

REDUCING THE STIGMATIZATION OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL
DISABILITIES: TESTING THE IMPACT OF INVOLVEMENT IN UNIFIED SPORTS®

Jeremy Heinlein

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Department of Communication and Dramatic Arts

Central Michigan University
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I dedicate this research to Noelle, thank you for your constant love and support.

ABSTRACT

REDUCING THE STIGMATIZATION OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: TESTING THE IMPACT OF INVOLVEMENT IN UNIFIED SPORTS®

by Jeremy Heinlein

Unified Sports® is a program offered by Special Olympics that brings together persons with and without intellectual disabilities to play organized sports in an intramural setting. The program aims to promote inclusion and combat stigmatization of persons with intellectual disabilities. Stigmatization is a pervasive problem in today's society, which causes irrefutable harm to those that stigmatized against (Goffman, 1963). Persons with intellectual disabilities who are stigmatized against often suffer social isolation, lower self-esteem, and depression as a result (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Unified Sports® combats stigma by with contact exposure between in-group and out-group members. The program spans two months and includes an assessment day, a five regular season, and a playoff day. Unified Sports® provides an inclusive environment that allows for sustained meaningful interaction, conversation, and bonding between persons with and without intellectual disabilities (Ekonen, 2016). This study used a pretest – posttest method that obtained (n) 171 responses from participants at universities in Michigan, Florida, and New Jersey. The study found that as a result of participating in Unified Sports®, college students experienced increased feelings of empathy, feelings of similarity, and feelings of altruism; while also experiencing a reduction in stigma and a reduction in use of discriminatory language.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis serves as an effort to analyze the impact that involvement in the program Unified Sports® has on participating college students and to understand how the program can be used as a vehicle to develop more inclusive perceptions regarding people with intellectual disabilities. Unified Sports® is a program at colleges and universities that brings together people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team to play sports with one another and to promote inclusion, friendship, and understanding. Of relevance, Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, and Anastasio (1994) found that exposure to out-group or stigmatized individuals reduces prejudice, decreases feelings of anxiety, and increases the intention of communicating with other members of the stigmatized group. Moreover, communication between in- and out-group members creates shared understanding that helps to eliminate stigmatization towards people with intellectual disabilities (Birtel & Crisp, 2012). Thus, the goal of the current project is to document attitude changes among the individuals without intellectual disabilities who participate in Unified Sports®. In the paragraphs that follow, I offer the reader an introduction to the logic of the thesis.

According to the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (1994) a person is diagnosed with an intellectual disability by having an IQ below 70 combined with deficits or impairments in at least two of the following areas: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, interpersonal skills, use of community resources, self-direction, functional academic skills, work, leisure activities, health, and safety. Last, criteria must be met prior to age 18 (Beart,

Hardy, & Buchan, 2004). According to Special Olympics (2016), approximately 6.5 million people in the United States have an intellectual disability. Worldwide that number increases to as many as 200 million people (Special Olympics, 2016).

For a person living with an intellectual disability, stigmatization is part of their everyday life (Jahoda, 1989). Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott, (2006) reported that the majority of people living with an intellectual disability experienced stigmatized treatment in and around the area where they live. Stigmatization can come in the form of name-calling, ridicule, and exclusion (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Common beliefs about people with intellectual disabilities include that they are not normal, they cannot complete basic tasks, they are not intelligent, and they cannot make a positive impact in society (Jahoda & Markova, 2004). These belief systems pose a problem as individuals living with intellectual disabilities attempt to integrate into different facets of everyday life with people without intellectual disabilities.

Experiencing stigmatization can severely impact the well-being of people with intellectual disabilities. Researchers have noted loss of identity, low self-esteem, and depression as serious harms suffered by individuals with intellectual disabilities who experience stigmatization (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Sadly, people with intellectual disabilities are confronted with these harms on a daily basis (Jahoda, 1989). As a result of the byproducts of experiencing stigmatization, a person with an intellectual disability may avoid fully integrating into society for fear of further stigmatization (Jahoda & Markova, 2004).

One key to combating such stigmatization is to expose people without intellectual disabilities to individuals with intellectual disabilities. The type of exposure focused on in

this study consists of repeated interactions with stigmatized groups, sustained over a period of time, in this case a Unified Sports® season Unified Sports® offers sustained and meaningful exposure to participants over the course of a two month season. The program begins with a training/assessment day allowing staff to assess skill levels of all participants. The season itself usually consists of a 5-week regular season that finds participants playing competitively together during the sports season (Special Olympics, 2016). During a season participants have the opportunity to practice, provide feedback, and hangout for a chance to build relationships and understandings. The program ends with a championship day, where participants will show up early and interact with each other, hangout in the stands with their teammates, and cheer on the teams that are playing. Unified Sports® creates meaningful exposure by developing an environment that allows for a lot of in-depth exposure over the course of a sports season. Sustained exposure between in- and out-group members positively impacts attitude change and positively effects desiring and seeking future communication opportunities with the out-group (Harwood, Joyce, Chen, Paolini, Xiang, & Rubin 2015). Furthermore, exposure between groups leads to the reduction of anxiety about outgroup members and reduced stigmatization of out-group members (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994). Hinck, Hinck, and Withers (2013) found similar results that exposure to out-group members (i.e., prison inmates) help college students overcome stigmatization. This thesis aims to extent the logic of this research by assessing stigmatization among college students who are exposed to persons with intellectual disabilities during their participation in Unified Sports®.

