Cultivating safe space: lessons for sport-for-development projects and events

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Abstract

Recent research has examined how sports events and sport-for-development (SFD) projects can create, sustain, and maximize positive social impacts for local communities. This paper takes this debate forward by arguing that the cultivation of safe space is a key ingredient of SFD management and community event leverage. Safe space is conceptualized as a multidimensional process that involves physical, psychological/affective, sociocultural, political, and experimental dimensions. Drawing on empirical findings from Sri Lanka, Israel, and Brazil, the paper shows how these different dimensions of safe space operate and

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interact in practice, and identifies practical strategies that sport managers, policymakers, and practitioners can use to cultivate safe spaces in and through sports projects and events.

Introduction

Sport has been embraced by sport managers, policymakers, and practitioners as a potent vehicle for social and economic development. The legacy of major sports events is often perceived in economic terms, with a focus on benefits related to employment, tourism, business, built environment, and urban renewal opportunities (e.g., Gratton, Shibli, & Coleman, 2006; Preuss, 2006). In contrast, the impacts of small and medium sized sports events and projects have principally been considered in terms of non-economic objectives such as social cohesion, community development, health promotion, and crime prevention (e.g., Kidd, 2008; Coalter, 2007). The primacy of sociocultural effects in analyses of community sports events highlights the fact that event legacies cannot be reduced to their economic dimension, but ought to take seriously their social and cultural impacts, both positive and negative. From this perspective, the aim is to optimize the social benefits that accrue to local communities and support stakeholders that host or participate in the sports event.

While the notion of sport as a catalyst for social change is widely established (United Nations, 2008), it is clear that sport does not automatically contribute to positive community outcomes (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2013). If poorly designed and managed, sports events or projects can actually be detrimental to local communities, and especially marginalized sections thereof, by strengthening the very social divisions and inequalities that they are expected to bridge. There is a growing body of literature that considers how transformative sports events and projects can be developed and their positive outcomes for individual and community development leveraged and sustained (Chalip, 2004, 2006; O'Brien, 2007;

Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012; Author, 1, 4). While a significant part of this literature focuses on regular, structured, and ongoing sport-for-development (SFD) programs, in recent years there has been a growth in attention from both academics and practitioners in transitory one-off activities and occasional interventions and how these may be used in conjunction with ongoing projects. For example, Schulenkorf and Adair (2013) argue for a SFD "pulse" (p. 103) involving episodic special events as a stimulus aimed at arousing or renewing excitement, animation, and enthusiasm, all of which are needed to ensure that positive social impacts are achieved and sustained.

In this paper, we aim to progress the intellectual and policy debate on how sports events and SFD projects can effectively leverage positive social impacts for local communities. We do so by considering a key ingredient of community event leverage: the cultivation of safe space. Safe space is still under-theorized and under-researched in sport management. This is problematic because safe space is critical both to the provision of inclusive and equitable sport opportunities and to leveraging the positive social impacts that can flow from those opportunities. Indeed, the cultivation of safe space is an important precursor to any collaborative activity and paramount in community development and conflict transformation efforts (Hunter, 2008). In the absence of safe space, a sports event or project is likely to be experienced as exclusionary and alienating by some community groups, and unlikely to transform social relations and produce social change. However, the creation of safe space is not done simply; instead, it requires careful deliberation, planning, and management (cf. Brady, 2005). Herein lies a critical task for sport managers, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

In this paper, we address this issue by examining how safe space might be cultivated in community sports events and SFD projects. We are concerned with social relations and experiences within the sports event context as well as how safe space becomes meaningful

beyond its immediate community of participants and beyond the duration of the event or project. We draw upon our own empirical research at sports events and projects in Sri Lanka, Israel, and Brazil to show that safe space is not simply an important outcome in its own right, but critical within the process through which sports events and SFD projects seek to leverage broader social impacts.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we discuss the concept of safe space and its relevance to SFD. We then examine how the different dimensions of safe space are addressed in sports events and projects in Sri Lanka, Israel, and Brazil, as well as the challenges involved in cultivating safe spaces in those settings. The final section of the paper identifies practical strategies that sport managers, policymakers, and practitioners can use to create safe spaces in and through sport.

Conceptualizing safe space

The metaphor of safe space has its roots in educational and feminist thought. It is often invoked as an objective toward which educators should strive in the pursuit of empowering and transformative education. Lepp and Zorn (2002), for example, argue that "safe space is essential for learning to occur and education to be empowered" (p. 383). However, the safe space metaphor does not offer a concrete educational method, but rather a way of thinking about education (Redmond, 2010; Boostrom, 1998). As a social science concept, safe space is contested and still under-developed in some respects. It is often used as a catch-all term that means different things to different people, and few scholars specify what they mean by safe space or how to create it (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Lepp & Zorn, 2002). This is limiting because the meaning of safe space is "not as clear-cut as might be supposed" (Boostrom, 1998, p. 398). The concept therefore requires more rigorous consideration for the purpose of this paper.

A useful starting point for conceptualizing safe space is to imagine it not as a physical space, but as a figurative, psychosocial space constructed through social relations. Thus, safe space refers to a way of acknowledging and relating to others. While especially in areas of violent conflict or fragile coexistence the need for a basic level of physical safety is an everyday requirement, theorists of safe space have something different in mind. In a broad sense, safe space refers to "a psychosocial and experiential space more or less aligned with separated, physical space" (Stengel & Weems, 2010, p. 505). Others describe safe space in more specific terms, for example as "protection from psychological or emotional harm", or as a space in which participants "are able to openly express their individuality" (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 50). Here "safe" refers not simply to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence and abuse, but also to emotional and psychological safety and opportunities for risk-taking (Hunter, 2008).

We can thus start to appreciate the different dimensions and usages of safe space. Multidimensionality is a key feature of the concept of safe space as we envisage it, and indicates the complexity of cultivating safe space in practice. The different dimensions of safe space and their interrelationships are discussed below.

