



Practice Update: Sport as an Emerging Area of Social Work Practice: New Playmakers in the Athletic Arena

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Sport has been recognized as a setting for social work practice for decades, with social workers practicing in diverse sport systems, from community recreation to professional sport. However, as an emerging area of practice, little is known about these social workers. The current study aims to understand how social workers who work in sport understand their own role in this area of practice. Fifteen social workers – who had on average 12.7 years of experience and were employed in a variety of sport systems and settings – participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that although social workers viewed themselves as

distinct from other service professionals, their sense of a professional identity was still evolving. Additionally, findings indicate that other social workers and sports professionals had a general lack of understanding about their role(s). Ultimately, there is a need to expand upon research informing formalized social work education.

Keywords: social work, sport, athletics, sport social work, social work practice

As a social service profession, social workers aim to help maintain the basic human needs of all people – especially individuals, groups, and populations that are systemically oppressed within society – by upholding the profession’s values and ethics. In turn, sport has been recognized as a setting for social work practice, dating back to the Jane Addams and the Hull House (Reynolds, 2017). More recently, several organizations have begun to operate within the intersection of social work and sport. For instance, The Ohio State University’s College of Social Work and Department of Athletics created the LiFEsports Initiative in 2009, which is nationally recognized as a premier model for sport-based positive youth development (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2021). The Social Work and Sport Association at the University of Michigan’s School of Social Work hosted, *Beyond the Playing Field: The Social Impact of Sport*, the first social work and sport conference in 2013 (Newman et al., 2016). In 2017, the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport (ASWIS) became a 501(c)(3) organization and now hosts the annual *Social Work in Sports Symposium* (aswis.org). Several universities, such as the University of New Hampshire (among others), also have begun offering specialized “sport social work” courses (Newman, 2022).

Social workers are currently practicing in a variety of sport systems and settings, from youth to professional sports. However, despite this long-standing history of ‘social workers in sport’ (Lawson & Anderson-Butcher, 2000), little is known about who these social workers are and their unique contributions within sport. Further, the lines between social workers and other service providers (e.g., sport psychology) are often blurred (Beasley et al., 2021a; McHenry et al., 2021). The current study aims to understand how social workers who work in sport understand their own role in this emergent area of practice.

A Need for Social Workers in Sports

The knowledge and skills of social workers have been shown to be uniquely positioned to meet the call for holistic care in sport (Dean & Rowan, 2014). Using the code of ethics and professional values, Newman et al. (2019) proposed how social workers can leverage their education and training to support athletes, coaches, and entire sport systems. Similarly, Beasley et al. (2021b) explored the ways in which sport ‘fits’ as an area of specialized social work practice. These calls for social workers to provide services in sport has been driven by an increased understanding of athletes as a vulnerable population with unique challenges and risks.

Athletes, like all populations, have been found to experience issues with mental and behavioral health. Research has demonstrated that retired professional athletes experience higher rates of dementia and depression than the general population (Weir et al., 2009). Similarly, in addition to the sport specific pressures to perform, college athletes experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, which in many cases surpass general population rates (Gavrilova & Donahue, 2018). Research also has indicated that youth athletes (ages 10-24) – because of

sport-specific factors (e.g., competition- and contact-levels) – are at risk for mental and behavioral health issues, such as aggressive and violent behaviors (Newman et al., 2021a). Due in part to additional sport-specific stressors, athletes of all ages may benefit from mental and behavioral healthcare and other social work services.

Moreover, there has been increased attention and dedication to promoting social justice throughout a variety of sport systems and settings through the use of *critical* positive youth development approaches (see Camiré et al., 2021). Athletes, coaches, and other sport stakeholders – at all levels – have been increasingly vocal and visible in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion when advocating for social justice both within and outside of sport. For example, as a response to the changing sociopolitical culture, collegiate athletics has seen the revival of athlete activism as college student-athletes – particularly student-athletes of color – have begun to use their power and platforms to effect change on campus and throughout society (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). In alignment – guided by the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW, 2021) Code of Ethics – social workers share the commitment to promoting social justice and challenging social injustice.

