Reimagining Positive Youth Development and Life Skills in Sport Through a Social Justice Lens

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s, models of positive youth development (PYD), as well as the concept of life skills, have served as popular approaches by which to situate psychosocial development in youth sport research. However, critiques have been put forth in terms of how the PYD approach fails to address power, privilege, and oppression and how life skills do not fully encompass the wide range of learning outcomes that can arise from sport participation. In light of social justice issues (e.g., systemic racism, gender inequity) that have led citizens in many countries to mobilize for change, there is a need to explore how PYD and life skills can be reimagined in order for youth sport research to be better positioned to promote dialogue and action on social justice issues in youth sport. The purpose of the present paper is to reimagine PYD and life skills in sport through a social justice lens. Following reflections on how PYD and life skills can be framed to further promote social justice in youth sport, implications for practice and research are offered.

Keywords: advocacy, activism, coach education, athletes, social change

Lay Summary

In light of contemporary social justice issues, the present paper is positioned as a reimagining of positive youth development and life skills in sport through a social justice lens. Recommendations are offered to progress positive youth development and evolve life skills. Further, implications for practice and research are provided.

Implications for Practice

- In consideration of accruing critiques, positive youth development and life skills in sport are reimagined through a social justice lens.
- Using example life skills such as teamwork and leadership, illustrations are offered of how life skills can be evolved into social justice life skills.
- Coach education is positioned as an important factor in training coaches on the importance of acting as allies and enabling their athletes to gain the confidence to engage in activism.

Reimagining Positive Youth Development and Life Skills in Sport through a Social Justice Lens

Since the early 2000s, models of positive youth development (PYD), as well as the concept of life skills, have served as popular approaches by which to situate psychosocial development in youth sport research (Holt, 2016; Qi et al., 2020). Specifically, the Five Cs framework of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005) has been adopted by many youth sport researchers. This framework is anchored in relational developmental systems theories, such as Bronfenbrenner's (1999) bioecological theory and Magnusson's (1999) holistic person-context interaction theory. Human development is positioned as involving mutually influential bidirectional relations between youth and their ecology, with these relations evolving over time (Geldhof et al., 2013). The possibility of adaptive developmental relations between youth and their ecology, as well as the plasticity of human development, both represent defining features of change theorized to occur in relational developmental systems. Plasticity is deemed to be present across the lifespan, but particularly salient in youth. This plasticity, when aligned with ecological assets, affords youth opportunities to experience positive developmental trajectories into early adulthood, which are accrued in contexts that afford (a) positive and sustained adult-youth relations, (b) life skills-building activities, and (c) opportunities to participate in valued community activities. Thus, within the strengths-based approach of the PYD framework, youth are not viewed as problems to be managed but rather as individuals who can develop and meaningfully contribute to society.

Under the large umbrella that is the PYD framework, different approaches have been used to situate developmental outcomes (e.g., assets, competencies). In youth sport research, life skills have often been positioned as key developmental outcomes, with Holt et al. (2017) stating that "life skill building activities are an essential feature of programs designed to foster PYD" (p. 3). Thus, using the PYD framework, researchers have examined how youth sport can be situated

as a learning environment conducive to the development of life skills, defined as intrapersonal (e.g., goal-setting) and interpersonal (e.g., teamwork) skills that enable youth to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as at home, in school, at work, and in the community (Danish et al., 2004). Some studies have focused specifically on how the life skills developed in sport can transfer to contexts extending beyond sport. According to Pierce et al. (2017, p. 194), life skills transfer refers to:

> The ongoing process by which an individual further develops or learns and internalises a personal asset (i.e., psychosocial skill, knowledge, disposition, identity construction, or transformation) in sport and then experiences personal change through the application of the asset in one or more life domains beyond the context where it was originally learned.

When considering how life skills can be taught through sport, Turnnidge et al. (2014) discussed how coaches can adopt implicit or explicit approaches. The implicit approach refers to coaching focused on sport-specific skills, without deliberate attention paid to the development/ transference of life skills. The explicit approach refers to coaching that integrates the deliberate teaching of life skills. More recently, rather than situate the implicit and explicit approaches as dichotomous in nature, Bean et al. (2018) theorized how the teaching of life skills occurs on a 6-level continuum of intentionality, with the levels complementing one another and acting as building blocks. Consistent with the notion of the implicit and explicit approaches being complementary, Holt et al. (2017), as part of a qualitative meta-study, hypothesized that the combination of an implicit approach (i.e., PYD climate) and an explicit approach (i.e., life skills program focus) can lead to positive outcomes that generally outweigh the negatives, when the sport context is appropriately structured and overseen by competent and caring adults. Within the literature, youth sport participation has been associated with life skills development as well as

other PYD outcomes in the physical (e.g., skills for healthy active living), personal (e.g., positive self-perceptions), and social (e.g., civic engagement) domains (see Camiré, 2014; Pierce et al., 2017 for reviews).