The **physical** dimension of safe space refers to a place that provides safety from physical harm and is accessible and accommodating. Strategies to create such a space include, for example, the provision of a secure and/or guarded environment, appropriate rules that protect participants during sporting competition (e.g. prohibitions on the use of excessive physical force), and adequate facilities and access for people with physical disabilities. The **psychological/affective** dimension of safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. This dimension is typically concerned with the establishment of trust, a sense of engagement, and a common identity within the confines of an activity (e.g., a sports event or project).

A third, more abstract, dimension of safe space is its "implied desired goal of familiarity: such that the people, practices and relations that exist within a safe space are comfortable and familiar" (Hunter, 2008, p. 8). We refer to this as the **sociocultural** dimension of safe space. A safe space must thus be a space where all can feel at home and supported regardless of their social locations (e.g., in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or age). Safe spaces are to be levelers, inclusive spaces that facilitate meaningful interaction through shared respect and shared meaning. This sociocultural dimension of safe space resonates with the notion of cultural safety, which promotes environments "where there is no assault, challenge or denial of [a person's] identity, of who they are and what they need" (Williams, 1999, p. 213). The sociocultural dimension has considerable importance in influencing other dimensions of safe space as they pertain to SFD projects and events, especially in those projects or events where bridging cultural divides and bringing disparate social groups together is a stated objective.

Related to this dimension is the **political** dimension of safe space, which refers to open dialogue, respect for political difference, and sharing a sense of community, where people feel less inhibited and more supported to share their experiences or views and to express their sporting and other identities. This dimension is particularly pronounced in situations of war or inter-community conflict, where a sports event may be perceived as neutral ground, a temporary escape from tense community relations, or even as a site for reconciliation (Stidder & Haasner, 2007; Höglund & Sundberg, 2008; Author, 2).

These four dimensions – physical, psychological/affective, sociocultural, and political – may be seen to convey the idea that safe space is a place without stress and discomfort. A space is safe when individuals can freely participate and express their identities and individuality without fear of physical or psychological danger, censure, exclusion, or exploitation. However, this interpretation of safe space is misleading and short-sighted. The

assertion that an environment should be safe does not mean that it should be free of risk. If understood as the avoidance of stress and discomfort, safe space is likely to stifle creativity, critical thinking and discovery, all of which are pivotal conditions for social change to be able to take place. Indeed, problems often arise when a safe space is an environment without any form of conflict or risk (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Boostrom (1998) points out that if critical thinking, imagination and individuality are to flourish, educators or facilitators need to manage conflict, not prohibit it. In a similar vein, Redmond (2010) argues that rather than attempting to avoid inherent tensions through rhetoric of "safe space," the role of the educator is to maintain these tensions. What these contributions suggest is that safe spaces are contentious and risky, yet playful, pleasurable, and "ripe with pedagogical possibilities" (Stengel & Weems, 2010, p. 506). This interpretation of safe space resonates with the notion of "psychological safety," which refers to a shared belief held by members of a group or team (e.g. in sport) that the group or team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999).

Hunter (2008) has developed a critical understanding of safe space as a site of experimentation and innovation. She argues that the experimentation encouraged to happen within a safe space is "a product of the dynamic tension between known (safe) processes and unknown (risky) outcomes" (Hunter, 2008, p. 8). Participants must negotiate how the safety of a space is in dialogical relationship with risk, and it is through this negotiation that transformative outcomes are produced. As Hunter (2008) puts it:

Tensions are created by time constraints, particular sociocultural exigencies, and the limitations of place; and creative risk may become a feature or failure of the attempt to cater for the diverse skills and capabilities of artists [in our case athletes] and community participants. Attention to how these risks are managed is therefore integral

to the cultivation of safe space (however defined) and, by extension, to the "success" of various social and artistic outcomes (p. 8).

We refer to this as the **experimental** dimension of safe space, which highlights the creative risk and tension that need to be maintained and negotiated to unleash the transformative potential of cultural practices such as sport.

Safe space: its application to sport management

How, then, has this multidimensional understanding of safe space been applied to sport management, and in particular to sports events and SFD projects that seek to leverage broader social impacts? Overall, there has been very limited analysis of safe space in sport management and in sports studies more broadly. Where such analysis has been undertaken, it tends to offer a one-dimensional understanding of safe space rather than engaging with its multiple dimensions and their interrelationships. However, the few existing studies on the topic underline the relevance of safe space for thinking about and managing sport, even if their reference to safe space is often implicit. A key example is Wacquant's (2004) ethnography of African American boxers, which characterizes the boxing club as a sanctuary from the disorderly world of the urban ghetto. Central to this experience, Wacquant (2004) argues, are the sociability, mutual respect, horizontality, recognition, and courtesy that the boxing gym produces, qualities that are often absent on the streets of the ghetto.

The most systematic application of the concept of safe space in SFD is Brady's (2005) work on the role that sport plays, or can play, in creating safe spaces and building social assets for young women in the developing world. Her research aligns with the aforementioned thinking about safe space as a way of acknowledging and relating to others. Brady is particularly concerned with the physical and psychological/affective dimensions of

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safe space. She argues that for young female sports participants in the developing world, a safe space would be:

>…one that would be considered culturally acceptable to parents and other gatekeepers on the one hand, yet free from parental pressures on the other. It would be a place that is conveniently located, known by potential program participants, yet not subject to intrusions by males and unwanted authority figures. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the "space" should not put girls at any risk of physical or emotional threat or harm and must offer girls some degree of privacy and confidentiality (Brady, 2005, p. 40).

Brady's research shows that while sports projects can contribute to the development of a physical and emotional safe space for girls and young women, this does not happen automatically. Instead, it requires insight and careful planning. This finding is consistent with studies which show that participation in sport does not automatically produce wider development objectives, but that this depends to a large extent on how sport is structured, organized, managed, and delivered (Sugden, 2010; Coalter, 2013).