Unified Sports® brings together people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same teams to play sports like basketball, softball, volleyball, soccer, and flag football. The goal of Unified Sports® is to promote inclusion, friendship, and understanding while breaking down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities (Special Olympics, 2016). Unified Sports® teams are made up of people of similar age and athletic ability, which aims to make practices fun and the games more challenging and exciting for all. The program facilitates interaction between people with and without intellectual disabilities that ensures stereotypes are not being reinforced, and instead are being combated. Consistent with the goals of Special Olympics and Unified Sports®, the literature review of this thesis proposal argues college students who participate in the program will develop more empathy, increase the use of inclusive communication, and reduce discriminatory perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities.

In the methods section, I detail how I analyze the impact of Unified Sports® on participating college students. I begin by detailing the sample of college students. Next, I highlight how I recruit college students to take part in a pretest-posttest questionnaire. After discussing the procedure, I highlight the specific scales used to measure the overall impact Unified Sports® has on participating college students.

The findings section of the Unified Sports® study discusses how five out of six of the hypotheses showed a positive impact for individuals participating in a Special Olympics program for the first time through Unified Sports®. These findings were tested by running paired samples t-tests to measure significant changes among participants from prior to participating in Unified Sports to after completing their Unified Sports

season. Two sets of paired samples t-tests were run. First, the tests were run on all participants. Then, a second set of analyses were run on participants involved with Special Olympics for the first time.

The remainder of this proposal includes four chapters. The review of literature analyzes current literature on stigmatization of persons with intellectual disabilities, problematic outcomes of being stigmatized, discusses in-group out-group exposure and reductions in stigmatization, describes how people are brought together through Unified Sports®, and deduces the hypotheses that are the focus of this thesis. In Chapter 3, I detail the methods, including the study's sample, recruitment methods, procedures of the study, and measures. Chapter 4 discusses findings of the study. To end, Chapter 5 embeds my findings within broader literatures and discusses research to continue to learn about combatting stigmatization with exposure.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities is a pervasive societal problem (Beart, Hardy, Buchan, & 2004). Stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities can take on many forms including dehumanization, negative labeling, and holding negative perceptions such as these individuals cannot complete basic tasks, are not intelligent, and cannot make a positive impact in society. Ultimately, stigmatization leads to a lowered quality-of-life for people with intellectual disabilities. To document how participation in Unified Sports® can mitigate discriminatory beliefs, this chapter first defines stigma, discusses how people with intellectual disabilities are stigmatized and then addresses the outcomes of those discriminatory beliefs for people living with an intellectual disability (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Next, I discuss the use of exposure to out-group members as a technique for fighting stigmatization (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994). Last, this chapter overviews Unified Sports® as a program that involves exposure between persons with and without intellectual disabilities and that has the potential to reduce discriminatory beliefs about people with intellectual disabilities.

Stigmatization, a Communication Problem

Stigmatization is a communication problem that was explored by Goffman (1963). Goffman (1963) suggests that individuals that are stigmatized are people that have to adapt their social identity because they fail to meet social acceptance. Additionally, Goffman (1963) argues stigma should be seen as a language of

relationships, not attributes. This phrasing helps cement stigma as a communication issue. Goffman (1963) reports three types of stigma: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion. These stigmas can then be translated into terms such as disabled, blind, or cripple (Goffman, 1963). Communication allows these stigmas to be transmitted through generations of families and have the potential to contaminate all members of a family, group, or organization. To understand stigma the study considers how stigma is created and who creates it, what the purpose of stigma is, and the role communication plays in developing stigma.

Stigma is created by humans failing to meet social acceptance (Goffman, 1963). If an individual has an intellectual disability that is a feature that disqualifies them from being “normal” and this disqualification is what creates the stigmatization of the individual. The creator of the stigma is the “normal” or someone that does not depart negatively from particular social expectations (Goffman, 1963). “Normals” control the identity of the stigmatized because they choose if an individual meets social acceptance or if they don’t. By denying someone’s social acceptance, a normal is ignoring the true identity of the individual. This control is part of the purpose of stigma.