An Emergent Area of Practice

Preliminary research has indicated that social workers provide a variety of roles across a diversity of sport systems and settings (Newman et al., 2021b). At the micro-level, social workers conduct biopsychosocial assessments for athletes at all levels, offer behavioral health support, and provide clinical and therapeutic services. At the mezzo-level, social workers educate athletes, families, coaches, and athletic administrators; develop and implement community-based programs; provide case management services, and foster stakeholder relationships, and coordinating systems of care. Further, at the macro-level, social workers act as advocates, social justice activists, and inform policy decisions. From a more general framework, social workers provide a range of services through three basic distinctions: (a) social workers who *use sport* as a social intervention to promote healthy development (e.g., youth development workers); (b) social workers who *work within sport systems/settings* to provide behavioral and mental health services (e.g., therapists); and (c) social workers who embody a *dual role* and use sport to promote healthy development through their work within sport systems/settings (e.g., sport coaches).

Several studies have been conducted related to the use of sport for youth development as a social work intervention (see Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021). For example, Newman and Anderson-Butcher (2021) explored how a community sport-based positive youth development program supported the development and transfer of life skills among youth recognized as being socially vulnerable (i.e., youth of color from economically disadvantaged areas). Designed to address the *Grand Challenge of Social Work* related to *Ensuring Healthy Development for All Youth*, the study highlighted programmatic factors (e.g., intentionally designed activities, behavioral reinforcement) and staff practice (e.g., framing, facilitating, and debriefing activities) that contributed to life skill development and transfer.

However, there has been much less research related to the roles of social workers who *work within sport systems/settings*, and there are no known studies exploring social workers with a *dual role*. One preliminary study by Newman et al. (2021b), which explored the diversity of roles and services that social workers provide when working in sport, did provide valuable insight. Findings revealed the unique values, knowledge, and skills social workers used when

practicing in sport. Social work values included the code of ethics that aimed to promote diversity and inclusion, whereas social work knowledge was related to holding a holistic, person-in-environment, and ecological systems perspectives of development. Further, findings highlighted the use of social work approaches, including a using person-centered approach and strengths-based approach when working with athletes and coaches. Even with this foundational understanding, Beasley et al. (2021b) cautioned that there is still need for additional training and educational opportunities to enhance competencies related to social work practice in sport.

Moreover, from a generalist perspective, psychology and counseling professionals have reported viewing social workers as being focused on case management, systemic issues of social justice, and social wellbeing, rather than providing the interpersonal, clinical, and/or therapy services offered by psychologists and counselors (Mellin et al., 2011). As a result, social workers within sport face challenges due to misconceptions about their profession (Beasley et al., 2021a). Such limited perceptions prompt the need for understanding the variety of diverse roles that social workers can fulfill, both in and out of sport. Differences aside, there is a general lack of understanding about what the social work profession is capable of offering. However, as outlined by Newman et al. (2019), social workers within sport not only share similar values with other service professions but are adept at working in interprofessional collaborations, while also being capable of providing unique contributes (e.g., ecological systems perspective of development, focus on holistic wellbeing, commitment to social justice, etc.).

There is much to be learned about the intersection of social work and sport as a unique area of practice. For example, there is a need to articulate the rationale for employing social workers in sport systems and settings, particularly when compared to other service providers. Additionally, as an emerging area of social work practice, how social workers view their own professional identity may provide insight into the current needs and future trajectory of this area of social work. Beginning to understand how other sport professionals may view social workers also may help to provide clarity when advocating for the unique skill set of social workers in sport systems and settings.

Method

Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and social constructivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), the current study sought to explore the lived experiences of social work professionals who work within different sport systems and settings. Whereas interpretivism is concerned with context (e.g., culture, time, circumstance) and acknowledges that contexts interact dynamically leading to a variety of social realities; social constructivism emphasizes the influence of sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts when seeking to understand and construct knowledge. In alignment, the objective of the current study was to gain a holistic, yet in-depth understanding of the shared worldview of these social workers, rather than creating quantifiable dichotomies between specific social work jobs within sport.