Brady (2005) highlights two themes that she believes are critical to the cultivation of safe space in and through sport: safe mobility, and group formation and social networks. Safe mobility refers primarily to the physical dimension of safe space. Brady argues that project or event planners, in consultation with parents and other stakeholders, need to identify ways in which to accommodate girls' schedules and mobility constraints. Safe mobility can be ensured, for instance, by scheduling project activities at appropriate times of day and making suitable arrangements for transportation to and from project or event sites. The second theme – group formation and social networks – is principally concerned with the psychological

dimension of safe space. Brady (2005) contends that sport can play a particularly beneficial role in group formation and the provision of a sense of affiliation and belonging. Team membership and attendant symbols and rituals (e.g., a team or project jersey), she argues, can offer both a physical and emotional safe space for girls by creating group identity. This argument is in line with findings from research carried out with young Muslim women in the developed world (e.g., Walseth & Fasting, 2004; Palmer, 2009).

In the remainder of this paper, we build on Brady's (2005) and our own research to consider how safe spaces might be created in and through sports events and SFD projects. In so doing, we move beyond the physical and psychological/affective dimensions of safe space to examine all five dimensions outlined here. In the next section, we first discuss the context and approach of the research on which our analysis is based.

Methods

For an applied analysis of the different dimensions of safe space and how these might be cultivated, we draw upon our qualitative research conducted in three countries: Sri Lanka, Israel, and Brazil. Each of these countries has a distinct history of conflict, intergroup tensions, and social inequality which are briefly portrayed in this section; at the same time, the relevant SFD activities are explained and a brief description of data collection procedures is provided. For our qualitative data analysis we used the transcribed discussions from all three countries along with observational field notes which resulted in an extensive data base out of which grounded empirical and theoretical insights were garnered. The interrogation of our data was supported by the NVivo 8 software package, which facilitated the storing, integrating, indexing, and coding of the large amount of data collected.

Sri Lanka

Intergroup relations within multi-ethnic Sri Lanka have been fraught with difficulties for several decades. In particular, in the 1970s the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE or Tamil Tigers) were formed to fight for Tamil self-sovereignty in the northeastern regions of Sri Lanka, which are considered the areas of traditional Tamil settlement (Dunung, 1995). The LTTE's violent demands culminated in a double civil war with the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan Government that lasted from 1983–2002 and 2008–2009; overall, the wars resulted in a terminal defeat of the Tamil Tigers and led to approximately 100,000 deaths on the island (Bilger, 2006; Witte, 2011).

As an impartial change agent, the Asian-German Sport Exchange Programme (AGSEP) is an NGO that has been conducting sport-related reconciliation projects in Sri Lanka since 2002. In cooperation with local communities and international donors, the organization has focused mainly on youth integration projects in rural western Sri Lanka that are designed to make a modest contribution to overcoming intergroup rivalry and reducing ethnic distance on a community level. Thus far it has been able to establish a sport complex in the western Sri Lankan town of Nattandiya for regular inter-community SFD activities for local youths. Moreover, a functioning sports event program across the country has been designed to encourage active social and intergroup development of the community at large. All AGSEP initiatives are supported by local community members and international volunteers; the latter are often sport and event management students from European Universities who spend several months in Sri Lanka on work experience or internship programs.

Against the background of a deeply divided society, SFD research was undertaken on social experiences around different inter-community sports events in rural western Sri Lanka

and the capital Colombo. In cooperation with the AGSEP and the major Sri Lankan ethnic groups, key individuals from participating Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities were identified for the initial round of interviews and focus group sessions. Further respondents were pursued and accessed through the use of a snowball sampling technique. The combination of community representatives previously known by AGSEP and the snowball method resulted in access to a wide spectrum of interviewees, ranging from local fishermen to high profile Members of Parliament.

Overall, 35 interviews and three focus group sessions with local communities, international organizers, and other relevant sports event stakeholders (incl. volunteers, sponsors, government representatives etc.) were conducted between January and April 2007. In this paper we will apply their experiences and AGSEP's SFD endeavors to the different dimensions of "safe space".

Israel

The state of Israel was controversially created in 1948 in the long shadow of World War Two. While this can be seen as a major achievement for the hitherto nationless and persecuted Jewish people, in equal measure it can be viewed as a disaster for the Palestinians on whose land the fledging state took shape. Perhaps rightly so, the situation of the Palestinians within Gaza and the West Bank (the "Occupied Territories") and the Israeli State's engagement with their Palestinian counterparts attract most global attention. However, often forgotten by the international community – and of central interest for the Football for Peace sport program discussed in this paper – are the relations between Jewish Israelis and "Palestinian-Arab-Israeli" communities that remained within the state of Israel after 1948.

Football for Peace (F4P) can be described as a grassroots sport-based coexistence initiative that focuses on improving intergroup relations between disparate communities in Israel. Within ten years of operation, F4P grew from one single Jewish/Arab initiative to encompass 13 cross-community projects with 33 participating communities across the country. F4P is orchestrated by the University of Brighton and supported through numerous organizational partnerships and hundreds of voluntary co-workers and local and international volunteers (for a more detailed description of F4P, see Sugden and Wallis (2007)). In terms of the latter, as active change agents their overall goal is to contribute to peace and reconciliation through sport, and to support local Jewish, Arab, Circassian, Druze and Bedouin communities in transcending their social, cultural, ethnic, and religious divides.

F4P offers an evolving, values-based educational curriculum centered on the five key principles of inclusiveness, equality, respect, trust, and responsibility which all feed into the ways through which the projects are structured and delivered. While each project has certain nuanced differences determined by prevailing local circumstances, there is a basic pattern and structure that all F4P initiatives follow. Each project recruits 100 children across two age groups (8-10 and 11-13) who are divided into ethnically mixed groups of Jewish and Arab players (50:50). Following a "sport plus" approach (see Coalter, 2007), the groups engage in week-long sport, event and cross-cultural activities.