The purpose of stigma is to control social standing and acceptance. Stigma gives “normals” a rhetorical weapon to categorize individuals that fail to meet their social requirements, and use that spoiled social identity as a method of separating those different from themselves. Those that are stigmatized are forced to accept they do not meet society’s standards, or attempt to hide their differences and pass as normal (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatized groups have developed a set of rules when dealing with

“normal” individuals as a way to appease them (Goffman, 1963). Some of Goffman’s (1963) rules include: one must assume that “normal” are ignorant rather than malicious, stigmatized should treat “normal” as if they are honorary and wise, and the stigmatized should see oneself as “normal” in order to put “normal at ease. All of these are done, because “normals” have used stigma to establish themselves as superior due to specific differences. This purpose of stigma is spread by the presence of communication.

Communication plays multiple roles in stigma. As detailed through this section, the key role communication has in stigma is its ability to help it spread. Without communication stigma would not exist. Additionally, communication is used to help those that are stigmatized against to cope, and come together with other individuals from similar situations (Goffman, 1963). As stated before, communication controls the flow of what is socially accepted and what is not (Goffman, 1963). Goffman (1963) details stigma is often weaved into the fabric of families, groups, and organizations because intergroup communication allows the stigma to spread from within and carry on to future generations. Once a stigma is established, it is spread from one individual to another until it is an accepted norm from someone facing that societal issue (Goffman, 1963). In addition to communication being used to transmit stigma, it is also used to cope with stigma (Goffman, 1963). Some members of stigmatized groups seek support and understanding from individuals from similar situations, or individuals prepared to offer support (Goffman, 1963). Goffman (1963) states the potential problem with this is stigmatized individuals focus too much on what makes them different, and not on their whole identity. Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma properly sets the stage to focus fully on the stigmatization of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Stigmatization of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Research identifies specific forms of stigmatization against people with intellectual disabilities, and documents the negative outcomes of those stigmas. Similar to Goffman (1963), Jahoda and Markova (2004) argue stigmatization arises when an individual differs from dominant social norms, and is perceived negatively by others. Unfortunately, stigmatization has a significant impact on individuals due to its ability to harm one's social identity and its ability to cause self-dehumanization and dehumanize people in the eyes of others (Jahoda & Markova, 2004).

As stated earlier, Jahoda and Markova (2004) found that common stigmatizations of people with intellectual disabilities include that they are not normal, cannot complete basic tasks, are not intelligent, and cannot make a positive impact in society. Rosegard, Pegg, and Compton's (2001) study on a Unified Bowling program revealed the use of numerous maladaptive behaviors toward individuals with intellectual disabilities including abuse, inappropriate treatment, social isolation, deprivation, and systemic neglect. Stigmatization takes other forms, including name calling, ridicule, and exclusion (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Thus, the aforementioned research documents the various forms of stigmatization against persons with intellectual disabilities takes.

In addition to individuals stigmatizing persons with intellectual disabilities, systematic discrimination occurs too. Chen and Shu (2011) studied the perceptions of young adults with intellectual disabilities and their experiences with stigmatization. Chen and Shu (2011) found that the sources of stigmatization often came from the educational and welfare systems. These individuals were consistently stigmatized to the

point that it harmed their well-being. Additionally, Chen and Shu (2011) found that individuals with intellectual disabilities perceived themselves as “not good” students, troublemakers, and as sick and odd people. Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott (2006) support these findings by documenting that young people with intellectual disabilities who compare themselves to their peers without intellectual disabilities can feel their social identity is devalued. These studies represent examples of institutionalized stigmatization.

To summarize, individuals living with intellectual disabilities live their lives as members of an out-group, and often face stigmatization and prejudice because they are labeled as non-normative. Rosegard, Pegg, and Compton’s (2001) supports the claim that people with intellectual disabilities are often stigmatized, and help elaborate on the outcomes of that stigma. Jahoda and Markova, (2004) provide depth to the outcomes finding that individuals with intellectual disabilities are dehumanized to the point that they are reluctant to fully participate in society.

Problematic Outcomes of Being Stigmatized

Stigmatization is a daily reality for individuals living with an intellectual disability (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Stigmatization can have serious outcomes on an individual, including persons with an intellectual disability. Every day stigmatization negatively impacts millions of people living with intellectual disabilities (Beart, Hardy, & Buchan, 2004). Common problems include loss of identity, low self-esteem, depression (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006), and social isolation (Beart, Hardy, & Buchan, 2004). Additionally, experiencing stigmatization causes

serious distress and can cause stigmatized groups to avoid seeking help, increase their chances of unemployment, and reduce social opportunities (Griffiths, Arthur, Parsons, & Reid, 2014).