To frame their studies, youth sport researchers initially relied on models of PYD from developmental psychology but in recent years, sport-specific PYD and life skills models have been created. Amongst others, examples include Gould and Carson's (2008) heuristic model of coaching life skills through sport, Hodge et al.'s (2013) life skills framework integrating basic psychological needs theory and life development intervention, Holt et al.'s (2017) model of PYD through sport created based on the results of a qualitative meta-study, Jacobs and Wright's (2018) framework for life skills transfer in sport-based youth development programs, and Kendellen and Camiré's (2019) grounded theory of life skills application. This proliferation of models serves as an illustration of the burgeoning interest in sport-based PYD research, with sport positioned as having particular features that are conducive to life skills development, such as being competitive, social, emotionally charged, and focused on skill building (Bean et al., 2018). In fact, the sport sciences featured relatively high in publishing volume by discipline in Qi et al.'s (2020) scientometric review of PYD publications between 1995 and 2020. Of particular note, the Holt et al. (2017) model of PYD through sport has been extensively cited, ranking fourth out of 1,435 papers for strongest citation bursts (Qi et al., 2020).

Based on the results of the Qi et al. (2020) review, it appears that the positioning of PYD and life skills as popular approaches to situate psychosocial development in youth sport research continues to have proponents. However, some youth sport researchers have raised concerns relating to the limits of anchoring youth sport research in the PYD and life skills frames of reference. For example, Coakley (2011) argued how PYD-based youth sport research promotes a

neoliberal agenda where young people are socialized to be compliant, productive, and employable. Ronkainen et al. (2021) critiqued the conceptual narrowing of what youth learn from sport to life skills that are economically productive. Youth development researchers in general psychology have also raised concerns with current iterations of the PYD and life skills frames of reference. Gonzalez et al. (2020), in developing their critical PYD framework, emphasized how "absent from PYD's traditional approach is an articulation of the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on young people's lived experiences" (p. 25). Wilson Outley and Blyth (2020) highlighted some of the issues surrounding the teaching of *loaded* life skills such as resilience and grit, which are deemed loaded because they are often aimed for youth facing barriers without acknowledging the realities of sociopolitical inequalities. It is important to note that resilience and grit have been adopted as key life skills by organizations offering sport-based PYD programming to youth facing barriers (e.g., Warner et al., 2019). Considering the accruing critiques, Kochanek and Erickson (2020) stressed the necessity to "reimagine sport coaching for positive development from a more socially responsible, critical praxis" (p. 1).

To address Kochanek and Erickson's (2020) call for change, there is a need for more critical theoretical lenses to better situate the state of affairs in youth sport. As recent movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Me Too, School Strike for Climate) have led citizens in many countries to mobilize for change, we must explore how PYD and life skills can be reimagined in order for youth sport research to be better positioned to promote dialogue and action on social justice issues in the youth sport context. The need for more critical youth sport research is evidenced in a study by Newman et al. (2020) who surveyed youth sport coaches (80% male; 88% White) and found that few regarded mental health (6.5%), race/diversity (1.9%), disabilities (1.0%), and LGBTQ+ (0.0%) issues as key matters. Such findings reinforce how inequity often

remains invisible to those in positions of privilege and highlight how some coaches fail to appreciate the broader sociopolitical context in which youth sport is practiced. In addition to coaches, a more critical examination is needed of youth athletes' attitudes and experiences in relation to social justice issues in sport (e.g., Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Moving forward, youth sport researchers must be critically self-reflexive and seek to challenge social structures that privilege some and oppress others. This entails acknowledging how youth sport often serves as a site of resistance due to entrenched discursive practices upholding the status quo, making social change a slow process (Spaaij et al., 2020). To identify and disrupt entrenched discursive practices, researchers must create theories and models that enable a critical praxis challenging systems of oppression.

Moving forward, the position statements for social justice (e.g., Schinke et al., 2019), as well as the critiques of PYD and life skills (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2021), must be acknowledged. Thinking and researching *differently* by reimagining PYD and life skills may spur opportunities for youth sport to better serve as a backdrop for teaching youth about social justice issues. Youth sport research must be at the service of youth sport stakeholders, meaning that researchers should create knowledge that stakeholders can use to foster models of social participation allowing them to exhibit meaningful agency in instigating change (Kochanek & Erickson, 2021). Given that the social activist space is complex to navigate, an essential next step consists of evolving current frameworks to ensure future research is positioned in manners that coincide with how society is evolving. Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to reimagine PYD and life skills in sport through a social justice lens. Reimagining current frameworks is vital in today's dynamic world for research to inclusively serve diverse youth sport stakeholders. The paper is positioned as a

contribution in the area of cultural sport psychology, which seeks to advocate for the diverse "cultural standpoints of sport participants" (Schinke et al., 2019, p. 58).