Researchers' Positionalities

The researchers of the current study recognize that acknowledging their own lived experiences are crucial. The first author is a professor of social work with a graduate-level background in kinesiology and serves on a student-athlete mental health advisory board for a Division I athletic conference. The research team also included student researchers at various

points in their educational careers (i.e., baccalaureate, masters, doctoral students) from a range of academic disciplines, including social work, kinesiology, sport management, sport studies, and public health. Additionally, a senior scholar – with experience integrating Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare in social work research, policy, education, and practice – was engaged throughout the research process. This scholar provided critical insights into understanding nontraditional social work practices. Moreover, the research team was grounded in their lived experiences as former collegiate, high school, and youth sport participants; and several members of the team were currently serving as competitive sport coaches. Given their unique perspectives, the research team approached the current study with a transdisciplinary and applied perspective. However, recognizing the influence of their own lived experiences, the variety of methods were used to better ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Procedures

Study procedures were approved by the first author's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research. Participants were recruited through the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) email listserv. Registered as an official 501(c)(3) in 2017, ASWIS serves as the collective voice for social workers who use and/or work in sport. Currently, ASWIS hosts an annual symposium, contributes to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) mental health resources, as well as maintains a list of telehealth providers that has been shared with the NCAA, the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC).

A recruitment email was sent two weeks prior to the annual ASWIS symposium, and a follow-up email was sent at the beginning of the symposium. Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format and occurred either in-person or via Zoom. A majority of the interviews were performed in-person at the annual ASWIS symposium. However, to engage participants who did not attend the symposium, interviews also were held via Zoom in the weeks leading up to and/or following the symposium. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes.

Participants

At the time of the study, there were nearly 150 members in ASWIS. As an invitation to participate in the current study, all active members were emailed a recruitment letter through the ASWIS listserv. To be included in the study, participants had to: (a) be at least a bachelor-level social worker; (b) identify professionally as a social worker; (c) currently work within a sport system or setting; and (d) use their social work education in sport. Interviews were done in-person at the annual ASWIS Symposium and via Zoom (within the same time period) and were audio recorded.

Fifteen social workers (10 women, 5 men) participated in the study (see Table 1). The self-identified race/ethnicity of participants was diverse: 7 who identified as Caucasian and/or White, 4 as Black and/or African American, 2 as Jewish, 1 as American-Asian, and 1 as Latinx. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 years old. All but two of the participants earned their Master of Social Work degree at the time of the interview. Additionally, eight participants earned their social work licensure, and four others were in the licensure process. These social workers

were employed in a spectrum of sport settings, including at the youth, collegiate, and professional levels. On average, participants had 12.7 years of social work practice experience.

Table 1.
Social Worker Demographics

Participant	Gender	Social Work Experience	Social Work Field (Self-Described)	Sport System / Setting
Chloe	Female	4 years	Sport Social Work	University Athletic Department
Aiden	Female	20 years	Athletic Social Work	Private Practice
Kassandra	Female	13 years	Clinical Social Work	University Sports Medicine
Linda	Female	1.5 years	Clinical Social Work	University Athletic Department
Nadine	Female	18 years	Clinical Social Work	Private Practice
Nathan	Male	6.5 years	Interpersonal Practice	Professional Sport
Luna	Female	10 years	Field Education	Academia
Jacob	Male	26 years	Clinical Social Work	University Counseling Center
Sadie	Female	5 years	Sport Social Work	University Athletics
Kate	Female	4 years	Athletics	University Athletics
Jonah	Male	9 years	Interpersonal Practice	Athletics Counseling
Travis	Male	2 years	Clinical Social Work	University Counseling
Sidney	Female	21 years	Sports Social Work	Competitive Youth Sport Club
Ben	Male	44 years	Community Organization	Higher Education
Veronica	Female	7 years	Sports Social Work	Professional Sport

Interview Guide

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Interview guides consisted of 10 main questions designed to explore how social workers understand their role within sport. Example questions included: What is your role as a social worker in sport? Within a sport setting, what challenges (if any) have you experienced as a social worker? Please explain any opportunities you have had to collaborate with other professionals in sport. Probing questions were paired with main questions and were used to facilitate deeper, more nuanced reflection. For example, after the main question “How do you use your social work background in sport?” participants may have been asked “How do you use your social work training and education?” and “To what extent do social work ethics and values play a part in your role within sport?” Additionally, a series of demographic questions related to their social work education and employment were asked, including: What is the work setting of your current place of employment? What best describes your primary field of social work?