In June 2009 and July 2010, qualitative research was conducted around numerous F4P projects. To explore social, cultural and managerial experiences, 30 interviews and eight focus group discussions were conducted with program participants, organizers, local communities, and international volunteers. For this paper, key findings from this research are interpreted within the context of the different dimensions of safe space.

Brazil

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The Brazilian context is qualitatively different from the Sri Lankan and Israeli experiences described above. Brazil is recognized as a part of the BRIC group of emerging powers (i.e. Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and, at present, does not feature the types of political conflict or armed struggle that Sri Lanka and Israel have experienced in recent times. However, Brazil does have some of the world's highest rates of social and income inequality (Beghin, 2008). Abject poverty is concentrated in the rural Northeast of Brazil; yet, social and income inequality are also rife in the country's major cities. Extreme poverty directly alongside immense wealth distinguishes Rio de Janeiro as a socially divided city. Although Rio's *favelas* (shantytowns) are not necessarily the poorest neighborhoods, they are often faced with high levels of violent crime, drug trafficking, unemployment, human rights violations, and de facto exclusion from citizenship rights (Arias, 2006; Perlman, 2010).

It is within this context that the transnational NGO Partners of the Americas established Vencer ("To Win" or "To Succeed") and, subsequently, Vencedoras (a female-specific version), programs that use sport and education activities to enhance the employability and employment prospects of young people living in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*. They are best understood as holistic youth development programs in which the different activities, including sport, act in combination with one another in mutually reinforcing ways. The projects focus on the development of core employability skills (i.e., discipline, teamwork, respect, communication, results orientation). To date, more than 1,500 young people have participated in the programs. Program activities are coordinated by the local NGO Instituto Companheiros das Américas (a sister organization of Partners of the Americas) and supported and implemented by local NGO staff and volunteers.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in order to gain a deep understanding of the social impact of the Vencer program on participating youth and their local communities. Fifty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants as well

as 36 interviews with program staff, local volunteers, and community members. Interview data were complemented with observational research and a survey (n = 221). For the purpose of this paper, key findings from this research are interpreted through the prism of safe space. It is to the application of the different dimensions of safe space that we now turn.

Findings

The empirical findings from the SFD projects discussed in this paper contribute to our understanding of how the different dimensions of safe space operate and interact in practice. However, it should be noted that the extent to which safe space is actually considered and planned for by the organizations that lead these projects is limited. The projects are built around an implicit understanding of safe space as an important condition and process, but thus far it has not been explicitly highlighted in pre-event planning and implementation. For example, the cultivation of safe space does not feature centrally in resource allocation or in the training of staff and volunteers.

Physical dimension

The physical dimension of safe space relates to safety from physical harm and the provision of a secure, accessible and accommodating environment. During times of severe ethnic conflict and regular terrorist acts in Sri Lanka, sport organizers realized the need to provide safe and secure sporting grounds for their development activities. AGSEP, in cooperation with international funders and the local Nattandiya community, constructed the *Peace Village*, a multi-purpose sports facility that was supplemented with accommodation for up to 80 people. Importantly, the *Peace Village* was built on the outskirts of the community to provide a safe and protected physical space for children and youth. Reflecting on her

experiences as an event volunteer at the purposefully designed site, a local Sinhalese woman confirmed:

> Yes, it was a very safe event, because, I think, the location of the *Peace Village* is an excellent location. It's far away from a big city. And there is no one disturbing; it's a little bit away from other people, away from the villages, too. So the children can feel safe here.

The location of the *Peace Village* in rural Nattandiya assisted in achieving feelings of safety and an increase in people's comfort. At larger scale events that were staged away from the *Peace Village*, AGSEP had to assure physical safety in a different way; they managed to create a safe environment through the involvement of security staff, police personnel, and emergency services, as well as official approval from the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Sport and the separate Tamil Sports Council. Reflecting on the large-scale Run for Peace event organized by AGSEP in 2006, participants appreciated these efforts and suggested that they contributed positively to people's feelings of comfort and safety:

> We took the security's advice and didn't have any problems. Because we got the fullest support from all the authorities, security, police, army and everything… it was a 100 per cent secure event.

However, a number of individuals were also weary of the inherent risk and feelings of uncertainty during open sports events in Sri Lanka. One participant argued that holding the event in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo was "a risky thing, because the country's security

situation is not good. I always felt that something could have happened: a bomb or maybe [an act of] terrorism or something."

Despite its very different political context, SFD organizers in Brazil also recognized the need to provide a physically safe and secure environment, especially in communities that experienced high levels of public violence (e.g., violent conflict between rival drug factions or between drug factions and police). Vencer participants reported a strong interest in physically safe environments in their community where they could be among peers and engage in sport and recreation; however, due to public violence, such environments tended to be scarce. To fill this void, Vencer's program sites were mostly located outside of, or on the fringes of, the shantytowns, where the threat of physical violence was less manifest. A staff member at one of the program locations explained how their reason for establishing the program facilities close to, but not inside, the *favela* was twofold: "…otherwise you become directly influenced by the law of the *favela*, including the violence; and because you want participants to feel included in society, and visiting our facilities [outside the *favela*] is part of that process." Although this strategy was generally effective in providing an environment that was physically safe, violence in the community could still affect the day-to-day running of the program. A program coordinator reported: "Often the violence in the community ends up affecting the day-to-day running of the project. We know that the majority of absentees are related to this." Here the coordinator refers to the fact that during violent clashes between rival drug factions or between drug factions and police, project participants may be unable to travel to the project site to attend the activities.

For Vencer staff and participants, however, the notion of physical safety also applied to the way the sports activities themselves were structured and organized. In particular, they recognized that organized competitive sport is often aggressive and exclusionary. Given this, Vencer used modified football games to ensure that all participants – female and male,

experienced and inexperienced – felt physically safe and could enjoy being physically active. Team compositions changed on a daily basis to reduce the competitiveness of the activities, and rules were modified to vary the physical and emotional demands of the games. This modified format was generally appreciated by participants, indicative of which is the following comment by a female participant:

It was fun because it wasn't normal football, it was different. There were always activities that made us respect one another. ... When you play football in the street this mutual respect doesn't exist, it's much more competitive.