Positionality

We acknowledge that our combined cultural backgrounds, experiences, and contexts influenced the manner by which we collaboratively wrote the present paper in terms of the literature reviewed, the examples provided, and the implications offered. Therefore, we felt sharing our unique positionalities was critical. The first author identifies as a White able-bodied male and is an Associate Professor in a kinesiology department at a Canadian university. The intersectional identity of second author is inclusive of his lived experiences as a neurodiverse foreign-born adoptee of color and is an Assistant Professor in a social work department at an American university. The third author identifies as a White able-bodied female and is an Assistant Professor in a recreation and leisure department at a Canadian university. The fourth author identifies as a first generation Black Canadian who is an able-bodied female and a Professor in a kinesiology and recreation department at a Canadian university.

Social Justice

Social justice is often described as too nebulous and too versatile to be constricted to a single concept, instead consisting of a multitude of "discursive and pedagogical practices" (Bialystok, 2014, p. 148). As an ideological perspective, social justice is the belief that everyone deserves equal social, economic, and political rights, as well as equitable opportunities and protections (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). It consists of embracing "the idea that social identities such as race, class, and gender exist in intersectionality, that is, in the belief that social identities do not act independently, instead interact in an intersection of systematic oppression" (Warren et al., 2014, p. 91). Social justice is thus a rights-based perspective with an

emphasis on fair treatment, which is value- and culture-laden (Morgaine, 2014). Hytten and Bettez (2011) organized social justice around five elements based on its contributions to the: (a) philosophical (i.e., meaning of justice), (b) theoretical (i.e., ideological positions connected to social movements), (c) democratic (i.e., problematization of oppression), (d) ethnographic (i.e., people's lived experiences of justice/injustice), and (e) practical (i.e., application of social justice). These five elements often intersect and research should not be restricted to one element. Ultimately, social justice is about embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion while recognizing the roles of privilege and power.

The Responsibility of Researchers

In sport psychology, the code of ethics of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (2021) offers six principles (i.e., competence, integrity, professional and scientific responsibility, respect for people's rights and dignity, concern for others' welfare, social responsibility) for members to "respect and protect human and civil rights, and not knowingly participate in or condone unfair discriminatory practices" (p. 51). Researchers in other fields, such as social work, have also recognized the need to advocate for social justice. For example, the National Association of Social Workers (2017) recognizes social justice in its code of ethics, stating:

> Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people (p. 30).

Newman et al. (2019) discussed the duty of social workers to advocate for social justice in many settings, including sport, by "ensuring access to resources, services, and information, and open spaces so all groups can participate in decision making at different levels of citizenship" (p. 167).

Researchers in physical education have also recently reflected on their responsibility to promote social justice. Walton-Fisette and Sutherland (2018) co-edited a special issue in *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* exploring how educators can promote social justice in physical education teacher education programs. Grounding the social justice discussion were the four levels of curriculum in physical education: (a) explicit (e.g., official curriculum, syllabi), (b) covert (e.g., unspoken agendas), (c) null (e.g., ideas that could be included in explicit and covert curricula but are left out), and (d) hidden (e.g., unexamined and/or unexplained processes and pedagogies). Walton-Fisette and Sutherland (2018) discussed how the hidden curriculum might be most responsible for promoting social inequities often pervasive in physical education and physical education teacher education.

Finally, researchers studying youth sport have recently articulated a responsibility for advocating for social justice. Bredemeier and Shields (2019) sought to redefine competition in youth sport, stating that only by redefining competition can sport adopt a genuine concern for social justice. Such a position was echoed by Camiré and Santos (2019) who rationalized that for meaningful ideological change to occur in youth sport (i.e., from a social justice perspective), approaches that help shift entrenched performance-based reward systems must be enacted. Otherwise, sport stakeholders will inevitably continue to prioritize performance objectives and pay less attention to benevolent aims, letting the youth sport system continue its descent "further down the professionalization precipice" (Camiré & Santos, 2019, p. 32). Schinke et al. (2019) discussed the importance of operating from a social justice praxis in community-based youth sport programs serving Indigenous communities. This entails genuine efforts to prioritize local values, respect local agency, and situate sport as contributive to culture. In efforts to continue

building momentum in terms of the interest paid to social justice in youth sport research, an important next step consists of reimagining PYD and life skills through a social justice lens.

