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Sports as placemaking: critical reflections on a community-engaged campaign

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ABSTRACT

Community-engaged scholarship has largely neglected the potential of sports to construct progressive forms of community and mobilize disparate interests. In this article, we critically reflect on how sports were used for placemaking purposes in the Friendship and Hope Campaign, an annual event that is driven by residents of Thembelihle, a low-income community in South Africa. The Campaign is a participatory and community-based intervention that seeks to strengthen community relations and mobilize resources to build peaceful, nonracial, and nonsexist communities. Although the Campaign hosted several sports tournaments and cultural events, its attempt to strengthen community cohesion for the purposes of making democratically-led change renders it a political approach to placemaking. Yet, as with all community-engaged work, this was far from a simplistic process. The Campaign's deployment of sports as a placemaking practice was complicated by a multitude of political interests that oftentimes contradicted the community-oriented values and aims of the Campaign. We reflect on how patronage politics can assist us in understanding such internal contestations and conflicting interests, and how community campaigns can work to move through and hold complexity in a democratic fashion, rather than attempt to settle such complexity altogether

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Introduction

The popularity and impact of sports are, in part, due to sport's flexibility, adaptability, and capacity to reach and bind crowds (Meir & Fletcher, 2019). All of this contributes to how sports can be leveraged in divided community contexts to build social cohesion and encourage small-scale social change (Tsuji et al., 2018; Van der Veken et al., 2020). Certainly, using sport within community-engagement initiatives has shown to promote a range of prosocial behaviors, including emotional regulation, open communication, teamwork, confidence, and even a reduction in depression (see Luguetti et al., 2022; Nunn

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et al., 2022). However, several scholars have cautioned against oversimplifying the complexities and impacts of community-centered sports development interventions (Kelly, 2011), and/or idealizing the supposed inherent capacities of sports to transform putative socio-political and socio-economic inequalities within communities (Darnell et al., 2018).

Darnell et al. (2018) argue that when sport serves as a community-engagement initiative, a range of outcomes are possible. Within community settings, they argue, sport can function as a multivariate site of social and political control (e.g., the high levels of corruption in international sporting bodies like FIFA; an idealization of aggressive masculinity; a cherishing of a competitive individualism which echoes that of neoliberal ideology), as well as a means for promoting the kinds of cohesion, pride and resilience required to resist oppressive social forces (e.g., using sports events to strengthen intra-community bonds; harnessing sport to promote sovereign identity in colonial contexts; promoting symbols of liberation at sporting events). This more nuanced view of sport can be observed in South Africa. In the apartheid era, the state sought to solidify racist hierarchies via segregated sporting events, with rugby in particular used as a vehicle for promoting white supremacy. Yet, at the same time, anti-apartheid groups such as the South African Council of Sports (SACOS), which operated under the slogan “no normal sport in an abnormal society,” resisted the segregationist and racist apartheid logic, seeking to forge anti-racist social relations while remaining critical of the oppressive ideological capacities of sport (Booth, 2003). It would seem, then, that community-engaged work need not romanticize nor vilify sport as such. Rather, when attempting to advance politically progressive community agendas, such work can engage sport in a dialectical manner.

Although there is considerable research on sport’s ability to cohere with both emancipatory and oppressive politics, there is a dearth of research that reflects on the more nuanced, contradictory elements of sport within community engagement, that is, sport’s simultaneous emancipatory, oppressive, and banal ideological capacities. In this article, we employ a critical reflection on the dialectical character of sport within a community-centered campaign. To do so, we rely on the concepts of placemaking (i.e., sociopolitical and material processes through which people construct the “experienced geographies” within and through which they live; see Pierce et al., 2011) and political patronage (i.e., where appointments, services and resources are availed on the basis of partisan loyalty; see De Wit & Berner, 2009). Specifically, we apply these concepts to critically reflect on the role of sports in the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign, and what this meant for actors involved in the Campaign, as well as honoring the Campaign’s aim of community cohesion.

It is worth briefly noting why we rely on critical reflection as a method in this article. Neither placemaking nor political patronage are quantifiable concepts. Each denotes a psychopolitical phenomenon, wherein political enactments are

formed through interactions among psychological subjects, and vice versa. Technical, rational approaches are, therefore, not necessarily sufficient for engaging the psychopolitical character of such phenomena (Atkins & Murphy, 1993). As such, critical reflection serves as a useful methodology and mode of understanding for grappling with the experience (rather than the “objective reality”) of these phenomena (see Morley, 2014). Reflection can be thought of, quite simply, as a “process of trying to structure or restructure an experience, a problem, or existing knowledge or insight” (Korthagen, 2001, p. 58). The reflective process thus strives to understand how individuals are (and are not) able to instate social change while working in and against various social structures and institutions – thereby interrogating what change means at the societal and the subjective level (Morley, 2014). In their classic review, Atkins and Murphy (1993) highlight that although the reflective process is highly variable and is shaped in accordance with particular research questions, it usually begins with discomfort, moving on to critical examination and, from here, to the development of new perspectives. Atkins and Murphy also distinguish reflection-in-action (i.e., that which occurs during one’s practice and thus influences decision-making in real-time) from reflection-on-action (i.e., that which takes place after the fact and influences future decision-making).