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reread to verify their accuracy. The software, NVivo 12, was used to manage transcriptions and organize the interview data. An inductive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The lead researcher of the project (i.e., first author) led the data collection and data analysis processes.

First, the researcher became immersed in the data by reading the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings. Initial codes were inductively constructed, representing both semantic and latent content. Codes were inductively organized in broad categories by collating related data. Within each of the categories, unique themes and subthemes were inductively developed. Themes were reviewed and revised to ensure their uniqueness and were given a specific label and definition. Finally, findings were illustrated using a thick description and vivid quotes to describe the essence of each theme and subtheme.

Multiple strategies were used to enhance the study’s trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Prior to conducting interviews, as a way to identify any assumptions and/or implicit biases related to the research, the interviewer engaged in a series of bracketing interviews with other members of the research team. During data collection, the interviewer kept a notebook as a way to reflect on and process the interviews, as well as make note of any particularly relevant information that may inform the future interviews. Throughout the data analysis, peer debriefing among the entire research team was used to ensure the clarity and validity of the initial coding schema and relevance of themes. Following analysis, member checking was conducted with one study participant to help clarify and verify the description of the themes.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in three sections (see Table 2). The first section provides an understanding of social workers who work in sport settings. The second section discusses the perceived perceptions that others hold of social workers who work within sport. Finally, future needs of social workers are highlighted. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants’ identities while honoring their unique lived experiences.

Table 2.

Understanding Social Workers in Sport: A Summary of Major Themes and Subthemes

Category	Theme	Subtheme
Understanding Social Workers in Sport	The Need for Social Workers	Self-Observed Need
		Growing Area of Social Work Practice
	Social Work is Transferrable	Employment Specifications
		Similar Population Needs
		Transferability of Knowledge and Skills
		Different than Sport Psychology Professionals
Professional Identity	Lack of Clear and Consistent Identity	
Perceptions of Social Workers in Sport	Perceptions of Other Social Workers	Positive Perceptions and Intrigue
		Resentment and Suspicion
	Perceptions of Sport Professionals	Positive Perceptions of Social Workers
		Lack of Understanding
Future Needs of Social Workers in Sport	Research and Literature	
	Education and Training	
	Need to Professionalize	

Understanding Social Workers in Sport Settings

Participants discussed the emerging need for social workers in a diversity of sport systems and settings, as well as explained the transferable nature of the profession. However, participants demonstrated that their own professional identity within sport is not clearly defined.

The Need for Social Workers

The need for social workers in sport was highlighted by several unique subthemes, including a self-observed need for social workers within sport, sport as a growing area of social work practice, and their ability to meet employment specification.

Self-Observed Need. Participants recognized the need for social workers through their own lived experiences as an athlete, coach, and/or parent of an athlete. Luna explained her motivation for working in youth sport through her perspective as a parent observing how coaches can impact a young athlete:

That's the final thing that prompted [working in sport] because I've seen it as a player, I've seen it as a coach, and I've seen it as an educator. But as a parent and watching a youth...one of the biggest things is, you realize how much impact a youth coach has on an individual, and when it's negative, how drastically that can change the trajectory of a student... I think that's been the biggest catalyst for wanting to dive into this.

Other participants discussed recognizing the need for social workers within sport from their previous experiences working and engaging with athletes. For instance, Ben explained:

[Some] athletes come from deprived environments where they didn't have everything they needed emotionally, financially, or educationally. When they get to college or the pros, everyone wants a piece of them...and they're not really equipped. We want to make sure they have the life skills to negotiate and communicate.

Although each participant had their own unique path to their work within sport, each expressed recognizing the need for and value of their profession within sport from lived experiences.