Reimagining PYD and Life Skills in Sport

Several key events have raised public awareness and consciousness of social justice issues. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement is spurred by the presence of systemic racism and police brutality, while the Me Too and Times Up movements are aimed to confront sexual harassment and violence against women. LGTBQ+ advocates continue to fight for civil rights and basic human needs for all people along the gender and sexual orientation continuums. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed racist rhetoric against Asians, as well as a multitude of social inequities that are pervasive amongst many communities of color. These societal issues intersect with a variety of other sociocultural and sociopolitical inequities that confront many marginalized and disenfranchised populations (e.g., how climate change disproportionally affects certain groups). Because of these oppressive forces, many youth populations are recognized as being socially vulnerable. Given that youth sport is an inherent part of the fabric of society, some researchers have recognized the importance and timeliness of addressing the abovementioned key events and movement in the context of sport (e.g., Tam et al., 2020). Moving forward, to meet the diverse needs of youth, researchers must further engage in critical praxis and work to reimagine PYD and life skills in sport with social justice as a central area of focus.

PYD Then and Now

The PYD framework surfaced as a resultant of the paradigmatic shift in youth development research that occurred during the last few decades of the 20th century (Amodeo & Collins, 2007). Historically, youth were viewed as social ills to be managed through a problem-focused approach, but the PYD framework brought forth a strengths-based conception of

development, holding that youth have the potential for successful, healthy development (Lerner et al., 2005). Therefore, the aim of PYD-based programs is to prepare youth to meet the stressors and challenges of everyday life through exposure to intentionally designed activities that help youth gain competencies. For the past two decades, many youth sport researchers interested in psychosocial development through sport have grounded their work in the PYD framework, with desired PYD outcomes often conceptualized as the development and transfer of life skills (Gould & Carson, 2008; Pierce et al., 2017). However, given some of the critiques mentioned earlier (e.g., Coakley, 2011; Ronkainen et al., 2021), a next step in the evolution of the PYD framework in sport consists of a reimagining through a social justice lens.

PYD Moving Forward

Reimagining the PYD framework requires that we critically examine existing efforts to progress the PYD framework and situate our own positionality as youth sport researchers.

First, researchers have argued for the need to progress to youth-centric approaches to PYD, particularly in the context of youth sport (Pierce et al., 2017). Newman et al. (2017) proposed an alignment between PYD and experiential learning theory, arguing that firsthand experience helps to bring "transcendent meaning to skills and lessons by emphasizing how experiences within a socially constructed environment are internalized and reflected upon" (p. 313). Travis and Leech (2014) proposed to enhance Lerner et al.'s (2005) Five Cs model of PYD from an empowerment perspective by advocating for the inclusion of community and citizenship, thereby allowing youth to understand their role in transforming social conditions to promote wellbeing. Dillard et al. (2019) built upon the eight program features of PYD to create their balanced and restorative justice model, stating the necessity of having engaged adult leaders who grasp the needs of the youth they serve. Recently, Gonzalez et al. (2020) proposed a critical

PYD framework, expanding on the Lerner et al. (2005) framework through the centering of critical consciousness as a reciprocal and dynamic process of reflection and action. Building upon Freire's (2000) work, Gonzalez et al. (2020) situated critical consciousness as the consolidation of youth successfully engaging in critical reflection (i.e., grasping how systems of power produce and maintain oppression), developing political efficacy (i.e., belief in one's capacity to effect social change), and engaging in critical action (i.e., challenging oppressive practices to instigate social change). Critical consciousness is positioned as an essential addition to the PYD framework given that it "benefits the civic development of *all* young people - including those with privileged identities - and facilitates perspective-taking and learning across differences" (Gonzalez et al., 2020, p. 29). Moving forward, in consideration of the conceptual work occurring in other fields (e.g., social work, education, economics), youth sport researchers should reflect and ponder if/how concepts such as critical consciousness could be integrated in sport-specific PYD and life skills models.

Second, we must acknowledge how our positionality is inherently entangled in our research, as we have attempted to do above. This entails acknowledging our many privileges as researchers and understanding our assumptions as we reflect on the lived experiences of the youth we serve. Additionally, and consistent with Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy, we should seek to empower youth to explore the many discourses of their reality as they acquire a critical consciousness of their lived experience (Gonzalez et al. 2020). As researchers, if we can invest efforts in reflecting on the diverse lived experiences of youth and the dynamic environments in which they live, we can more actively reimagine PYD and life skills in sport through a social justice lens. Concretely, this entails reflecting on our positionality in traditional systems of

power, privilege, and oppression. A key step in this exercise is to imagine how we can evolve the meaning of life skills beyond their current conceptualization.