In this article, we undertake a mode of reflection-on-action, looking back on our experience of sports as placemaking in the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign. Specifically, our reflection began with a shared sense of discomfort over how patronage politics came to jar with placemaking in the Campaign’s soccer tournament. As such, we reflect in this article on how sports, patronage politics, and placemaking unfolded in the Campaign. From these reflections, we conclude with a series of recommendations for the future action. Although our reflections are based on a series of conversations among ourselves and with community members, they ultimately represent the thoughts and dispositions of each of us authors. Future work of this sort should employ a dialogical reflection, constituted by the interplay of community voices and the voices of community practitioners.

In what follows, we flesh out the different ways by which sport can serve emancipatory and oppressive purposes in community engagement. We then move to our reflection on how patronage politics shaped the sports component of the Friendship and Hope Campaign as a placemaking community event. We conclude by drawing on our reflection to consider how sport can contribute to generative kinds of placemaking, while also engaging critically with the role that patronage politics can play in community-engaged work that relies on sports. We consider how patronage politics can be engaged democratically so as to diminish its influence on politically progressive notions of placemaking.

Sport and oppression

Research on sports suggests that sporting events can deepen existing social divisions and exert control on two grounds: cultural imperialism and class discipline (see Alegi, 2002; Darnell et al., 2018; Holt, 1990; Hughson, 2013; Reid, 2019).

Cultural imperialism

The preservation of colonialism via contemporary systems of power (known as coloniality) is oftentimes sustained through cultural power, that is, the legitimization and imposition of colonial values through cultural apparatuses. Sport represents a notable component of such cultural imperialism (Allen, 2016; C. Chen & Mason, 2019). Different colonial powers, especially British colonial powers, exported sports into various settler colonies (e.g., Australia, the Caribbean, South America, New Zealand, and Canada) to assimilate colonial subjects into British culture, as well as consolidate British nationalism in these colonies (Darnell et al., 2019). Sport was also used to incorporate local elites into the colonizing culture, establishing a distinction between the colonized elite and the colonized majority in an attempt to mark colonial culture as superior and distinct from the cultural values of the colonized (Holt, 1990). In South Africa, for example, cricket was introduced to the children of local elites who attended missionary schools to signal the education and Christianity of these children (Alegi, 2002; Allen, 2016). Sporting competitions were often held between the colonies and the empire to strengthen the collective bonds of the settler colonialists to the empire (Hughson, 2013). Hughson (2013) argues that the overall goal behind this was to “provide a cultural bond between the colonizing and colonized peoples” (p. 71), connecting them through sport as an expression of colonial culture.

The importation of sport as a colonial mechanism affirmed the growing power of settler colonialism. Land belonging to colonized peoples, for instance, was dispossessed for settler recreational uses, which meant that the sporting activities of local populations began to decline (Reid, 2019). We saw this in the 1904 St. Louis Olympics, which hosted “Anthropology Days,” events where organizers staged competitions among athletes from different indigenous communities. The purpose behind these activities was to assist anthropologists to find justifications for racist theories that portrayed athletes from Indigenous communities as inferior and in need of assimilation and ‘cultural civilization’ (C. Chen & Mason, 2019). Sport could be deployed and enforced as a kind of cultural repository that contained colonial values, serving as an ideological mechanism for consolidating colonial powers. At the same time, sport was not the only or most prominent of these mechanisms. Sport was and is oftentimes played in informal ways that have little to do with the colonial project.

Class discipline

Marxist sports scholars have been critical of sport, arguing that it conceals capitalist exploitation and promotes capitalist ideology through competition and nationalism. Sport, these scholars argue, can divert the attention of both athletes and audiences away from their material circumstances of oppression and inequality (Hendricks, 2010; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Alegi (2002) notes that the exponential growth of soccer in Black communities all over the world was fostered by missionary organizations, liberal institutions, big business, and municipal authorities in an attempt to use sport as a tool for defusing growing political discontent, winning allies, and distracting people from economic marginalization. The ideology of sport also operates at the level of the individual. A narrow focus on improving player performance can preclude athletes from understanding the importance of personal awareness and growth (Hendricks, 2010).

Sport is ideological precisely because it is rarely accepted as political. Sports spectators are often critical of athletes who choose to represent social causes. For example, Muhammed Ali was criticized and ridiculed in much of the mainstream press of his day for his oppositional stance on the Vietnam War (Kaufman, 2008), just as Colin Kaepernick has, in more recent times, endured criticism for his support of Black Lives Matter. There are also those athletes and sports institutions that refuse opportunities to use sport for promoting political awareness (e.g., the South African cricketer Quinton de Kock refusing to take a knee in a symbolic stance against racism at cricket matches). In other cases, sports have been used to sublimate the resistance efforts of oppressed people. Many non-governmental organizations, for instance, have aligned with the Israeli government to use soccer to deflect the attention of Palestinian youths away from Zionist occupation (Dart, 2022). In all of these cases, sport is used to advance ideological interests, and thus enforce class discipline.