People without intellectual disabilities can be described in a variety of ways including their gender, race, sexuality, and religion; however, persons living with an intellectual disability are often only given one label. Having an intellectual disability is a powerful and often dominant label as well as a stigmatizing one. It overrides other identities including gender, ethnic origin, sexuality, and religion (Beart, Hardy, & Buchan, 2004). People without intellectual disabilities fail to recognize other identities important to someone with an intellectual disability. This causes people living with intellectual disabilities to internalize their devalued status and are more likely to make negative internal social comparisons (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Using self-reported perceptions of stigma, Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott (2006) studied sixty young people with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and analyzed their self-reported social comparison to a more disabled and non-disabled peer. Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott (2006) found when the label of intellectual disability was removed students were able to obtain positive labels allowing them to thrive socially. Additionally, the study found that students in an integrated and supportive learning environment were more likely to set goals of obtaining a professional job. Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott's (2006) research shows that by using integrated classrooms, and potentially other settings, students are more likely to be successful both socially and professionally.

Another harm of stigmatization on individuals with intellectual disabilities is that of low self-esteem. Crawford, Burns, and Fernie (2015) found that due to lack of social

acceptance, low self-esteem is common for people with intellectual disabilities. To a person with an intellectual disability, social acceptance is area of major concern (Jahoda & Markova, 2004). Failure to feel accepted by their peers, results in lower self-esteem among people with intellectual disabilities. Lack of acceptance leads to an inability to succeed in common social situations such as social relationships, leisure opportunities, employment opportunities, or even getting married (Crawford, Burns, & Fernie, 2015). Jahoda and Markova (2004) performed a study of 10 individuals making the transition from their family home to living more independently and 18 individuals moving from a long-stay hospital to live in community housing. The study focused on awareness of stigma and modes of adaption to stigma. They found participants with intellectual disabilities have a high awareness of stigmas against them. This awareness can lead to anxiety. When experiencing anxiety, people are less likely to pursue integrated social interaction, which could have a positive impact one's self-esteem. Self-esteem can serve as a foundation for building a positive identity. Because lower self-esteem often comes from stigmatization from people without intellectual disabilities, Crawford, Burns, and Fernie (2015) found that involvement in integrated programs like Special Olympics, can increase a sense of identity and self-pride, which then leads to increases in self-esteem.

Just as loss of identity leads to lower self-esteem, lower self-esteem leads to depression for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Depression in people with intellectual disabilities results from low social support (Dagnan & Sandhu, 1999). Depression can cause individuals living with an intellectual disability to further seclude themselves from society. As stated earlier, a loss of identity can cause an individual with

an intellectual disability to start making negative comparisons between themselves and others around them (Crawford, Burns, & Fernie, 2015). By making these comparisons the individual may deem themselves socially unattractive. Among individuals with intellectual disabilities, depression can be negatively associated with comparisons of group belonging and social attractiveness (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006).

The negative outcomes of stigmatization are connected with one another, and together can cause further harm to people with intellectual disability. Due to the harm of stigmatization people with intellectual disabilities are segregated from social situations, and have fewer employment opportunities. As a result, individuals are often less economically well off, less likely to marry, have less satisfying social relationships, and experience fewer community leisure opportunities (Beart, Hardy, & Buchan, 2004). In attempts to avoid these stigmatizations and stereotypes, people with intellectual disabilities exhibited behaviors including avoidance and isolation (Chen & Shu, 2011). Chen and Shu found that stigmatization forced students with intellectual disabilities to retreat from society to avoid and further ridicule.

Stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities can cause loss of identity, low self-esteem, and depression (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006).

Understanding the harms of stigmatization will assist in learning how to combat it.

These outcomes cause people with intellectual disabilities serious harm, and prevent them from having a normal social and personal life. To that end, identifying programs that have the potential to reduce stigmatization against persons with intellectual disabilities would benefit persons with intellectual disabilities and society as a whole.

Reducing Stigmatization through In-Group and Out-Group Exposure

Exposure has been used as a method to reduce stigmatization towards a variety of different groups including those with mental illness, people of different sexual orientations, and persons who have different religious beliefs (Birtel & Crisp, 2012). A variety of forms of exposure techniques have been used including imagined contact (Birtel & Crisp, 2012) and contact exposure (Birtel & Crisp, 2012). Importantly, each technique is associated with reductions in discriminatory beliefs (Griffiths, Arthur, Parsons, & Reid, 2014).

The simulation of a positive intergroup experience can lead to reduced stereotyping and improved out-group attitudes (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Crisp and Turner (2009) found that imagining a positive intergroup experience reduces intergroup anxiety and extends the perception of positive traits to others. Applying imagined contact, Birtel and Crisp (2012) studied stigmas against adults with schizophrenia, gay men, and British Muslims. The study consisted of participants imagining positive and negative interactions with the stigmatized group. Birtel and Crisp (2012) framed their research as exposure therapy and as an attempt to “treat” prejudice against stigmatized groups. Results showed significant reductions in prejudice, while also increasing the intentions to interact with the stigmatized group again in the future (Birtel & Crisp, 2012). Similarly, Miles and Crisp (2014) conducted a meta-analysis that found imagining a positive interaction with an out-group member can reduce stigmatization of the stigmatized group and encourage positive intergroup behavior. Specifically, they documented reductions in biased attitudes, emotions, intentions, and behavior following positive imagined interactions with a stigmatized out-group member. Multiple studies, both

empirical and theoretical support imagined contact as an effective technique for reducing stigmatization and improving intergroup relationships (Crisp & Turner, 2009).