Growing Area of Social Work. Participants emphasized how working within sport systems and settings is a growing area of social work. For example, Chloe described her specific role within collegiate athletics administration, "I haven't seen anything like this in the country... This first year is really learning where the gaps are, and then filling them in and creating a plan to do so. I wear a lot of different hats here." Nick, who works in tandem with a professional sport league, added, "We're not built yet. And it's something like the field of social work is not built so robust that the opportunities are plentiful, because they're not." However, Nick noted the progress that has been made, "But now in comparison to 2013 when I was coming out of grad school, the landscape is totally different." Several participants also offered insight regarding getting others to buy-in to the idea of employing social workers in sport systems and settings. As Ben, who coordinates social work field placements, explained:

I think it's really growing. At first, I think people were like, 'Sports are great. We like football.' But what I did is, I would tell them why a social worker could be very important and [how they] use strengths-based social work approaches.

Employment Specifications. Many participants explained that they were hired for their current position in sport because of their social work background. Chloe described her job hiring process within collegiate athletics, "I was absolutely hired because I was a social worker. That was a big thing that they made known during the [hiring] process." She added:

They were looking for somebody who had the cultural competence around how to manage different relationships, how to understand therapy, how to understand the whole person and work with systems and also policy... Our sports psychologist really wanted to have a social worker come in and manage all the other things that were going on here.

Kassandra similarly explained, "I think that I knew that those [social work] skills were important in the work that I was doing, but I was asked about them during the interview process of interviewing for the job at the university."

However, as Veronica – who works in professional sport – explained, "We're still sort of welcoming social work to the table. There's been a lot of leg work to really have people

understand what it is that we do and that we can do, and to really sort of revere our skill set.” Ultimately, new job opportunities continue to arise as sport organizations and programs continue to understand the importance of holistic wellbeing, mental health, and social justice.

Social Work is Transferable

Participants shared that one of the key strengths of a social work education, is that the profession is as versatile as it is diverse. Specifically, participants explained how they are equipped to work with athletes, coaches, and other sport stakeholders because of similarities to other populations they have served and the transferability of their knowledge and skillset.

Similar Population Needs. The social workers who were interviewed reflected on the parallels of their previous social work experiences working with other vulnerable populations. Kassandra explained the similarities of her work as a school social worker and her job collegiate athletes, “The things that I do now are things that I used when I was working in an alternative school setting because there were students with really high emotional and mental health needs.” Kassandra went on to say, “although the performance is different than the behavior that I dealt with, it’s still a high level of anxiety and it’s still a really tender tipping point.” Linda made a similar comparison, reflecting on her internship experiences during her social work education:

In college athletic departments, [student-athletes] don’t have a lot of agency, they don’t have a lot of control. There are a lot of different entities controlling their schedule, what classes they take, what meals they take, what their financial aid looks like. So, it’s a lot of people that don’t have a lot of power... They’re much more privileged obviously, and they have so much more at their disposal, but they also are so limited.

However, participants acknowledged that many of the athletes that they work with were dealing and coping with a variety of mental and behavioral health issues, as well as oppressive forces that perpetuate social inequities. Aiden described her experiences helping to create a system of care for a young female diver, “Turned out the girl in diving was starting to exhibit symptoms of an eating disorder. It’s really common amongst women divers, and so they have their own perspective of treatment and coordination of care.” Jacob added, “The campus that I have worked on, half of the black men on the entire undergraduate population are in the athletic program;” however, the system is “not responsive to the psychological health and wellness needs of black students.” Although the system and settings may differ, many populations have similar intersectional needs and are faced with social vulnerabilities because of systemic inequities, which helps to highlight the value of social justice education received by social workers.

Transferability of Knowledge and Skills. Participants talked about the transferability of their knowledge and skills gained from their social work education. Regardless of their role within sport, their education provided a foundation to serve those with diverse needs. Sadie, who is a collegiate sport coach and operates a consulting business that works with youth athletes and teams, discussed this transferability:

I’ve been in a few different roles... I’ve had a few different experiences, like with an athletic department, with the startup company, and now I’m also back in an athletic department as the coach... I have different duties, or whatever it is, than I had at each of those positions, but I think I’m still using those same skills, those same social work skills... I’m still taking that perspective with everything that I’m doing in the profession.

Similarly, Sidney described her work as a youth sport coach, “Never in a million years thought that I was going to wind up using my clinical skills.” She went on, “When I came back down to coach, I mean it was like, ‘Oh my God, I am using textbook stuff.’ I mean, I literally went back to my textbooks and was like, ‘...this is Hepworth and Larson all over again.’”