Sport and social transformation

Sport need not represent an apparatus of oppression. On the contrary, social resistance and transformation through sports can assume various forms, such as: inclusivity; symbolic activism; non-collaboration; and Sports Development and Peace (see Biyanwila, 2018; Booth, 1997; Cooper et al., 2019).

Inclusive identities and visions of sports

Sports-based initiatives can assist in harmonizing group relationships and establishing positive, collaborative interactions and loyalties that transcend in-group/out-group divisions (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008). Schulenkorf (2010) argues that if properly organized, sports can lead to the creation of interpersonal friendships and inclusive social identities through common interests.

However, for these initiatives to be effective they need to be integrated into a wider socio-political agenda that seeks to promote peace and reconciliation in divided societies.

Sports can approach progressive socio-political agendas in a top-down or bottom-up fashion. In top-down approaches, sports can be used symbolically in the task of nation-building. However, uncritical nation-building can mean that the material divisions between different groups are not addressed (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008). This was observed in 1995 when South Africa won the 1995 Rugby World Cup. This victory was harnessed by the country's first democratically elected government as a symbol of national reconciliation and the end of apartheid, while socio-economic inequalities remained unaddressed (Maralack, 2010). Thus, the integration of sports into top-down political agendas can reinforce uncritical practices of sports participation and development (Arellano & Downey, 2019).

In bottom-up approaches, activism within sports is harnessed as a response to wider socio-historical, socio-political, and cultural issues, raising awareness, or seeking retribution for experienced injustices (Kilcline, 2017). In the case of South Africa, sport was used by the apartheid government to entrench division. Laws were instituted that required those who wished to practice non-racial sports to apply for permission to use state-owned sports facilities or even to play sport outside of the residential zones into which particular races were relegated. In a bottom-up response to this, three racial soccer organizations of "Coloureds" (the South African Coloured Football Association), "Indians" (South African Indian Football Association), and "Africans" (South African African Football Association) merged into one nonracial soccer organization in 1951 called the South African Soccer Federation (SASF). SASF hosted matches across different racial communities, defying apartheid's racial segregation principle (Ngidi, 2014; South African History Online, n.d.). This type of bottom-up sport-based activism sees athletes use sport in efforts to challenge and mitigate oppressive social structures, laws, and practices (Cooper et al., 2019).

Symbolic activism

Symbolic activism in sports denotes athletes' planned actions to raise awareness about social injustices by using the symbolic power of sports (Cooper et al., 2019; Hartmann, 2009). For instance, at the 1968 Mexico Olympics, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists on the podium, a symbol of Black Power that signified solidarity with those facing racist violence, while the third player on the podium, Peter Norman, wore an Olympic Project for Human Rights patch in solidarity with Smith and Carlos (Hartmann, 2003). Another example is the case of Feyisa Lilesa, an Ethiopian marathon athlete who crossed his wrists over his head after winning a silver medal at the 2016

Rio Olympics, thus mimicking the gesture used by the Oromo people to demonstrate their disapproval of the Ethiopian government (Boykoff, 2017). Symbolism of this kind is visible and disruptive, meaning that athletes act in direct opposition to what is often expected of them in the sports arena. Such symbolic activism can be used to draw attention to and eventually instigate social change in the poor and working-class communities from which many athletes come (Cooper et al., 2019).

Non-collaboration

The commercialization of sports has resulted in the displacement of poor peoples. We see this in the building of sports stadiums, the exploitation of service workers at games, and the exclusion of the majority from opportunities to participate in sports (Biyawila, 2018; Le, 2020). Non-collaboration entails rejecting such oppressive practices in sport (Hendricks, 2010). It is a principle that required members of oppressed groups, as well as those wishing to extend their solidarity with these groups, to disengage from government institutions and programs (Hirson, 1995). SACOS was key to anti-apartheid non-collaboration. SACOS argued that the inequalities in sports were a result of a racial capitalist system that rewarded and exploited communities on racist grounds. The organization also encouraged boycotting apartheid sports and advocated for Black self-reliance (Booth, 2003; Maralack, 2010).

Non-collaboration is, of course, not a silver bullet. Booth (1997) argues that the non-collaboration principle of SACOS paralyzed its political capacities, thus alienating it from many sports fans. Indeed, SACOS refused to seize upon the sports reforms conceded by the apartheid government, and to use these reforms to advance the objectives of the anti-apartheid movement (Maralack, 2010). Nonetheless, non-collaboration offers an important means of politicizing sport, using sport to advance a progressive political agenda, thus highlighting sport's fundamentally (and often obscured) political nature.

Entrepreneurship and peace initiatives

Sports have the capacity to promote personal and community stability, social empowerment, and mobility (Cooper et al., 2019). Here, we can understand sports through entrepreneurship as well as Sports Development and Peace interventions (SDP) (McSweeney, 2020). In terms of entrepreneurship, independent sports leagues and teams have been harnessed by communities to pool collective resources to produce salaries for players, management, referees, local businesses, and suppliers (Cooper et al., 2019). In this way, sport moves from the entrepreneurship of capital to an entrepreneurship of the multitude (see Hardt & Negri, 2017), where community interests are prioritized over profit-making. In terms of SDP, social entrepreneurs, community activists,

and political leaders have endorsed the idea that sports could be used to promote community development and, in turn, peaceful community relations (Darnell et al., 2019). SDP interventions can, therefore, “position sport as a relatively non-threatening and depoliticized means, or even tool, of pursuing development and peace, particularly in regions and contexts where such efforts have been difficult and where violence and poverty have proved intractable” (Darnell et al., 2019, p. 4).