Contact exposure is the most effective form of exposure therapy that can be used to reduce the stigmatization of out-group members (Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Miles & Crisp, 2014). Griffiths, Arthur, Parsons, and Reid (2014) found that exposure to individuals with a mental illness helped to reduce stigmatization. Studying multi-cultural high school students, Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, and Anastasio (1994) found that contact between in- and out-group members influence the perception of the out-group members and eliminated ignorance and prejudice towards the stigmatized group. Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, and Anastasio (1994) state that successful exposure results in the elimination of anxiety, which then leads to a more accurate, less polarized, and more favorable perceptions of the stigmatized group. Consistent with the aforementioned research, Hinck, Hinck, and Withers (2013) found that college students had a more favorable view of prison inmates following exposure to prison inmates (Hinck, Hinck, & Withers, 2013). As a set, these findings reveal the positive impact that exposure has on in-group/out-group relationships.

Imagined contact and contact exposure have been shown to reduce stigmatization and prejudice by in-group members of out-group members (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994; Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Miles & Crisp, 2013). These findings reveal that imagined contact can reduce stigma, but that contact exposure is the most effective way to reduce these stigmatizing beliefs (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994; Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Miles & Crisp, 2013). Building off previous exposure research, this thesis seeks to document that exposing

persons without intellectual disabilities to persons with intellectual disabilities via Unified Sports® will reduce stigmatization toward people with intellectual disabilities.

Bring People Together Through Unified Sports®

Through the years, researchers have looked at many ways to combat stigmatization. One method that has proven to be effective is that of contact exposure. By exposing a non-stigmatized group to a stigmatized group, shared meaning can be created. Empirical research shows that exposure the non-stigmatized group increased thoughts of empathy, use of inclusive communication, and a shift from discriminatory to inclusive perceptions of the stigmatized group (Hinck, Hinck, & Withers, 2013; Special Olympics, 2016). In the paragraphs that following, I outline how Unified Sports® can be used as a vehicle of exposure to combat discriminatory beliefs about persons with intellectual disabilities.

Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics is an organization that creates athletic opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities with the ultimate goal of bettering the lives of all people with intellectual disabilities.

Special Olympics' mission is to:

provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community (Special Olympics, 2016).

Special Olympics uses sports to help people with intellectual disabilities to discover their strengths, skills, and successes, while also helping them to find joy, confidence, and fulfillment (Special Olympics, 2016). Expanding the scope past the athletes, Special

Olympics aims to inspire people, with and without intellectual disabilities, to open their hearts to inclusion, and to the talents and to the potential of all humans (Special Olympics, 2016). Consistent with that mission, during Special Olympic events, athletes work closely with other athletes, coaches, parents, and volunteers. In doing so, Special Olympics creates an environment of inclusion and acceptance where everyone feels welcome (Special Olympics, 2016)

Although limited, the research that does exist documents numerous benefits associated with involvement with Special Olympics. Crawford, Burns, and Fernie (2015) studied the psychosocial impact of involvement in Special Olympics on persons with intellectual disabilities. In their study, they found that people with intellectual disabilities that participated in Special Olympics events had higher self-esteem, better quality of life, and less stress as compared to individuals that did not participate in the program (Crawford, Burns, & Fernie, 2015). Additionally, Crawford, Burns, and Fernie (2015) found a positive association between sports involvement and increased physical well-being. Rosegard, Pegg, and Compton's (2001) study supports these findings. Rosegard, Pegg, and Compton's (2001) study focused on the athletes of Special Olympics. Results of the study showed a reduction in maladaptive behaviors among individuals with intellectual disabilities that participated in a 12-week Unified bowling program (Rosegard, Pegg, & Compton, 2001).

Because Special Olympics aims to create an environment of inclusion and acceptance, in recent years they have sponsored the Project Unify and Unified Sports® initiatives. According to Special Olympics, Project Unify is:

an education and sports based strategy powered by an engaged youth community that increases athletic and leadership opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities, while creating communities of acceptance for all (Special Olympics, 2016).

Unified Sports®, which is a program within Project Unify, uses sports training and competition to bring together people with and without intellectual disabilities to create a shared understanding between the two parties and to combat stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities. Unified Sports® was founded in 2008 by the U.S.