Evolving Life Skills

An important step in evolving life skills involves achieving synergy between their utility for the individual and how they can help address societal issues. Although there are likely a multitude of ways to evolve life skills through a social justice lens, our reflections, influenced by our positionality, led us to consider three ways in the present paper: (a) ensuring life skills take on expanded meanings, (b) seeing life skills as sociopolitical, and (c) teaching life skills that address youth's social realities. Such efforts can help reimagine life skills as socially just actions.

First, we argue that many life skills can be reimagined to have expanded meanings and applications. *Teamwork*, in the life skills literature, has been defined as "working cooperatively as a group to achieve a common goal" (Kendellen et al., 2017, p. 39). However, teamwork can take on new meanings that extend beyond group goal achievement, whereby the work a team accomplishes can be "the means through which human beings experience personal growth, social development, and socialization" (Lang, 2010, p. 1). Thus, through a social justice lens, teamwork can be a critical skill needed to engage with individuals and groups that may differ culturally and/or hold different belief systems. Similarly, *leadership* is a life skill that can be reimagined to foster inclusive community efforts and advance social advocacy movements. Within the life skills literature, leadership has been defined as including skill-based (i.e., action-oriented and relational skills) as well as mindset-based (i.e., personal development and transformational role modeling) elements (Pierce et al., 2020). In complement to those attributes, from a social justice lens, leadership can also consist of advocating for change and working towards a socially just society. For example, social justice leadership in sport can take on the form of coaches, captains,

or other informal leaders taking part in a peaceful protest or standing up for a teammate harassed because of their racial/ethnic background, gender identity, or sexual orientation. When life skills such as teamwork and leadership are leveraged to promote a socially just world, they can enact contributions for the individual as well as society as a whole.

Second, in evolving life skills, it is also essential to preface how certain life skills should be reviewed with consideration to the inequities they can (albeit unintentionally) uphold. For instance, as alluded to earlier in the paper, some current portrayals of resilience and grit in youth sport scholarship may, in certain cases, perpetuate inequities without acknowledging the factors that contribute to such inequities (Wilson Outley & Blyth, 2020). Specifically, as life skills, resilience and grit may be loaded concepts perpetuating the notion that youth facing barriers must navigate environmental stressors and challenges that youth from perhaps more privileged backgrounds may not have to navigate. As Warner et al. (2019) discussed, resilience and grit are two of seven core life skills in the theory of change of an urban sport-for-development program for youth facing barriers being studied longitudinally. From a social justice lens, life skills with such a connotation should be reflected upon and perhaps even deconstructed to elucidate whether, in some ways, they perpetuate behaviors aimed at getting *some* youth to persevere as they attempt to beat odds stacked against them. Moving forward, youth sport researchers must consider if resilience and grit can/should be reformulated, understood anew through a focus on addressing both the individual and social factors that may work to mitigate the impact the barrier-filled developmental trajectories of some youth. In simpler terms, as a society, can we strive to enact conditions that help change the odds, instead of asking youth facing barriers to continuously fight to beat the odds?

Third, if life skills are to help youth engage in complex social systems, they must be culturally relevant and based on youth's social realities. In essence, not all life skills hold the same value and the same meaning for every person and in every situation. For instance, the life skill of *emotional regulation* has been defined in the life skills literature as "exercising control over your emotions" (Kendellen et al., 2017, p. 39). However, that exact manner by which this life skill is valued, learned, and ultimately exhibited may be different for youth living in upper-middle class households compared to youth living in low-income public housing (Anderson, 1999). Similarly, *meeting and greeting* has been situated in the literature as an important life skill in the sport of golf and in fact, it represents a core learning outcome within The First Tee golf curriculum employed in Canada and the United States as a framework for youth development (Weiss et al., 2013). Nevertheless, as part of meeting and greeting, it must be noted that eye contact as a form of communication holds different meanings in East Asia compared to North America (Uono & Hietanen, 2015). In youth sport, emotional regulation as well as meeting and greeting skills are often taught uniformly but may be interpreted differently by youth of different cultural beliefs, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, and physical and cognitive abilities. Just as no two sports systems are the same, nor are the diverse youth populations who engage in them. Moving forward, the inherent challenges of teaching youth life skills in socially responsible manners (e.g., Who determines what are culturally-relevant life skills?) must be considered and should be addressed through a genuine consideration of participants' lived experiences and social realities.