Yet, staff and participants also believed that the ritualized competition and conflict that are inherent to team sports activities should not to be entirely dismissed. In fact, they argued, the risk-taking and creative tension associated with sporting competition has educational value in that it creates opportunities for participants to respond to and resolve these situations in a way that will impact positively. A program assistant expressed this as follows: "On the sports field, emotions come out and a lot of these youth respond to conflict with aggression or anger, which can be nerve-wracking but also bring out a lot of really great real-life teaching moments." The challenge for SFD programs, then, is to balance the need for physical safety with encouraging experiences of risk-taking and conflict management. In Vencer, facilitators played a key role in fostering these conditions. We will return to this issue in the discussion of the experimental dimension of safe space.

Psychological/affective dimension

The psychological/affective dimension of safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. In the SFD initiatives under study, this dimension was typically addressed

through the development of trust, a sense of engagement, and a common purpose and identity. In Sri Lanka, the inter-community events offered participating communities the opportunity to connect with like-minded people over common interests, as well as a temporary escape from daily routines and hardship. This was particularly the case for the Tamil and Muslim community members, many of whom came from war-torn parts of Sri Lanka to participate at AGSEP's SFD initiatives. One of the volunteers recalled:

> The [Tamil] children from Trincomallee came out of a really troubled area and were playing together with the [local Sinhalese] kids and having fun in the pool. It was something very special for them, because [the northeast] is a very, very troubled area and I could SEE they had a good time and forgot the hardships of the daily life.

Participation in the SFD project was described as stimulating and psychologically liberating, albeit only for a short period of time. Children were able to play and parents had the opportunity to connect with others. In terms of group categorizations and the creation of inclusive social identities, not the sport projects *per se* but the purposeful creation of ethnically mixed teams at football, cricket, and basketball sessions as well as identification along symbolic lines (e.g. agreed-upon team names, self-designed jerseys, flags etc.) seemed instrumental. One of the German project organizers explained:

> [Cohesion] is achieved because of this team building effect. In their teams – even if the people are mixed – participants have the feeling that they are in ONE group and then this leads to *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*.

The German term *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl* stands for a strong feeling of togetherness and belonging, and characterizes the main impact of the teambuilding exercises. In other words, the opportunity to play with others in one team was seen as a superordinate goal that facilitated a psychological connection among individuals in a newly formed group. One of the participants said: "It never felt like there were different parties. There was respect for each other… friendliness and support and a sense of unity."

In Brazil, the creation of a common purpose and identity was also considered key to the psychological safety of participants. The focus on collectivity and shared experience facilitated a context for mutual social and emotional support. As one participant noted: "We constructed a kind of family. We studied, made mistakes, had various experiences…. Each of us developed in a certain way, helping each other." The informal nature of the team sports activities and the common focus and teamwork this entailed appear to have been central to the production of psychological/affective safety. On-field, team-based activities made interpersonal interaction and approximation between participants easier and more meaningful as success on the pitch was dependent on players' cooperation. A Vencer coordinator expressed this as follows:

> Sport makes teamwork possible. The main factor is building a group that has a particular common purpose. When a young person is in school he also has a group [of classmates], but that's different. The teachers are not concerned with establishing some form of unity and common purpose, only with the curriculum.

As a consequence of the team building exercises, several participants experienced improved social confidence and interpersonal skills. For example, they reported losing part of their shyness or social awkwardness, establishing new friendships, and developing trusting

relationships with peers as key outcomes of program participation. Follow-up research indicates that in some cases these supportive relationships transcended the program as they met with each other outside of the program activities, formed study groups, and maintained friendships.

Sociocultural dimension

The sociocultural dimension of safe space is based on familiarity, recognition, and acceptance, such that participants feel comfortable, at home and supported. The above discussion of SFD initiatives' attempts to foster a sense of common purpose and identity highlights the interrelationships between the psychological/affective and sociocultural dimensions of safe space. The broader challenge here is to ensure that all people feel part of the event or project they participate in and are able to experience a sense of belonging within it regardless of their social locations.

In the process of designing a socially inclusive and culturally supported SFD program, AGSEP in Sri Lanka was proactive in inviting representatives from all disparate ethnic communities to share their ideas and expectations. For example, in the lead-up to a martial arts project in Colombo, a community sports forum was organized where a multi-ethnic managing committee was elected. The organizing team consisted of male and female members of different ages (from 18-60) who came from all three participating communities (Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim), as well as the CEO and support staff of AGSEP. This socially inclusive and participatory approach resulted in cultural customs being respected and followed, and communities feeling meaningfully represented. It also secured community support and widespread trust in both the sports events and the external organizer.

A good example of how trust between local communities and international volunteers can be created and sustained around SFD projects is offered by the F4P program in Israel.

Here, at all projects mixed coaching sets were created that consisted of an overseas volunteer and two local coaches, one Arab and the other Jewish. During the entire initiative the coaching set engaged with the F4P values-based curriculum that was laid out in three languages (Hebrew, Arabic and English) in the F4P manual. Through constant contact in a positive and cooperative environment (see Allport, 1954), the coaching set grew into a socially inclusive and trusted team. This is particularly important in a setting where there is no common language available and coaches fulfill additional roles as communicators. For example, children at F4P often relied on their coaches to discuss issues and translate between Hebrew, Arabic and English.

Against this background, the importance of community-based role models should be highlighted. Role models were identified by community members and international coaches as the key to social engagement, participation, and socially inclusive development:

> There was no Jewish role model involved in the dancing. The cultural activities were pretty much run by the Arabs and Circassians only, and there was no Jewish representative leading something or doing something, which would have been important for the Jewish kids. (International coach)

Role model support was considered important from both a moral and integrative perspective, particularly in situations where cultural differences were strongly observable. In cases where role model support was absent, children "were reluctant to join the others and dance." In other words, the children were not able to find a socioculturally safe space that allowed them or encouraged them to engage with others.