Department of Education as a method to build tolerance and inclusion in schools

(Unified Sports®, 2016) Unified Sports® uses exposure to create an avenue for people with and without intellectual disabilities to come together, and gain a better

understanding of similarities rather than differences. The program promotes social

inclusion through the world of sports by having teams made up of people with and

without intellectual disabilities play competitively against one another in sports like

basketball, flag football, volleyball, and soccer (Unified Sports®, 2016). The idea behind

the program is that through training together and playing together leads to friendship

and understanding between all parties (Unified Sports®, 2016). According to Unified

Sports® (2016) 215 college campuses and universities have Special Olympics clubs on

campus, and 73 of those schools actively participate in Unified Sports®. According to

Dan Ekonen (2016), Director of Unified Sports® Initiative with Special Olympics

Michigan, Unified Sports® on a college campus is promoted through the college or

universities intramural sports program. Students can sign-up to play like any other

intramural sport. Making it easily accessible to students will hopefully create a greater

exposure with members of the community with intellectual disabilities (D. Ekonen, personal communication, December 12, 2016).

Although the goal of Unified Sports® is to create inclusion and shared understandings among persons with and without intellectual disabilities, little research has established attitude change among the individuals without intellectual disabilities before and after they participate in Unified Sports®. The little research that does exist suggests that there should be positive attitudes changes among college students who participate in Unified Sports®. For example, Townsend and Hassall (2006) studied middle and high school students' (without intellectual disabilities) perceptions of inclusion and the development of a Unified Sports® program at four New Zealand schools that did not previously have integrated sports programs (Townsend & Hassall, 2006). The study revealed that students had positive attitudes towards involvement in the Unified Sports® program. In addition, Ozer, Baran, Aktop, Nalbant, Aglamis, and Hutzler (2011) studied the effects that a Unified Sports® soccer program had on 12-15 year olds with and without intellectual disabilities. Results of the study indicated that the youth without intellectual disabilities involved in the program experienced improved attitudes toward the youth with intellectual disabilities. Both of the aforementioned studies, suggest that college students who participate in Unified Sports® should experience similar positive attitude changes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Proposal of Hypotheses

As mentioned previously, Birtel and Crisp (2012) found a significant reduction in stereotypes and prejudice among a group of participants in their study who imagined both positive and negative encounters with adults with schizophrenia, gay men, and British Muslims. In addition, the participants also reported increased intentions to interact with the stigmatized groups in the future. Similarly, Ozer, Baran, Aktop, Nalbant, Aglamis, and Hutzler (2011) found participation in Unified Sports® to improve attitude of youth without disabilities toward participants with disabilities. Thomson and Lillie's (1995) study also found that students without disabilities that attend an integrated school have significantly more positive attitudes to their peers with a disability than those at the non-integrated school. Students with exposure outside of school had an even more positive perception and behaviors of individuals with disabilities (Thomson & Lillie, 1995). Taken as a set, these findings suggest that exposure to with people with intellectual disabilities through Unified Sports® should reduce stigmatizing beliefs about those individuals. Stated formally as a hypothesis:

H1: Participating in Unified Sports® reduces stigmatization about persons with intellectual disabilities.

Hodges and Klien (2001) define empathy as “phenomena ranging from feelings of concern for other people that create a desire to help them, emotions that match another person's emotions, knowing what another person is thinking or feeling, to blurring the line between self and other.” Through empirical research on individuals with schizophrenia, Ikezawa, Corbera, and Wexler (2014) found that many types of exposure and stimulus between members of different groups lead to participants having

empathetic feelings towards individuals with schizophrenia. Brockhouse, Msetfi, Cohen, and Joseph (2011) support this finding with their research of therapist-client relationships. They found exposure was a key variable in developing empathy. Increased exposure between less-empathic therapists and clients has the ability to challenge current schemas and trigger change (Brockhouse, Msetfi, Cohen, & Joseph, 2011). Additionally, Brockhouse, Msetfi, Cohen, and Joseph (2011) found through their study of therapist-patient relationships, that when therapists put themselves in the place of the client that there is a decrease in distance between therapist and client, thus directly challenging personal schemas. Consistent with these findings, I predict college students who participate in Unified Sports® will develop more empathy for people with intellectual disabilities. Formally stated:

H2. Participating in Unified Sports® increases empathy for people with intellectual disabilities.

Birtel and Crisp (2012) found that different methods of exposure, both face-to-face and imagined, can create a more positive perception and shared understanding between in-group and out-group members. The positive perception leads in-group members to be more socially inclusive of out-group members. The more exposure the two groups have with one another, the more likely that inclusive perceptions would be the dominant perception over discriminatory (Birtel & Crisp, 2012). Unified Sports® provides an exposure experience that should facilitate the growth of inclusive perceptions. Stated formally as a hypothesis:

H3: Participating in Unified Sports® increases inclusive perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities.