Acknowledging Developmental Outcomes Extending Beyond Life Skills

In addition to evolving life skills, we must be cognizant that life skills consist of one of many outcomes that can emanate from youth sport participation. Within the sport-based PYD

literature, developmental outcomes emanating from sport have been constituted in different yet similar manners, from Benson et al.'s (1998) developmental assets (e.g., Forneris et al., 2015) to Lerner et al.'s (2005) Five Cs (e.g., Jones et al., 2011), which generally encompass psychosocial skills enabling youth to thrive as productive citizens. However, as Ronkainen et al. (2021) argued, too much focus on life skills has perhaps "unduly narrowed the research on learning in sport to only what is deemed functional, teachable, and economically productive" (p. 214). Therefore, other forms of learning that differ in their instrumentality, depth, and relation to self must be recognized as extending the research on life skills. Ronkainen et al. (2021) critiqued that the predictable, strengths-based PYD approach can be deterministic, often constricting learning to "what makes athletes 'stronger' and 'better'" (p. 219). As many past studies have shown, negative experiences such as stress and making mistakes can lead to the development of coping skills when youth successfully overcome difficult challenges (e.g., Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Newman et al., 2021). Moreover, unexpected experiences in sport that spur disjuncture also have pedagogical worth, such as enabling youth to acquire the ability to read whether relationships are caring and supportive in contrast to instrumental and conditional (Massey & Whitley, 2020). Moving forward, researchers should consider how models of PYD and life skills can be framed through social justice lens to account for how negative and unexpected experiences (e.g., racism, homophobia) exist in sport. These models should also be framed to account for other forms of learning that may or may not complement the explicit teaching of life skills.

An essential next step consists of maintaining an acute awareness that youth sport participation can foster learning outcomes that extend beyond the traditional bounds of what have been considered life skills, which in many ways rationalizes the insertion of social justice in sport-based PYD frameworks. Embedding a social justice agenda within youth sport research

may enable researchers to better appreciate the importance of not studying youth as independent producers of their own development (Lerner, 2021), but rather as agentic connected beings who can learn to exhibit cultural humility, embrace culture, value others' worldviews, and hold an informed understanding of socially just human behavior. (Mio et al., 2012). Thus, for youth who display multicultural competence, exhibit empathy for difference, and strive for the dismissal of oppression (Iverson, 2012), is it fair to say that they have learned *social justice life skills*?

Social Justice Life Skills

Moving forward, the concept of social justice life skills must be further explored in terms of its potential conceptual and pedagogical worth. Does this concept hold value in helping explain and delineate how youth can be taught to develop a critical self-awareness of their own positionality in relation to the culturally diverse society? In the context of youth sport, and within a reimagined PYD framework, it is essential to consider if it makes sense to situate concepts such as civic engagement and critical consciousness as social justice life skills. For example, regarding civic engagement (i.e., the process of taking collective action to address issues of public concern; Checkoway, 2009), to what extent can youth sport be situated as a context where coaches "teach" civic engagement in manners that encourage youth to discuss issues of discrimination occurring at their school and in their community? Similarly, in consideration of the Gonzalez et al. (2020) critical PYD framework, to what extent can youth sport be situated as a context where coaches teach critical consciousness by helping youth develop their critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action? In light of these crucial questions, important next steps for youth sport researchers will consist of continuing to push reflections on whether concepts such as civic engagement and critical consciousness are in fact conceptually and pedagogically amenable as social justice life skills.

If we are to progress and reimagine models of PYD and life skills that account for social justice life skills, several factors must be considered. First, more work is needed to better delineate the particular contributions of sport in promoting social justice life skills (e.g., What features of sport make it a setting conducive for teaching social justice life skills?). Second, we must more closely examine the various manners through which social justice life skills can be taught by coaches through sport and if current approaches (e.g., implicit, explicit) remain warranted. Third, if coaches are going to be responsible for teaching social justice life skills, they must be educated to do so in culturally-sensitive manners. Further, coaches must reflect on their positionality/privilege and ensure they approach discussions on social justice issues as facilitators rather than authoritarians. Fourth, from an organizational perspective, coaches should be closely supported in their efforts to teach social justice life skills by sport organizations operating at municipal, regional, and national levels. Fifth, beyond coach instruction, we must demarcate other factors (e.g., athlete biography, cultural background, sociopolitical context) influencing the development of social justice life skills. Last but not least, it is crucial to recognize the inherent limits of the youth sport context and temper our expectations of sport as a setting for teaching social justice life skills, with sport merely one of many contexts shaping the lives of youth. Taken together, such efforts will contribute to the further delineation, conceptualization, and refinement of social justice life skills, which is needed to provide a clearer guide for the potential worth of its usage in youth sport research. As Kochanek and Erickson (2020) argued for, further reflections in this area of interest are needed if a more socially responsible, critical praxis can be adopted in youth sport research.

Implications

Within the following sections, implications are offered to situate how a reimagining of PYD and life skills in sport through a social justice lens can help reposition youth sport research from conceptual, methodological, empirical, and applied perspectives.