In Brazil, on the other hand, discussions focused particularly on gender. From the outset, Vencer has sought to provide a welcoming environment for both young men and

young women, with a focus on equality, within the broader context of a patriarchal society. This was done, for example, through the involvement of female role models who had had successful careers in professional sport, business or politics. However, there was no consensus among program staff as to how inclusiveness based on gender was best achieved. While two-thirds of Vencer participants were female, some staff members still believed that it was important for young women to have their own project in which issues such as gender inequality and women's rights could be discussed more freely. A local female assistant argued:

> When girls are here [at Vencer] by themselves they speak more openly, and you notice their discourse which is gendered. They think that a woman's job is to clean and cook before leaving the house. We want to deconstruct this discourse here in the program. We want equal rights for men and women.

However, others argued that if the program was to contribute to female emancipation, it should encourage mixed-gender education, that is, the integrated education of male and female participants in which they can jointly develop a critical understanding of gender inequality, including gender-based violence. A local female coordinator noted:

> If we create a program for girls only, we are reaffirming the idea that women are still not recognized. On the other hand there is the woman's own reality: women have made many conquests, occupied so many spaces. And so the girls themselves ask me: why a space only for women? I believe that the gender question is a question for discussion.

This comment reveals some of the challenges organizers are confronted with when they seek to ensure that all people feel part of the sports event or project they participate in. Yet, when compared to the Israeli and Sri Lankan experiences, it also shows that SFD projects exist in diverse contexts and that certain dimensions are likely to be more prominent than others in achieving certain outcomes. In the Brazilian project, the emphasis on gender equality meant that psychological/affective and sociocultural dimensions were considered particularly important.

Political dimension

The political dimension of safe space refers to an environment based on open dialogue, collaborative learning, and respect for difference where people feel less inhibited to share their political experiences and views. The way that a politically safe space is created can vary considerably between SFD projects. A sports event or project may be perceived as neutral ground between communities or even as a site for reconciliation.

At the F4P projects in Israel, all activities were presented as taking place in neutral, politics-free zones, and all project participants – players, coaches, parents, administrators – were asked to leave their political views and ideological positions outside the project zones. The international organizers have consistently argued that this approach contributes to a feeling of safety and comfort, especially after their experiences from the early days of F4P. Back in 2001, the purposeful inclusion of political debates as part of the cross-cultural "sport plus" activities was considered. One of the founding members of the program remembered that "even these initial discussions were so heated and fiery that we decided against any political statements or involvement in the program at all." Interestingly, the debate about politics at F4P is still as current as ever. For example, a Jewish volunteer argued in 2010 that actually he "would like to be able to talk about the realities in this country – the situation

between Arabs and Jews; I would like us to be able to put our finger on the wound and not be afraid of that." Clearly, this suggestion represents a challenge to the promise of F4P to provide a neutral space, free of political and religious influence. Yet, as the experimental dimension of safe space (discussed below) suggests, it is precisely opportunities and experiences such as these that can unleash the transformative potential of projects like F4P.

In Sri Lanka, AGSEP's approach to providing a politically safe space is slightly different. According to an AGSEP manager, direct cooperation with political parties is avoided: "Our logo says 'Connecting Sportspeople', which is a very neutral statement. It does not give any ideas or links towards any political affiliation or philosophical direction, we are just connecting sportspeople." However, the events are often supported by local, regional, and national politicians as chief guests. AGSEP justifies this approach by highlighting the leverage potential of politicians as key players in the community.

An important similarity between AGSEP and F4P concerns the role of international support staff members and volunteers. In both Israel and Sri Lanka investigations have highlighted the importance of external change agents that facilitated the projects as impartial mediators. In Israel, this role was largely attributed to the international coaching staff from Brighton University, while in Sri Lanka international volunteers and AGSEP as an international event organizer held the important status as neutral middle-men between Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities. As neutral and impartial mediators, international coaches were of great significance to conflict resolution initiatives. In regards to the European coaches at F4P, one Arab community representative suggested:

> The charm is that they arrive without a conflict, they treat everybody equally, and this is what we should learn from them... I think this is their added value, [irrespective] of them being better or worse coaches. They bring something that is in the middle, they

come as neutral friends. I believe that the EU coaches are still irreplaceable… they

bring a different mentality.

In Sri Lanka, interview respondents argued along similar lines and suggested that within an

ethnically divided society an external mediator is of central importance for the establishment

of trust. AGSEP's German background and its international management team were

repeatedly highlighted as beneficial for mediation purposes:

I think it is important that they are an international group, an impartial organization

which is not from Sri Lanka. It has a big impact, because if this was done by Sri

Lankans we would not have the power to persuade or convince people from all

communities to participate. When my ethnic group explains our ideas, people of the

other ethnic communities would probably become suspicious…So in that way

AGSEP is important as a neutral link between the Muslims, Sinhalese, Tamils,

internationals and also Government bodies.

This Sri Lankan example indicates the interrelationships between the political and

sociocultural dimensions of safe space, particularly with regard to the management and

negotiation of political and cultural differences within the context of the project or event.

Experimental dimension

The experimental dimension of safe space is concerned with the risk-taking and

experimentation encouraged to happen within the context of a sports event or SFD project.

This experimental dimension is a key aspect of the cultivation of safe space because, as noted

in the previous section, it is often in situations of experimentation and risk that the

transformative potential of SFD projects is unleashed. In practice, however, the question of how this experimental dimension can be facilitated or managed effectively is rarely explicitly addressed in SFD planning and implementation.