Much like inclusive perceptions, inclusive communication is an expected outcome of exposure to persons with intellectual disabilities through the Unified Sports® program. In the past 25 years there has been a push for the use of people first language (i.e., person with an intellectual disability) as compared to the use of pros modified nouns (disabled person) with the intent of being more sensitive to all peoples (Sytnik, 2014). Inclusive language, such as person first language, improves community relations among in- and out-group members, and by using inclusive language one creates a feeling of acceptance for all members (Harwood, Joyce, Chen, Paolini, Xiang, & Rubin, 2015). Mitchell, Eheart, and Hopping (2011) studied the power of inclusive language and found that the use of inclusive, non-stigmatizing language resulted in the reduction of hurtful labels, and lead to a shared understanding affirming the normality of all community members. Harwood, Joyce, Chen, Paolini, Xiang, and Rubin (2015) found that as groups are exposed to one another, communication and relations between both groups greatly improves. By creating a community of people with and without intellectual disabilities, Unified Sports® provides an opportunity to learn to use more inclusive language increases. More formally stated:

H4: Participating in Unified Sports® decreases discriminatory language usage.

I predict that through exposure college students who participate in a Unified Sports® program are less likely to stigmatize people with intellectual disabilities. As students get increased exposure with individuals with intellectual disabilities the students will have increased thoughts of empathy, use of inclusive communication, and a shift from discriminatory to inclusive perceptions of the stigmatized group. In the Chapter that follows, I outline a method to test these hypotheses.

H5: Participating in Unified Sports® increases feelings of similarity towards persons with intellectual disabilities.

Harwood, Joyce, Chen, Paolini, Xiang, and Rubin's (2015) found that meaningful exposure between groups leads to individuals seeking future communication opportunities as uncertainty is eliminated, this can be associated with increased feelings of similarity. It can be expected that as Unified Sports® participate in the program, and gain an understanding of the individuals with intellectual disabilities they are playing with, that those interactions will lead to feelings of similarity. This potential finding would align with the goal of Unified Sports® to break down boundaries and create more inclusive communities (Special Olympics, 2016).

H6: Participating in Unified Sports® increases levels of altruism among participating college students

Unified Sports® is a service-learning program by nature that operates as a sporting program. It is an expectation that as individuals get involved with this service experience that they seek out further service learning experiences. It can be expected that participants will get more involved with Special Olympics, as well as other volunteer based programs because of what they experienced with Unified Sports®.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

A pretest-posttest survey design was used to document changes in perceptions before and after participation in Unified Sports®. In using a pretest-posttest design, I was able to compare changes in stigmatization before and after exposure to persons with intellectual disabilities during participation in Unified Sports®. Prior research assessing attitude change has used similar pretest-posttest designs (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). Further details about my chosen method are discussed in the sections that follow.

Sample

The sample for this study was college students (without intellectual disabilities) that attended universities offering Unified Sports® programs in Michigan, Florida, and New Jersey. These states were chosen because of contacts I have with those states' Unified Sports® programs. The different states widen the scope of the study and allow for greater generalizability due to a larger sample size across a more diverse pool of participants. To be eligible to complete the study students must have attended at least one Unified Sports® event, and have an academic standing of freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, or graduate student.

The demographics varied by state; however, consistent with most college populations I found most participants were between 18-24. Also, the make-up of Unified Sports® teams were primarily female with 64% of participants selecting female, and 35% of participants selecting male.

Recruitment

All students recruited that took the survey did so voluntarily as part of their participation at a participating Michigan, Florida, or New Jersey university.

Recruitment for participants in Michigan were invited through two methods. The first method is face-to-face. At the beginning of Unified Sports® basketball in the spring I attended the training sessions before competition began to inform students of the survey and invite them to participate in my study. Once the season concluded, I emailed participants inviting them to participate in the posttest survey. For universities, I was unable to visit I utilized a second recruitment technique, I sent the survey link to students participating in Unified Sports®. This email list was obtained during the registration period for each Unified Sports® season.

Recruitment for participants at Florida universities mirrored my first Michigan method. At the beginning of Unified Sports® basketball season I spoke with students before competition began to inform students of the survey and invite them to participate in my study. Once the season concluded, I emailed participants inviting them to participate in the posttest survey.

Recruitment for participants at New Jersey universities was done strictly through email. I sent the survey link to students participating in Unified Sports® before the season started, and I sent a follow-up email after the season concluded. This email list was obtained during the registration period for each Unified Sports® season, and provided by the Unified Sports® representative of that university.

Participants were given a gift card for \$10 for each wave of the study they complete.

Procedures

For both the pretest and the posttest, upon entering the survey participants were prompted to complete an informed consent form. Following, participants completed demographic questions. Then participants stated what kinds of Unified Sports® experience they may have had. Once the previous sections were completed and IRD approval was received, participants began to complete a series of surveys that measure key variables, including: empathy, level of stigmatization, inclusivity, person first language, feelings of similarity, and altruism (Table 1).