Professional Identity

Throughout each interview, participants contemplated their professional identity. While there was not a clear consensus, several overarching characterizations were described.

Different than Sport Psychology Professionals. When describing the need for social workers in sport, participants compared and contrasted their perspectives and abilities with sport psychology professionals. Nadine, who owns her own private practice, described common reactions when working with new clients. She stated, “The assumption is always that I’m a sports psychologist, always...I look at it as an opportunity to educate.” She went on to, “I say that not only do you get the benefit of working on performance, if that is a need, but we also get to deal with things that are affecting you outside of your sport.” Similarly, Aiden added, “Psychologists have more of an individual perspective,” whereas social workers come from the “perspective of providing the best experience for that athlete and maintaining their mental and physical health within the entire system.” Cassandra also discussed the importance of holistic wellbeing when working with collegiate athletes:

The thing that I find most prevalent is just the idea that helping students connect the dots that their athletic performance impacts their academic performance, impacts their sleep cycle, impacts their relationship with their partner, impacts the way that they engage with academics. We just talk about how all those things are connected.

However, Linda explained, “I feel like we don’t really need to focus on the differences...It needs to be about collaboration and not like territorial and things like that.”

Lack of a Clear and Consistent Identity. Throughout the course of the interviews, there was a divergence related to the terminology used to describe their professional identity. For example, there was a cohort of participants who classified themselves as a *sport(s) social worker*. Nadine stated, “For me, I’m in private practice, so I market myself as a *sports social worker*... It’s who I am, it’s what I do. I love to say I practice sports social work!”

However, not everyone agreed with this term. Linda discussed this stance, “I think [the term] *sports social work* is bad...I think it has to be behavioral health. If you’re an athlete going to see a social worker, it means you have a problem... I feel like it has to be behavioral health.” Kate echoed this sentiment when discussing the term:

Not a *sport social worker*, because I do think it limits a lot of what we’re able to do, and it also doesn’t allow for as much sort of flexibility and diversity in the groups that we work with, and really, we’re just using social work skills with a different population.

Rather, some participants referred to themselves explicitly emphasizing their identity as a *social worker*. For example, Kate elaborated on her role as a *social worker* in sport:

I would say the best term we’ve been able to come up with, in my opinion, is *social worker in sport*... In my opinion, no different than being in a practice area such as children and youth, this is just a different field working with athletes, or we can even compare it to people with disabilities. There’re social workers that work with people with

disabilities...to me, is no different. We don't call those social workers, social worker that works with people with disabilities, they don't have a term or anything.

This overall lack of continuity was demonstrated by Sadie, who reflected, "It's so interesting, because what is the field of social work? Because I'm a social worker in coaching, does that make that then a social work position?" And as Sidney shared, "I have actually been saying now that I'm a coach *and* a social worker."

Perceptions of Social Workers in Sport

To gain a better initial understanding about the views of social workers in sport, participants were asked to reflect on how they believe others may perceive them and their role.

Perceptions of Other Social Workers

In general, participants believe that other social workers (not working in and/or unfamiliar with sport) viewed their work positively. However, several participants also shared that some of their social work peers seemed resentful and suspicious.

Positive Perceptions and Intrigue. Participants believed that their social work peers held positive perceptions of their unique work within sport. Moreover, they noted that other social workers were often intrigued and curious about their role. As Chloe put it, "I think people are intrigued by it...they're interested by it, and they want to learn more about it." Nick added: "When I tell them what I do, they're like, 'Oh, that's interesting. I didn't know the [professional sport] had social workers.' And they find it fascinating that there are actual social workers that are involved in sports. And I think it draws interest from them but not criticism per se. So, I think their more intrigued by it than, 'Why would they need that?' Jonah, who works in a college athletic department, responded, "Interesting question. I don't know...as long as you're serving the community, I feel like social workers are okay with that."

