worker also provides performance enhancement services. For example, Participant 9 pointed to the importance of having their field placement in an athletic department: "[It] really [was] an opportunity for me to gain some of that competence, because I was having the hands-on experience while still in school." Similarly, Participant 2 did their master's in social work, but their PhD in sport psychology:

> *I did my PhD in sport psychology, so I got all the training in that field in addition to the clinical training…if you look at the NCAA best practices [for mental health programming], that's what they recommend for mental health providers to really have that dual background.*

However, participants also felt their general social work education prepared them to work with the student-athlete population. For example, Participant 3 discussed how their initial anxiety of working with student-athletes diminished when they realized the presenting issues were the same as issues they saw in their previous positions. They explained, "I realized it's just anxiety, it's just depression, it's just transitions." Participant 4 pointed to how their prior work with non-athlete clients in private practice prepared them to work with the student-athlete population. Participant 4 explained, "My private practice is mostly focusing on TBIs [traumatic brain injuries] and has a sexual health component;" therefore, they had previous experience implementing interventions to address these issues. Yet, participants still discussed that some experience with the sport culture, such as sport-specific courses and field placements, would have been beneficial in preparation for working with the student-athlete population.

There were different opinions on the type of training needed to work with student-athletes. This tension is similar to conversations occurring in the psychology profession specifically around which professionals are best suited to provide performance enhancement services (Beasley et al., 2021; McHenry et al., 2021). Some argue that a sport psychology consultant with a masters or doctorate in sport psychology or related field from a kinesiology department is best suited to provide performance services, and others argue for a psychologist with a doctorate in counseling/clinical psychology who is a licensed mental health practitioner to provide these services (Wrisberg & Dzikus, 2016). To avoid

similar confusion, the social work profession can benefit from outlining sport as a subspecialty, similar to other NASW social work credentials. At minimum, as some social work programs are beginning to do (Newman et al., 2020), incorporating sport courses into baccalaureate and masters-level social work programs and establishing sport-based field placements can better prepare social workers to work in sport settings.

Implications for the Social Work Profession

Despite the growing demand for social workers in sport, little is known about what social work practice in sport looks like, particularly within collegiate athletics. This current study, through the lens of the NASW Code of Ethics, provides one of the first discussions of how the values of social work are applied to the scope of practice in collegiate sport. As some professionals, including some social workers, may not recognize student-athletes as a population in need of social work services, the participants in this study described the ways in which their work fits the ethical base of the social work profession. Specifically, they identified student-athletes as a vulnerable population (service), worked on social justice issues (social justice), placed an emphasis on the diversity of student-athletes that is many times lost in athletics (dignity and worth of the person), built relationships with both student-athletes and support staff (importance of human relationships), and consistently advocated for social work values in athletics to maintain trustworthiness in their practice (integrity). In these ways, social work practice in sport can be considered a subspecialty. However, although competent social workers, the majority of participants did not have a sport-related social work field placement, and none had sport-specific social work courses. To fill this need and uphold the value of competence, social work programs should include specialized classes to teach students about the culture and ethical considerations of social work in sport, and field departments should create sport-specific field placements.

Furthermore, the social workers involved in this study described case management roles (i.e., connection to other university resources), clinical issues (i.e., identity issues), and social justice issues (i.e., Black Lives Matter) that appear in work with student-athletes, as well as challenges they may face addressing them. These descriptions of social work practice in sport may be used to inform the development of specialized courses on social work in sport.

Limitations and Future Research

A few limitations of this study should be noted. First, due to the qualitative and constructivist nature of the current study, findings are not meant to be generalized to all areas of social work practice in sport. However, findings do provide novel insight into social work practice within collegiate athletics, a recognized gap in the literature. Second, potential participants were limited to social workers who were explicitly listed as being social workers on athletic department websites. Therefore, social workers who do not use their credentials and/or those who may be contracted or working part-time were not recruited. Third, it is important to note that the sample in the current study was not diverse (the majority were White females) and may not fully represent the intersectional identities

of social workers who are employed in this field. Fourth, because only licensed social workers were included in the current study, the diverse perspectives of other stakeholders within college athletics were not captured. Future research should consider engaging coaches, student-athletes, athletic administrators, and other athletics staff members. Finally, as the intersection of social work and sport is ever-growing, new opportunities to gain sport competence are also becoming available, a trend that may not have been captured with these participants. Thus, more empirical work on the roles of social workers working in collegiate sport is needed. Future research can also consider taking different theoretical perspectives (e.g., career construction theory, see Savickas, 2005) to further understand the emergence of sport as a social work subspecialty.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the social workers involved in this study offer key insights about how they maintained the core values of the profession when serving the needs of student-athletes involved in collegiate athletics. This information should be used to inform the development of specialized curriculum, education, and training opportunities for future social workers. For example, social work programs should include information about careers in sport as a professional track at student orientations and job fairs. Moreover, programs should consider offering elective courses related to providing mental and behavioral health services in a variety of sport systems and settings. Field placement opportunities also should exist for students interested in this subspecialty of social work practice, and social work departments can consider working with their university's or college's athletic department to establish practicum opportunities. Furthermore, as many sport professionals have misconceptions about what social workers actually do (Beasley et al., 2021), the information in this study can be used to educate sport administrators who are making hiring decisions to better understand what services social workers can provide to student-athletes. As this subspeciality of social work practices continues to grow and evolve, sport administrators should consider including social work as a preferred educational background when creating hiring announcements for their athletic departments. Overall, social workers, with a practice foundation in the NASW Code of Ethics, have the opportunity to enhance the holistic well-being of student-athletes.

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