Scholars have raised several concerns about SDP and entrepreneurship in sports, such as ill-defined intervention outcomes, the unequal donor-recipient relationship that may result in dictated agendas, scarce funding for organizations that affect project sustainability, and the inability to adequately speak to deep structural challenges such as inequality and political domination (Darnell et al., 2018; Hartmann, 2003; Kelly, 2011; Meir & Fletcher, 2019). However, McSweeney (2020) and Darnell et al. (2019) argue that despite the limitations of SDP and entrepreneurship in sport, these interventions nonetheless carry considerable potential for promoting resistance to discriminatory norms and social inequalities, especially when combined with grassroots political activism that attempts to promote social and economic development beyond sport.

It would seem, then, that sport is neither inherently progressive nor is it fundamentally reactionary. Rather, the political implications of sport are dependent on the context in which sport is harnessed as well as the specific political agenda toward which it is harnessed. With all of this in mind, in what follows, we discuss the interpretive framework that we utilize to reflect on the progressive and regressive currents within a community-oriented sports intervention that took place in a low-income South African community.

Interpretive framework

In our reflections on the dialectical nature of sport (i.e., the politically progressive and regressive potentialities inherent to sports), we have found the notions of placemaking and patronage politics to be useful psychopolitical anchors, particularly in the South African context. Thus, before we reflect on how sport was utilized as a community-building tool in the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign, we must first define these two concepts as they inform our critical reflections on the Campaign.

Placemaking

Although a broad term, placemaking can be defined as “the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live” (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 54). It denotes a people-centered process of reclaiming and reinventing space for public use through individual and collective action (Salzman & Lopez, 2020;

Toolis, 2017). We can thus understand place not as a static location, but as an always-becoming product of placemaking, that is, a set of temporal and multitudinous interacting relations and practices that are open to contestation and negotiation. Through placemaking, community members can reconstruct physical locations; imbue a place with their cultural values; and generate constructions of community that mobilize community members through the symbolic registers of these values (Gambetti, 2009).

Placemaking is an inherently psychopolitical phenomenon. The intersections and interdependencies of place, culture, economy, and culture have political and psychological implications in terms of who can access a space's resources and privileges (Lyons et al., 2016). Moreover, place-identities (i.e., the specific meanings with which people imbue space in the process of placemaking; Pierce et al., 2011) always give precedence to some histories, cultures, and ways-of-being over others (Loopmans et al., 2012). As such, place-identities are generated through contestation and negotiation, indicating the symbiotic relationship between place and power (Lai, 2019), a relationship that Massey (2009) speaks of as geometries. When the place-identities – and the contestations therein – of the oppressed are made salient, we can propel placemaking and its geometries with an emancipatory ethos. Put differently, we can drive placemaking via liberatory place-visions, or programs that provide images and ideals toward which a place's development can aspire (Lai, 2019). It is, in this regard, important to understand the psychopolitics of placemaking through particular ideologies, and how these ideologies embed historical meaning within the present. Placemaking is, in short, undertaken as part of a contested process wherein the past and the future are grappled with in an effort to imbue present-day geographies with meaning.

Political patronage

Political patronage broadly refers to transactional relationships where state patrons selectively deliver resources – including sports resources – to community members in exchange for electoral support (De Wit & Berner, 2009). Proponents of neoliberalism argue that political patronage embodies values of equal opportunity, democratic contest, improved personal freedoms, and increased involvement in civil society (Altschuler, 2013). However, in practice, patronage politics are not necessarily beneficent or unifying.

Several theorists contend that patronage politics contribute to feedback cycles associated with dependency on the capitalist state, divisive inter/intra community competition over access to resources, and political factionalism (Altschuler, 2013; Dawson, 2014; De Wit & Berner, 2009; Rees, 1973). As such, people become dependent on the state for essential resources related to, for instance, health and education, as well as leisure resources related to, for example, sports and entertainment. It is oftentimes because of patronage

politics that intra and inter community competition emerges in resource-deprived settings, where politicians and co-opted civil society unequally distribute resources depending on their voter base and personal interests. Patronage politics can mean that community members are reified by patrons as “voter banks” or “assets” rather than active subjects with agency or political will (Staniland, 2008). This can limit the range of possibilities available to both community members and politicians. Consequentially, poverty becomes further entrenched and those who do not benefit from such political patronage feel resentment toward those who do (Kurer, 1993). Sastry (2004) further contends that “the problem with extravagant spending is [that] the winner spends [their] time recovering the money spent and in returning favors rather than focusing on real issues of governance” (p. 1391).