Resentment and Suspicion. Conversely, some participants did acknowledge that some of their social work colleagues seemed resentful. Travis, who was completing his graduate degree at the time, explained, "I think personally I'm perceived differently, cause when you think of vulnerable populations, you don't really think of athletes. It seems like they've been on the back burner. So, I think there's a little resentment." Kate talked about this sense of resentment further, "[It's] kind of polarizing...they're for it or completely shut it down." Jacob also raised the question about misperceptions that lead to negative perceptions. He posed the question, "When you go as a social worker to work in athletic systems, have you been or are you at-risk of being co-opted by that system and abandoning your social work stance? I think they're suspicious of athletic and competitive values." Thus, participants acknowledged an often-complicated relationship with their social work colleagues.

Perceptions of Sport Professionals

Similar to what they believed about their social work peers' perceptions, participants believed that their sport colleagues (e.g., other service providers, coaches, athletic administrators, etc.) held generally positive perceptions of social workers in sport. However, participants also

noted that other sport professionals had a general lack of understanding about social work education, knowledge, and skillset.

Positive Perceptions of Social Workers. When asked what she believed other sport professionals' perceptions were of social workers who work in sport, Chloe replied, "I would say actually in a more positive light than the general public." Kassandra shared an experience she had when interviewing for her job within collegiate athletics. She stated, "They asked me, 'What do I think the biggest challenge was about coming into this environment?' I said, 'My concern is being a social worker and not having a seat at the table already.'" She went on to add, "I was told the idea was like, 'People here don't care what your degree is. The kids don't care what your degree is. They just know that you're here to help them get better, and that's what matters.'"

Among coaches, Jacob noted a "generational change in coaching." He explained, "The younger generation of coaches are much more into how mental health resources can be useful. Not only for health but also for team development and for performance and just general well-being." Aiden, who runs a private practice, shared how coaches use her as a resource. She said: He brings me in to do kind of a parent training on how to be a positive sports parent... He loves that they're getting that perspective, not from him as a coach, but from someone who is considered an expert in the field.

From athletic administration to athletic coaches, sport stakeholders often consider social workers a positive resource who are capable of providing holistic support.

Lack of Understanding. Although other sport professionals are believed to view social workers in sport in a positive manner, there also was confusion. Travis explained:

I think it's intimidating for them, just on that aspect that when you think of social workers, a lot of the times people think of CPS [Child Protective Services] so they think that they associate we're going to take their kids, or a lot of people have had negative reactions with social workers through the child welfare system... Once we got past those barriers, I think they have a lot of respect for social workers once they actually find out that we're actually on their side of the team.

As Veronica explained, "I think that people want to have us involved, and I don't think people always know how to have us involved." Aiden added, "Typically I have to do a little bit of...education, around what roles a social worker fills, and how our education qualifies us to do what I do, and that tends to assuage a lot of anxiety." In the end, participants noted that they often have to advocate for themselves, just as they would the clients whom they serve.

Future Needs of Social Workers in Sport Settings

Although social workers are seeing greater opportunities to engage in a variety of sport systems and settings, continued evolution in this unique area of practice is necessary. As Jacob cautioned, "[Working in sport] is like working with the military, you have to become culturally competent." To be effective agents of change within the complex and dynamic systems of sport, the social workers who were interviewed highlighted several areas of need that would help others to become ethically responsible and culturally competent.

Research and Literature

Currently, there is a lack of research and literature related to the intersection of social work and sport. When discussing the current state of resources for social workers interested in working with and/or in sport, Ben added:

The first thing I looked for was a literature review and we couldn't find anything. We kept on looking and looking, but there really wasn't anything. When we had our first mini-conference...but there wasn't much. I would look for social work sport or social workers and sports and I found out that colleagues and other individuals were having to publish their work in other journals because it wasn't considered "sport social work." Nadine added, "Early on it wasn't a ton of books. There's still not a ton of books out... I kind of created some things [resources] myself." Travis, who is earning his graduate degree in social work, discussed how he prepared for his sport-based internship. He shared, "Research has been a huge component because, there's data, but a lot of the data seems a little outdated." He went on to explain, "So that's been the biggest thing for me right now because a lot of the research has been done on Caucasian males and females and not enough on African American males or females." As Aiden, who has been working in his area of practice for two decades, simply stated, "There's a poverty of resources."