Earlier we noted how the Vencer program in Brazil sought to balance a need for physical safety with encouraging risk-taking and creative tension by building on the competition and conflict that are inherent to sports practices. There were several other ways in which Vencer attempted to produce the kind of creative tension that is at the heart of the experimental dimension of safe space. Vencer's efforts to cross social boundaries and encourage participants to assert their citizenship rights in novel and sometimes confronting ways are a case in point. The access that young people in *favelas* have to middle- or upper-class neighborhoods is often minimal. Venturing into these largely unfamiliar spaces is risky, leaving them vulnerable to fear, prejudice, and stigmatization. The following comment by a female participant reflects this: "…everyone is from the upper class, so when you go and mingle with people from there you have fear. The first time I was dying of fear! When I saw them all with car keys in their hands I said to myself 'what am I doing here?'" Still, such ventures can also be highly rewarding, both personally and socially. One Vencer mentor described this as follows:

> Because they do everything here in the [*favela*] they don't know how to behave themselves outside of it. They have fear of the outside and feel that they are different. So the issue of taking them to those other spaces is very important because it enables them to see that the world is not just inside their own communities.

In the same vein, a former participant reported:

I used to look differently at the people in the city, and with these trips [to non-*favela*

areas] we became equalized. The difference between the world inside the [*favela*] and

the [outside] disappeared. You get to know new places. You know, we live here and

we don't know… we remain prisoners in our little world. It's great to know places

and people on the outside…

As part of this discovery process, Vencer organizers created deliberate opportunities for

participants to gain new experiences. For example, the official program launch was held at

the legendary Maracanã stadium in Rio's city center. Participants and their families, most of

whom had never visited the stadium before, were invited to attend the launch, with

complimentary transport to and from the stadium.

In Sri Lanka, the geographical design of the International Run for Peace can be seen

as challenging and experimental. Participants started the run at Colombo's Independence

Square and passed through three city districts of varying socio-economic status: the upper-

class Colombo 7 quarter, the slums of Maradana and the middle class Kolpitiya district. The

run was supposed to "push boundaries" and be inclusive and confronting at once. For many

participants it was the first time they entered into these areas and while some described the

experience as "eye-opening," others struggled with the discrepancy of living conditions they

were exposed to. Moreover, as part of the post-event celebrations a music festival was staged.

A number of up-and-coming Sri Lankan musicians were performing live at an outdoor

concert before the crowd moved to the nearby *RnB Club* around midnight. Here, a DJ played

international Hip Hop music long into the following morning. The post-event activities were

an experiment in different ways. First, the combination of traditional Sri Lankan music with

international beats was uncommon and many participants left after the open-air performance.

Second, celebrations past midnight were seen as exciting for the younger generation yet

unfamiliar for many participants from the rural areas. With limited public transport at night, many of them felt restricted in their opportunities to participate. Third, participation of youths – particularly girls and young women – at the music festival was heavily criticized by the traditionalists among members of rural communities. Taken together, these aspects show how the experimental dimension can impact on the other domains, and how managers are required to balance the tension between experimental, sociocultural, political, and even physical aspects of safe space during event management planning and operations.

In Israel, the experimental dimension of safe space was played out through the F4P methodology and project design. In short, F4P's methodology revolves around "teachable moments" related to the five key values of inclusiveness, equality, respect, trust, and responsibility. Right from the start of the projects in 2001, joint physical activities, trust games, and intercultural exchanges formed a vital part in trying to actively live and play these values, and to achieve interpersonal and cross-community engagement on and off the football pitch (for more details, see Sugden and Wallis, 2007). As a form of experiential learning related to the aspect of responsibility, the F4P team decided to put the children in charge of the refereeing at the Festival of Football – the final event that brings the annual F4P activities to a close. In other words, after the completion of all value-based training and engagement sessions, the coaches transferred the responsibility of refereeing to the children who were expected to apply their newly learned values and behave in line with what they had learned during the training sessions. Similarly, in terms of respect and equality, no adult coaches were in charge of substituting players during games; all substitutions were managed by the children who were expected to act fairly to provide everyone with similar time on and off the pitch. It is to the implications of these findings that we now turn.

Implications for policy and practice

Drawing on our empirical findings, this section identifies practical strategies that sport managers, policymakers, and practitioners can use to cultivate safe space in and through sports projects and events. Building on the work of Brady (2005), we argue that safe space is critical both to the provision of inclusive and equitable sport opportunities and to leverage positive social impacts that can flow from those opportunities. In other words, safe space is often the precondition for engagement of disparate groups and communities, but also a leverageable outcome that can maximize social benefits for sport participants and the wider community. Importantly, our findings also reinforce Brady's (2005) conclusion that the cultivation of safe space requires detailed insight, planning, and management. Overall, it becomes obvious that the five dimensions of safe space operate in concert with each other; they are inseparable as they influence, depend on, challenge, contest, stimulate, and build on each other. It should be also noted that depending on the social context and desired outcomes of the SFD project or event, certain dimensions may be more important than others. Nevertheless, policymakers and practitioners need to incorporate all five dimensions into their planning and design to achieve, secure and cultivate safe space.

In the first instance, sports event organizers or SFD leaders are required to satisfy safe space aspects related to **physical** infrastructure. The choice of location, considerations around physical contact at play as well as general security staffing on sporting grounds are at the forefront of sport management efforts to guarantee accessible and trouble-free experiences. Particularly at reconciliation projects in post-war or quasi-war settings, critical reflections on physical safety are paramount. As seen in the examples from Sri Lanka and Brazil, project organizers may see particular locations as either limitations or opportunities in their management and development efforts. In this context, the management of physical space extends beyond the stadium or venue itself and relates to what Lederach (2002) has described as a *locus* for peace. This is particularly important as locations often hold specific meaning

for people and may be used to reinforce or challenge prevailing worldviews. For example, at the Peace Run in Sri Lanka particular city areas of different socio-economic status were strategically integrated into the design of the sports event, which resulted in eye-opening and at times challenging (learning) experiences.