From a Conceptual Perspective

Prior to undertaking research, youth sport researchers should actively engage in critically reflecting on their positionality and implicit biases. Moreover, youth sport researchers should delineate what it is that they are trying to accomplish and whom they are trying to serve through their scholarship. Such efforts can be enhanced by acknowledging one's privilege and by remaining up to date on current theories and pedagogies, with the aim of understanding the youth at the center of the research process. Such theoretical and pedagogical perspectives include, amongst others, critical race theory, critical indigenous theory, feminist theories, queer theory, critical disability theory, and sociocultural theory, as well as social justice pedagogy, critical pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and inclusive pedagogy. This necessarily entails reading beyond the sport psychology literature by staying closely connected to scholarship from other disciplines such as social work, education, and sociology to be exposed to different theories and to capture the different facets of how social justice is conceptualized.

Such openness to literature from a variety of disciplines can instigate creativity in how social justice is understood in sport. For instance, the critical PYD framework proposed by Gonzalez et al. (2020) integrating critical consciousness as a 7th C is fertile grounds for reflection for youth sport researchers in terms of apprehending how critical consciousness can be facilitated in youth sport settings. Researcher training cannot be overlooked as youth sport researchers should develop a capacity to properly support participants as they share their experiences of social justice/injustice, which is essential in establishing psychological safety when discussing

sensitive topics. The ability to *listen* during data collection and data analysis should be encompassed in researcher training, which is closely tied to one's willingness to read scholarship from various disciplines to develop nuanced interpretations.

From a Methodological Perspective

To move youth sport research forward using a social justice lens, practices related to sampling are essential to consider. As suggested by many researchers, purposeful sampling approaches should be favoured to seek out multiple and diverse perspectives (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018; Wilson Outley & Blyth, 2020). Hearing the voices and lived experiences of people of color, people living with a disability, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and people living in economically disadvantaged communities is necessary for knowledge to be representative and actions to be targeted. By being purposeful in our sampling approaches, research may serve as a way to empower marginalized voices to advocate for their strengths, needs, and realities. In addition to gaining the perspectives of historically underrepresented voices, exploring the perceptions of those in privileged positions (i.e., White, male, middle/upper class, heterosexual, able-bodied) is also imperative to understand their perceived responsibility in engaging in social justice action (Gearity et al., 2019).

For researchers conducting qualitative research, the use of creative methods is suggested as a means to understand the diverse lived experiences and distinctive worldviews of youth. For example, Newman (2020) used photography and journaling to empower youth of color from economically disadvantaged communities to share their experiences related to the development and transfer of life skills. Ronkainen et al. (2021) recommended storytelling and reflective writing as starting points for understanding what youth learn from/through sport. Arts-based methods can be used by youth from diverse backgrounds to capture what life skills mean to

them. Such youth-centered methods can not only support autonomy, they can also aid in broadening the concept of life skills beyond researcher definitions (Pierce et al., 2017).

For researchers conducting quantitative research, in recent years, strides have been made to create questionnaires assessing life skills development, such as the Life Skills Scale for Sport (Cronin & Allen, 2017), the Life Skills Transfer Survey (Weiss et al., 2014) and the Coaching Life Skills in Sport Questionnaire (Camiré et al., 2021). In reimagining PYD and life skills through a social justice lens, new tools may be needed to measure stakeholder perceptions of social justice in sport, although some tools do exist that could be validated in youth sport samples (e.g., Engagement in LGBTQ Ally Actions in Sports Scale; Toomey et al., 2016).

From an Empirical Research Perspective

Exploratory research is needed to acquire a foundational understanding of the barriers that exist on the ground prior to conducting action-oriented research. Mac Intosh et al. (2020) identified a disconnect in athletes between their intentions and actions for engaging in activism, meaning that research investigating how coaches and administrators can support athletes' engagement in activism is warranted. Moreover, exploratory research could be conducted to examine what social justice life skills (e.g., civic engagement) stakeholders believe can/should be taught to athletes in youth sport settings, and how. Exploratory research could also be conducted to examine youth sport organizations' values and missions to assess if they need to be reimagined with social justice taking precedence, or at least being considered.

Once exploratory research has been conducted and has yielded important insights, action-oriented research should follow. Collaborative efforts (e.g., community-based participatory research) can be pursued to establish research-community partnerships that inform, for example, the co-construction of curriculum, training/education, and interventions. Social justice-focused

education opportunities for coaches and athlete leaders can be leveraged within communities and organizations, building off previous research that has engaged coaches and team captains (e.g., Gould & Voelker, 2010). Such action-oriented research initiatives should then be evaluated to understand implementation, quality, outcomes, and impact, with frameworks such as knowledge to action (Graham et al., 2006) or RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance; Glasgow et al., 2001) offering approaches for sport-based evaluation research. However, it is important to note that evaluations of social justice are bound to be difficult to undertake given that social justice is multi-faceted, making it difficult to delineate and measure. The current reimagining of PYD and life skills in sport can perhaps instigate a rethinking of existing sport-based frameworks or the creation of new frameworks that can be used to guide exploratory research, action-oriented research, as well as evaluations.