Education and Training

Participants also believed that there is a need for specialized education and training for social workers who want to work in sport. Sadie talked about adding specific coursework within social work curriculum to prepare social workers, "There's social justice in sport...social justice applies to female athletics, minorities...mental health. There could be so many different ways that you could take that." Chloe discussed potential course topics:

I think it would be really cool to do a class on the unique challenges of student-athletes. So, transitioning out of sport is a big one... How to manage nutritionally, I think there's a whole thing that can be done about eating disorders and disordered eating. I think there's a huge piece that can be educated around when you get injured, that grief process. Also managing the relationships of student-athletes.

Additionally, participants talked about the need for specialized certifications that would help to showcase their expertise area of working in sport. Chloe stated, "I think it would be amazing if there was some sort of certification you could do with social work very similar to a sport psychologist [Certified Mental Performance Consultant certification]. That is such a gap that needs to be filled." To this point, Aiden discussed the ASWIS Certificate Program, which she recently concluded. While valuable, she did recognize several limitations:

I would say the downfall is, right now – and they're trying to work it out – the internship and access to internship. They require practicum hours, it's 300 hours to get your certificate. They don't quite have the network in place... That's severely lacking, and so it makes it difficult.

Although participants noted existing opportunities, current offerings are limited and there is a need – and market – for more specialized education and training.

Need to Professionalize

Participants articulated the need to further professionalize the work that occurs at the intersection of social work practice and sport. Similarly, the current theme reflects several previous subthemes related to having a *lack of a clear and consistent identity* and the *lack of understanding* about the services social workers are capable of providing. Sadie explained, “The field specifically for sport social workers isn’t even defined for other social workers... There’s almost a little bit of convincing that had to take place for those social workers who didn’t know about sports.” When discussing the steps necessary for professionalizing this area of practice, Chloe posited:

I think it would have to be the combination of both of NASW and [Council on Social Work Education] for it to be. I think it would be really hard if an outside group tried to create that. I think we need the people who create the social work degree to be on board with this. I think it would create a lot more legitimacy around it as well.

Aiden added, “I would love it if the NASW would actually spend more time than they already have focusing on it and highlighting it... I think it’d be really great if our national association would start advocating for the actual profession.” In the end, as Nadine reflected, “I think from when I first started, of course it’s much better. We’re in a better position, but we are nowhere where we need to be...our work is not even close to being done.”

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Findings notwithstanding, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. Grounded in interpretivism and social constructivism, the objective of the current exploratory study is not to generalize the study findings. Further, because an atheoretical lens was used to analyze the data, the study did not aim to examine distinctions and/or similarities among social workers related to their professional experiences, the sport systems and settings in which they work, or the populations whom they serve. However, as there is value in understanding the nuances of specific social work roles, future research should examine the unique positions social workers hold within sport (e.g., social work sport coaches) and with more in-depth analytical methods (e.g., multiple interviews, narrative analysis). Another limitation was only the ASWIS listserv was used to recruit participants. Research should expand past ASWIS membership and utilize more generalizable methods. Future research also should engage other sport stakeholders themselves, such as sport psychologists, athletic trainers, coaches, and athletic administrators.

Findings from the current study highlight a continuously growing area of social work practice. Moreover, building on previous research (Beasley et al., 2021b; Magier et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021b), the current study provides additional evidence that there is a need for further educational opportunities for social workers who wish to work in sport. Because of the transferability of social work knowledge and skills, social workers are capable of servicing the diverse needs of athletes and other sport stakeholders throughout a variety of sport systems and settings. For instance, while the specific sport system and/or setting may differ, sport participants have many similar intersectional needs and are faced with social vulnerabilities because of systemic inequities and injustices. Additionally, among the social workers who were interviewed for the current study, they themselves as distinct from other service professionals; however, their sense of a unified professional identity was still evolving. Finally, the study concluded by exploring areas of need. In addition to expanding upon available research and literature,

participants expressed a need for formalized education (e.g., social work curricula) and training opportunities (e.g., specialized certifications). By meeting these needs, the social work profession may be able to facilitate the recognized need of professionalizing the role(s) of social workers in sport. In the end, more research needs to be conducted to explicitly examine how social workers can be meaningful playmakers within sport; however, findings from the current study can be used to initially inform future social workers who intend to pursue a career in sport, as well as social work educators considering educational training programs.

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