The threat of patronage politics in South Africa, according to Staniland (2008), has been realized in the decline of power for civil society, the deterioration of collective mobilization, and limitation in the range of effective, creative community building. The ultimate psychopolitical impact of patronage politics, however, remains ambiguous. Such politics tend to lead to a precarious and perilous cycle, limiting possibilities for collective, participatory community building (Rees, 1973). Yet, in some cases, patronage politics have been leveraged for the benefit of particular aspects of community life, such as sports. While the impact of political patronage unfolds in complex ways, it is nevertheless clear that patronage politics remains an important consideration when reflecting on the organization of placemaking geometries, and the formulation of community-engaged practice.

Sport and the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign

Thembelihle is a low-income community located in south-west Johannesburg, South Africa. Our reflection focuses on the Friendship and Hope Campaign, an event that has been hosted annually since 2018 by residents of Thembelihle in collaboration with the institution for which we work, the University of South Africa’s Institute for Social and Health Sciences (ISHS). The Friendship and Hope Campaign is a movement conceptualized and executed by residents of Thembelihle along with several other neighboring communities and their respective stakeholders. The Campaign was born from community-driven concerns with addressing intra- and inter-community tensions, the essentialist and reductionist narratives about Thembelihle that circulate in the mainstream media, and the high levels of poverty and inequality that exist in Thembelihle and its surrounds (see Malherbe et al., 2021). Through processes of collaborative planning, network building, and community participation, the Campaign brings different people together in an effort to strengthen community relations, celebrate local histories of struggle, as well as pool and lobby for resources for collective problem-solving.

Planning and hosting the Campaign strives to be open-ended. Thus, residents from Thembelihle and several other surrounding communities conceptualized the Campaign together over a series of weekly meetings that occurred over several months. The meetings were organized democratically and were hosted at the ISHS offices. Invitations to these meetings were extended to all of those from the communities involved in the Campaign. The meetings focused on conceptualizing different Campaign events, with ISHS personnel offering administrative assistance in obtaining the requisite permissions from local government for these events. It was ultimately decided that the Campaign would constitute a soccer tournament, a 6.5 km walk through Thembelihle and its surrounds, dialogue sessions, a recycling initiative, and a public screening of a documentary film on Thembelihle, co-produced by community residents (see [Table 1](#) below). Each of these events saw different kinds of entertainment along with speakers from local government, religious institutions, community groups, and activist organizations. The events were very well-attended by members of Thembelihle and other neighboring communities.

The Campaign was understood by community members as a means by which to engage political issues beyond the bounds of protest, which have often resulted in violent confrontations with police and government. Importantly, the Campaign did not offer itself as an alternative to protest, but rather as a different mode of collective political engagement, one that might inform how protest is organized in the area. Thus, through various placemaking activities, the Campaign looks to promote a more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable future for the participating communities.

For the purposes of this paper, we reflect on the sports component of the Campaign, and its relationship with placemaking and patronage politics.

Table 1. Campaign components and anticipated outcomes.

Campaign Component	Anticipated Outcomes
Walk for Friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Connections established through collaborative organization and large-scale participation ● Intra- and inter-community cohesion ● Relations of recognition that consolidate divided struggles and challenge spatial segregation
Soccer Tournament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Community connections ● Grassroots institutional consolidation ● Celebration of unrecognized sporting talent
Recycling Initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implementation of community-led sustainable waste management ● Support of local recycling co-operatives ● Promotion of dignity
Dialogue Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Critical consciousness relating to representations of Thembelihle ● Outline of community assets and needs ● Assessment of the Campaign
Documentary Film Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Nuanced, community-led depictions of Thembelihle ● Critical dialogue on how Thembelihle is perceived in South Africa ● Linkages made between community-led representations of Thembelihle and organized political activism in Thembelihle

These reflections, it should once again be emphasized, are highly subjective. They form part of an ongoing conversation between us and residents of Thembelihle. The reflections offered here should, therefore, not be considered as empirically grounded. Instead, they form part of an experiential methodology derived from the notes and photographs that we, as authors, took during the planning phases of the Campaign, as well as during different Campaign events. The purpose of these reflections is to probe critically into the effects that patronage politics had on the Campaign, with the ultimate aim of using our experiences to better understand the role that patronage politics can play in community campaigns concerned with placemaking, as well as how the regressive influence of patronage can be prevented or, at the very least curtailed, in these campaigns. Although our subjective reflections represent an important avenue of inquiry, there is also a need for empirical monitoring and evaluation work here.

Placemaking in the campaign

The coaches involved in organizing the Campaign's soccer tournaments expressed dissatisfaction with the place-identities that were prescribed to Thembelihle. Such identities included depictions of Thembelihle (reinforced by mainstream news media) as a fundamentally violent community whose existence is premised on unrelenting, almost pointless, protest violence (see Malherbe et al., 2021). This, the coaches argued, influenced public support for police violence in Thembelihle, as such violence is made to seem a legitimate mode of policing this "unruly" community (see also Duncan, 2016). In short, because the place-identity of Thembelihle was, in hegemonic depictions, characterized by violence, the community could be engaged violently by external state actors with little condemnation from the broader South African public. Soccer was thereby identified as a means of crafting a more positive place-identity for Thembelihle, one based on comradery athleticism. Soccer, it was understood, could assist in developing a more nuanced image of Thembelihle, an image that could be developed by those who live in the community. In other words, soccer represented a means through which people could fashion a new place-vision for their community. This aligned with broader aims of community cohesion outlined by the Friendship and Hope Campaign.