When dealing with disparate or fractured communities, the need for **sociocultural** safety deserves increased attention. Supporting Sugden's (2006, 2010) and Stidder and Haasner's (2007) conclusions from conflict resolution research in Israel, our findings indicate that inclusive participation and diverse input from both communities and external stakeholders into the design, management, and implementation of sports events and projects are critical. As evidenced in our examples from Sri Lanka and Israel, such input provides meaningful representation and engagement of all parties involved − on and off the sporting ground. Where engagement is absent, community buy-in may not be achieved which can result in local apathy or resistance to projects, a phenomenon previously described by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) within the framework of critical pedagogy. And even if buy-in can be secured, a key challenge for sport managers − and an area that requires significantly more research and investigation − lies in leveraging feelings of safety, comfort and confidence beyond the immediate participants and stakeholders. In other words, more evidence is needed to show if, and how, SFD projects can have somewhat of a "multiplier effect" and contribute to regenerating or developing the fabric of the wider local community.

The sociocultural dimension has flow-on effects on the **political** dimension of safe space, where equal representation of groups − including political parties, minority groups, or special interest communities − provides a level-playing field in which different customs, traditions, and views are not only respected, but appreciated (see Sugden & Wallis, 2007; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). As evidenced in this paper, the creation of political safe space for a variety of social groups/axes (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, social class, disability

etc.) can provide a challenge for sport organizers – particularly if they are not part of the local community. Significant planning and inclusive consultation needs to underpin the development of the political dimension of safe space; strategies range from banning any political discussions at projects (Israel) to allowing political representation yet limiting political influence in the management of events (Sri Lanka). Despite the differences, a common finding is the importance of equal representation and equitable treatment of groups and communities in this delicate space.

Within the context of providing exciting yet safe experiences in SFD, project organizers and coaches play an important role as facilitators of safe space. However, at the reconciliation projects in Israel and Sri Lanka, *international* change agents played a key part in bridging community divides. As external and impartial mediators, they occupy a particular space in between communities that local people cannot embody. We argue that the value and role of external change agents in SFD projects in divided societies is often different to the role of educators or development workers in non-conflict settings. The Brazilian project examined in this paper, which more closely reflects the latter category, supports this argument as it is delivered almost exclusively by local change agents. In contrast, our research in Sri Lanka and Israel suggests that without external involvement, most SFD projects with a conflict transformation objective would simply not be feasible due to mistrust, suspicion, and a lack of reciprocal engagement between (politically) opposed parties. However, in light of significant criticism related to neo-colonialism in SFD (Guest, 2009; Darnell, 2012; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013), we realize that this is a contentious issue that requires further research.

One of the most difficult aspects in SFD – yet arguably one of the most rewarding outcomes of sports projects in fractured communities – relates to the **psychological/affective** dimension of safe space. This domain provides difficult terrain for sport managers due to the

generally limited availability of positive affection and common identity between participants prior to the sport project. However, there are opportunities to plan for and influence socio-psychological outcomes through sport. For example, the sports projects and events in Brazil and Sri Lanka suggest that a pedagogical strategy focused on cooperation and teamwork can contribute to a family atmosphere. Additional symbolic elements such as inclusive team names, self-designed jerseys, team songs, or chants may further foster what Anderson (1991) refers to as an "imagined community." In this case, this emotional state is built on co-receptive trust, common identity, and a collective sense of being "at home" at the sports event or project.

Overall, our findings are consistent with recent research that highlights that these socio-psychological outcomes cannot be attributed to the use of sport alone; rather, facilitators and coaches and their efforts to create a supportive environment play a crucial role in this process (e.g., Kunz, 2009; Sugden, 2010). However, we argue that despite encouraging short-term success (Author, 1, 3), significantly more strategic planning is needed to sustain and leverage development outcomes that may flow from psychological/affective safe space. This area should provide intriguing opportunities for scholars to conduct future research – including long-term evaluations and socio-managerial debates – in the areas of community development, sport management, sociology, and psychology.

Finally, a fundamental challenge for sports events and SFD projects is to **experiment** around safe spaces with the purpose of balancing the need for physical, psychological and sociocultural safety with experiences of risk-taking and creative tension. There is a danger that by prioritizing the previous four dimensions of safe space, sport managers, policymakers, and practitioners erode its experimental dimension. For example, while policies and codes of conduct designed to stamp out discriminatory practices and expressions of intolerance are a key part of developing the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of safe space, they can

also stifle critical thinking, creativity, and discovery. A safe space should not be viewed as an environment without conflict or risk, but rather as a space where tensions and conflict are maintained and managed (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Redmond, 2010). It is when safe spaces are contentious and risky, yet playful and pleasurable, that the greatest possibilities for social change and conflict transformation arise. This paper has described a number of strategies that have been successfully undertaken by sports projects and events in Brazil, Sri Lanka, and Israel to cultivate this experimental dimension of safe space while at the same time managing the other dimensions of safe space. These strategies have encouraged participants to relate to and engage with others in inclusive, yet also novel and sometimes confronting ways.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the cultivation of safe space is a key ingredient of SFD management and community event leverage. The significance of safe space was examined through a comparative analysis of sports events and projects organized in communities characterized by fragile coexistence. While our findings have applicability beyond these particular social settings, we recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the cultivation of safe space and that the nature of this task is inherently context-specific and requires intensive local knowledge, community partnerships, and outreach. As discussed, the way safe space is best facilitated in SFD projects with a conflict resolution objective may be different from how this is done in sports events or projects in qualitatively different social and political contexts.

Further research is necessary to ascertain the relevance and application of our conceptualization of safe space to large-scale and/or professional sports events. This could include in-depth exploration of how and in which conditions different dimensions of safe space might be applicable to and effectively cultivated in those settings. Future research

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could also investigate the role and impact of program stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, media, governments, celebrity athletes) in contributing to perceptions of safe space, and the opportunities of leveraging safe space for tourism and marketing purposes. Thus, the concept of safe space opens up new research agendas that extend current SFD debates and merit serious attention from sport management scholars, policymakers, and practitioners concerned with the use of sport as a vehicle for social change.

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