From an Applied Research Perspective

Education is one of the most important social determinants of health that has wide-ranging effects across the life course as it intersects with many other determinants such as social inclusion/exclusion and social safety. In the context of youth sport research, if applied efforts are to make meaningful strides in addressing social justice issues, a priority moving forward must be to develop critically responsible and culturally sensitive ways to educate coaches on the importance of acting as allies and enabling their athletes to have the confidence to engage in advocacy and activism (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Given a documented lack of openness to social justice matters (Newman et al., 2020), many youth sport coaches could benefit from evidence-informed professional development opportunities to help them identify abuse, prevent inappropriate behaviors, and become aware of how their unintentional actions may harm some athletes (Tam et al., 2020). Moving forward, researchers must engage in knowledge translation

by, for example, facilitating initiatives dedicated to social justice, including but not limited to social justice-focused coach education, online training modules, and social media campaigns with advocacy groups. Within such professional development opportunities, coaches could be exposed to the principles of behavioral economics recently discussed by Whitley (2021), whereby coaches can consider making adaptations (e.g., priming, nudging) in their everyday coaching practice to instigate PYD-related behavior change in their athletes.

When conducting applied research on the ground, it is important to consider what social justice looks like in a particular context of study. A starting point can consist of intervention work where researchers engage coaches in reflecting on their coaching philosophy and help them understand how they can make a deliberate commitment to social justice by promoting diversity and approaching sensitive matters in culturally competent manners. Ultimately, applied intervention work should be focused on getting coaches and athletes to work together to build community connections as they think about what is relevant to them in terms of social justice advocacy (Jones et al., 2020). Applied research that fosters community capacity building is essential for youth sport programs to raise awareness and create change in their community.

In taking an ecological systems approach, social justice research in youth sport must be conducted beyond the team level, meaning that the onus to address social justice should not fall solely on the shoulders of coaches. Applied research should be conducted with youth sport administrators with the aim of putting in place policies, organizational processes, and equitable hiring practices that promote social justice. If youth sport is to operate as a vehicle for change, then applied research should play a role in facilitating change that occurs synergistically from top-down as well as bottom-up to help dismantle resistance to diversity (Spaaij et al., 2020). All of these applied research efforts stand to benefit from reimagining PYD and life skills in sport.

Concluding Thoughts

The present paper is positioned as a contribution in the area of cultural sport psychology by reimagining PYD and life skills through a social justice lens. As researchers (e.g., Darnell & Millington, 2019) have argued, sport can serve as a setting for addressing social justice. For youth sport research to play its rightful role in addressing social justice, entrenched practices linked to discourses of essentialism, denial, and victimization must be understood through reimagined concepts of PYD and life skills. Efforts to think outside the box might also be needed in terms of reimagining the context of youth sport itself as it continues to face increasing pressures of professionalization (Camiré & Santos, 2019). Thus, instead of trying to *fit* social justice agendas into market-driven youth sport structures, perhaps a rethinking of organized youth sport may be warranted for alternative modes of human movement to at least be acknowledged as offering worthwhile opportunities to promote social justice (Atkinson, 2010a). For example, post-sport physical cultures (Atkinson, 2010b) may very well serve as more socially just opportunities to move our bodies in ways that allow us to go beyond the traditional binaries of male/female and able/disabled created within modernist sport. Thus, in attempts to promote social justice, a push back against the corporatization and professionalization of youth sport may open doors to explore "cultural forms, identities, lifestyles and practices that do not perfectly emulate or replicate hyper-competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal modernist sports" (Atkinson, 2010a; p.112). However, it should be noted that offering alternatives to organized youth sport might enact its own set of challenges in terms of the extent to which alternatives would be physically accessible and culturally safe.

On a different yet equally important note, if we are to reimagine PYD, life skills, and how we conduct youth sport research through a social justice lens, more spaces must be created

for research that addresses social justice issues. Reimagining the very essence of who conducts youth sport research is necessary and starts with including a diverse set of individuals engaged in PYD and life skills research, both as students and professors. There is great value in having qualified people from underrepresented groups in positions of power, which in the world of research means having more diversity, in all its forms, amongst editors and editorial boards of peer-reviewed journals (Wilson Outley & Blyth, 2020).

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