The soccer coaches resolved that to coordinate their efforts effectively, they needed to form a neighborhood sports association to organize all sports activities of Thembelihle under an umbrella body referred to as the Thembelihle Sports Association (TSA). TSA, they posited, would eventually be registered as a nonprofit organization. In participatory democracy literature, this is referred to as cross-functional coordination, that is, an organization's ability to deal with environmental complexity by breaking down daunting responsibilities into more manageable parts, dividing up labor and expertise accordingly (Fung, 2004). To

complement the cross-functional coordination efforts of the coaches, the ISHS provided the coaches with an opportunity to attend a coaching management training course provided by the South African Football Association.

The relationship between the soccer coaches and the ISHS reflects the importance of institutional relationships in providing support to grassroots sports initiatives in under-resourced communities. In Thembelihle, the ISHS can be characterized as an anchor institution, which are “locally embedded institutions, typically non-governmental, cultural or other civic organizations, that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community life of cities in which they are based” (Goddard et al., 2014, p. 307). Through the resources availed by the ISHS, residents of Thembelihle accessed the kind of training and networking opportunities that they had indicated would strengthen the Campaign’s community-building efforts. Indeed, this training afforded coaches and Campaign organizers the legitimacy and skillsets to consolidate relationships with neighboring sports organizations, the city council, the local ward councillor, and the Palestine Solidarity Movement (the latter of which has been involved in much community-engaged work and activism in this area). These relationships speak to the relational nature of placemaking, emphasizing the importance of multi-sectoral partnerships to address the interlocking social problems that Thembelihle faces.

The coaches harnessed these networks to organize against the use of Thembelihle’s sports fields as dumping sites, to train young athletes, and promote positive parent-child relations. At the Campaign’s soccer tournament, different parties effectively reclaimed and reinvented space in Thembelihle. As such, sport was drawn on for broader purposes within the Campaign’s placemaking practices. This is contrary to many SDP initiatives, where sport is used to target specific community issues (Darnell et al., 2018), usually in an effort to honor the requirements of donor organizations, rather than those of local communities (S. Chen, 2018). The soccer initiative thus served as a means of constructing community relations that could serve as a resource for organizing the capacities of different people toward broad-based community-building as a common interest (Gambetti, 2009).

Patronage politics

Lodge (2014) argues that since the presidency of Jacob Zuma in South Africa, clientelism within governance has become more entrenched, which has resulted in local government structures becoming especially dependent on client-patron relations that use public resources and services as a means of gaining political support. Despite the purported ideals of the Friendship and Hope Campaign, several politically regressive elements were noted

during the organizing processes, various Campaign events, and after the Campaign, most of which were driven by patronage politics in Thembelihle. Examining how these regressive elements played out in the Campaign allows for insights into how political patronage can impact placemaking and its associated geometries.

Employing sports as placemaking practice within the Campaign required that the ISHS and members of Thembelihle developed relationships with key community stakeholders. As such, it was important to draw into the Campaign those with political and financial connections. Although this is undoubtedly a partisan process, we did not anticipate the political implications of forming these strategic relationships, which is to say, how these relationships would be leveraged as patronage politics. This oversight is, according to Petrova and Tarrow (2007), rather common. They argue that community researchers frequently disregard the actual relations between community organizations, their interactions with political parties, and their relationships with individuals and groups in public office. This is not to say that an embrace of patronage politics results in the abandonment of the collective good, or that such a politics will result in a monetary surplus (oftentimes patronage politics sees to basic survival needs). However, patronage politics do introduce tensions in community-centered campaigns and can undermine the efforts of these campaigns to promote the collective good.

During the organizing stages, the local government – seeking to bolster its image – had expressed interest in offering their support to the Campaign. It soon became clear that there were tensions between those campaign organizers who aligned themselves with a local government-affiliated councillor, and those who rejected involvement from the state, favoring instead social movements like the Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC), or oppositional parties like the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Supporters of the state's involvement in the Campaign were accused of selling out the community, while others saw pecuniary and political advantage in gaining support for various Community-Based Organisations (CBOs). Sports were an especially contested area of patronage politics. At one of the soccer games, for example, a representative of the ward councillor made a speech that credited the state for organizing the Campaign's sports events, giving little recognition to the community organizers. The soccer match thus served as a vehicle through which people could give legitimacy to the local councillor's administration in return for favors for themselves and their organizations. However, many did not accept this and openly challenged the presence of patronage politics at the sports event, affirming Dawson's (2014) point that communities have the potential to exercise agency in ways that inform, steer, disallow, and influence the formation and utilization of patron-client relations.

The kinds of tensions ushered in by patronage politics came to define how sports in the Campaign were received. For example, during a soccer match, an

electricity outage occurred, preventing commentary, speeches, and music from being played at the game. This gave rise to speculations that the ward councillor had sabotaged the event due to the presence of political rivals affiliated with the PAC and the TCC. Such speculation heightened tensions between community members, leading community members to view the Campaign's placemaking activities as shaped by political tactics. This undermined the Campaign's aim to consolidate community cohesion. While patronage politics have certain benefits and represent the agency of community members within tenuous neoliberal structures, competition for affiliation and attempts to improve the reputation of local councillors can have the effect of exacerbating community divisions.

While we note that neo-patrimonial relations and factional competition represent forms of self-preservation in contexts marked by scarce resources, we posit that there is a related process of externalization occurring where community members associate themselves with the dominant structures of power, and in turn blame others for the problems that occur within their communities. Attention is turned away from structural inequalities, and toward improving one's position within such unequal structures.

Exploitation of young soccer players

After the Campaign's soccer tournament, we hosted a series of meetings with the coaches to reflect on the placemaking capacities of the Campaign. It remained clear that the coaches were bitterly divided with respect to how they aligned themselves to the patronage politics that came to define aspects of the Campaign. Lai (2019) argues that uneven commitment to community initiatives by community actors can often be attributed to contending placevisions. Although none of the soccer coaches had any sort of employment, several viewed their teams as an opportunity to generate income through betting on the different matches. The consequence of such betting was that these coaches often used young boys to generate income and would often pay them by buying the young people alcohol or giving them money to buy cannabis. There were, however, other coaches who were interested in using the sports events for community mobilization and development purposes (e.g., attaining donor funding, consolidating social movement activities, and/or altering damaging depictions of Thembelihle). It soon became clear that securing state patronage was what motivated some of the coaches' participation in the Campaign, even though this was not communicated to the organizing committee. Yet, because the coaches affiliated with patronage politics controlled the sports grounds in Thembelihle, they were able to limit the other coaches' (and their teams') access to these grounds and their facilities. The control of public space by small groups is not uncommon in community campaigns. As Pettas (2019) argues, in contexts marked by high rates of

unemployment, horizontal contestations over the use of place can emerge due to some influential actors blocking the access of others to public spaces.

Community members began to notice the betting that occurred on the sports grounds, which affected support for soccer as a placemaking activity in the community. Indeed, the sports grounds became a site of excessive alcohol consumption, cars frequently drove across the grounds during games, and people once again began to use the grounds as a dumping site. Moreover, where some soccer players were making money and/or receiving alcohol, others were not, which meant that the coaches who were not involved in patronage politics struggled to retain players. Thus, the Campaign's place-frame was made ever more fragile through the introduction of patronage politics (see Larsen, 2008).

Burte (2003) highlights that popular conflict over public space often revolves around questions of acceptable uses of space, who has more claim over the use of the space, and who controls and makes key decisions about access to public space. During the Friendship and Hope Campaign, the sports initiative led to contested forms of placemaking amongst the soccer coaches; however, it was ultimately the coaches who favored the betting that determined the sports grounds as a public space. The place-vision of transforming Thembelihle through sports was similarly influenced by a sports-for-profit approach that fragmented the shared place-identities mobilized during the planning phases of the Campaign. Patronage politics rather than community thereby fueled the placemaking capacities of sport.

Placemaking scholars have highlighted that shared concerns play an important role in creating a sense of community within a place and that these concerns can be used as a mobilization force for community initiative (Barry & Agyeman, 2020; Gambetti, 2009). However, as revealed by the Friendship and Hope Campaign, the interests of community actors are multidimensional. They are connected to different places which relate to different kinds of monetary and political obligations. Inasmuch as the coaches were interested in implementing changes in Thembelihle, they also expressed that they had familial obligations and a duty to support their kin. For them, the embrace of patronage politics in the Campaign did not represent a total abandonment of shared community concerns, but a compromised bargain between the concerns of the community and their own material interests. For other coaches, however, this compromise was unacceptable, partly because it came to be without explicit warning. Indeed, patronage politics became a part of the Campaign, defining elements within it, without the consultation of the Campaign organizers.

Extortion

During the Campaign, it was discovered that several of the soccer coaches involved in campaign organizing had approached foreign nationals who run

convenience stores near the soccer tournament. If the store managers were unable to produce valid municipal trade permits, coaches would request “donations” in return for their silence (i.e., the coaches would not alert local authorities of the expired permits if the storeowners paid a bribe). The coaches perceived this process of extortion, abhorrent as it may be, as necessary for funding the soccer tournaments, and its ability to implement community cohesion. Nonetheless, the coaches did not report how the money received from the bribes was spent.

Extortion of this kind has the potential to exacerbate xenophobic tensions within communities, while laying the ground for extortion and bribery as legitimate forms of negotiation. Through bribery (which can be understood as a kind of patronage politics), claims to space are restricted to the momentary form, and thus placemaking is emptied of any democratic character (see Anjaria, 2011). There was, indeed, a fear among storeowners that this kind of extortion would become standard practice, implemented for all foreign nationals living in the community. Alexander (2016) points out that economic pressures have the tendency to distort the utopian premises of civil projects. It is when these pressures seize upon nationalist divisions that they can produce destructive intrusions which are difficult to repair. Despite the coaches’ stated aims to expand the civil sphere and promote inclusive relations in Thembelihle, their extortion of foreign nationals narrowed the kinds of solidaristic relationships that the Campaign was able to form. Such patronage politics solidified personal interests, antagonism, and competition between geographically defined constituencies, even within the same broader community. This affected the legitimacy of the Campaign among community groups and external stakeholders, making funding and resources even more difficult to secure which, in turn, increased campaign organizers’ reliance on extortion networks.

It would seem that the coaches’ individual, material interests came to contradict the values and intentions of the Campaign and as such, exploitative extortion practices were resorted to. Although the Campaign sought to balance community-oriented ideals with a realistic outlook, the material circumstances of the campaign organizers (i.e., unemployment and family obligations) meant that elements of the Campaign became driven by the betterment of individual rather than community conditions.

Conclusion

To use sports as a placemaking practice is to engage the relational and political dimensions of community life. The Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign highlights the progressive and regressive potentialities of organizing such community-centered placemaking efforts around sports. Indeed, in organizing the Campaign’s soccer tournament, people in Thembelihle worked to promote public health initiatives, pool community resources, engage in

youth development, and construct positive community-centered depictions of Thembelihle that countered those perpetuated in mainstream media. However, the Campaign also demonstrated how community-oriented place-making can become complicated by the material and political interests of the campaign organizers, resulting in, for example, extortion, the exploitation of young people, profit-making over community interests, and political divisions.

Unequal social structures can result in an internal undermining of community campaigns. This is not to ignore the agency of community actors; however, it is to highlight that people risk being driven by difficult material circumstances which can lead to their abandoning, or at least “compromising” on, the agreed-upon goals of a campaign. This perhaps represents the fundamental contradiction of community campaigns: community versus individual interests. While such a contradiction cannot be eradicated altogether, it can be negotiated democratically by campaign organizers, with the ultimate aim being to advance individual interests along with community interests so that the two do not compete against one another, but are instead understood as forming part of a single entity.

The Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign offers several lessons with respect to patronage politics, some of which will be more salient in some contexts than others. Lessons could be derived from each level of the Campaign: from its conceptualization, to its execution, to its evaluation. Cutting across each of these levels is the need to honor open communication and participation, both of which – we suggest – should be implemented between all campaign organizers.

At the level of the Campaign’s conceptualization, practical, bureaucratic, and institutional requirements were attended to at the expense of ideological and financial considerations. This is perhaps to some degree understandable, given the work involved in hosting community campaigns. However, a campaign’s relationship to profit-making should be carefully considered at its outset precisely because this will affect how a campaign is materially realized. Considerations of ideology (e.g., people’s political affiliations) and money should, therefore, be engaged democratically and should be considered against a particular campaign’s social, political, and cultural aims. Moreover, in the case of the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign, greater participation from young people and foreign nationals in the community may have prevented exploitation and extortion by some of the organizers. It is thus crucial that campaigns involve as many different groups within a community as possible. This will, in turn, also bolster its commitment to the democratic process.

At the level of execution, the noted kinds of extortion and exploitation that defined some (but certainly not all) aspects of the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign cannot be ignored, especially with respect to how such extortion and exploitation contravened the Campaign’s goals of promoting fair and equal inter-community cohesion and solidarity. As such, the goals of a campaign should be explicitly outlined and

democratically articulated, and the methods by which a campaign honors these goals should be succinctly articulated (including whether these methods will make use of patronage politics; to what degree they will make use of such a politics; and whether it is possible to uphold community-oriented values while adhering to patronage politics). Within a campaign's institutional machinery, there should be procedures and processes that hold campaign actors accountable to the values of the campaign (values that should be articulated democratically during the conceptualization stage). Any violation of a campaign's values should then be reported to campaign organizers via established channels, with agreed upon penalties for those who violate these values.

Lastly, the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign was evaluated by those who participated in organizing the Campaign, as well as those who attended different Campaign events. Questionnaires were completed and focus groups were conducted. For the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that many respondents were, indeed, pleased with the kinds of cohesive community-building that were observed throughout the Campaign, however, such community-building was typically referenced against the sorts of patronage politics observed throughout the Campaign. There were also concerns regarding some of the political actors who spoke at the different campaign events. The evaluation responses once again point toward the need for campaign organizers to attend democratically not only to pragmatic concerns, but also to the more agonistic issues around a campaign's politics, including its relationship to money, profit, and ideology more broadly.

Sports-based placemaking campaigns are, in many ways, representative of community engagement practice more generally because they rely on the efforts of different people to activate a common set of goals. Our experience of the Thembelihle Friendship and Hope Campaign highlights some of the complexities of this work. Indeed, where some of these challenges are the result of intentional efforts, particularly in light of patronage politics, others relate to systemic constitutions of power. Those involved in instituting community campaigns must take heed of such complexities. As such, we do not offer a singular solution or way forward. Instead, we suggest that a deeper entrenchment of popular democratic processes within campaign organizing can enable community members to better learn from the past, negotiate complexity, and hold contradiction throughout this kind of community practice.

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Compliance with ethical standards

The author of this manuscript has complied with APA ethical principles in their treatment of individuals participating in the research, program, or policy described in the manuscript. The research has been approved by the University of South Africa's Institute for Social and Health Sciences. The study received no funding. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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