Measures

To measure the six hypotheses, I included several multi-item scales that were completed by participants. All multi-item scales will be assessed for parallelism and internal consistency.

Stigmatizing Beliefs

Two scales were used to assess stigmatization. First, to measure negative or non-accepting attitudes towards people with disability, Yuker, Block, and Youngg's (1970) Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale was used. ATDP includes 20 items, measured on a six-point likert scale (1 Strongly Disagree, 6 Strongly Agree). The scale measured an individual's attitudes and level of stigmatization towards persons with intellectual disabilities. Pretest means produced results of ($M=4.28$, $SD=0.41$) compared to scores post participation of ($M=4.41$, $SD=0.43$), $t(36) = 2.25$, $p = 0.03$.

Additionally, The Community Living Attitudes Scale (CLAS) – Empowerment subscale (Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Henry, Bradley, & Leichner, 2003) was also used to

assess stigmatizing beliefs. The scale measures attitudes of empowerment towards people with intellectual disabilities. CLAS utilizes a six-point likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree). The statistics of the scale were ($M=4.61$, $SD=0.68$) for the pretest and ($M=4.70$, $SD=0.62$, $t(36) = 0.73$, $p= 0.47$) for the posttest.

Inclusivity of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Findler, Vilchinsky, and Werner's (2007) Multidimensional Attitudes Scale (MAS) was used to measure attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities by using two subscales: cognition and behavior. The MAS uses a five-point likert scale (1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much) to assess attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities. Values for the cognitive subscale were ($M= 2.23$, $SD=0.52$) for the pretest, and ($M= 2.23$, $SD=0.64$), $t(35) = 0.02$, $p= 0.98$) for the posttest. Values for the behavior subscale were pretest ($M=3.86$, $SD=0.54$) and posttest ($M=3.90$, $SD=0.54$), $t(9) = 0.21$ $p=0.84$.

Empathy

The Empathetic Concern Subscale (ECS) (Davis, 1980) was used to measure empathy of college participants of Unified Sports®. The ECS uses a four-point likert scale (1 = Does not describe me well, 4 = Describes me well) that is a subset of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). ECS focuses the thoughts and feelings of empathy participants have about people with intellectual disabilities. Scale values were ($M=3.44$, $SD=0.44$) for the pretest ($M=3.59$, $SD=0.34$), $t(35) = 2.63$, $p=0.01$ for the posttest.

Inclusive Language

To assess discriminatory language usage, I used a single item question (How would you describe the persons with whom you will be on a team with? Select all that apply.) Options include a person with an intellectual disability, a mentally retarded person, a disabled person, a special needs person, a learning-disabled person, a special education person, and another option. Selecting “a person with an intellectual disability” is the only person-first language option, the other options are considered discriminatory language. Values for the scale were pretest ($M=1.58$, $SD=0.89$) and posttest ($M=0.65$, $SD= 1.12$), $t(59) = 7.44$, $p= 0.00$).

Feelings of Similarity

Feelings of similarity between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities were measured by the similarity subscale of Yuker, Block, and Youngg’s (1970) Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP). ATDP is measured on a six-point likert scale (1 Strongly Disagree, 6 Strongly Agree). The scale measured an individual’s attitudes and level of stigmatization towards persons with intellectual disabilities, and how similar they would consider themselves. Scale values were ($M=4.6$, $SD=0.60$) for the pretest and ($M=4.45$, $SD=0.73$), $t(36) = 1.90$, $p= 0.07$ for the posttest.

Altruism

Levels of altruism were measured using Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken’s (1981) *Self Report Altruism Scale* (SRAS). The SRAS contains six questions and measures altruistic tendencies with a five-point likert scale (1 Never, 5 Very Often). The

SRAS scale values were ($M=3.70$, $SD=0.62$) for the pretest and ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.72$), $t(9) = 2.24$, $p= 0.01$) for the posttest.

Table 1. Variables and Corresponding Scales

Variable	Scales
Stigmatizing beliefs	Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale The Community Living Attitudes Scale (CLAS) – Empowerment Subscale
Empathy	The Empathetic Concern Subscale (ECA)
Inclusivity of persons with intellectual disabilities	MAS – Behavior Subscale MAS - Cognitive Subscale
Inclusive language	To assess discriminatory language use, a paired samples t-test was run on use of discriminatory language towards persons with intellectual disabilities by comparing pretest scores to posttest scores
Feelings of similarity	ATDP-Similarity subscale
Altruism	Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRAS)

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

To assess the effect Unified Sports® has on participating college students' perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities, paired samples t-tests were run to measure significant changes among participants from prior to participating in Unified Sports to after completing their Unified Sports season. Two sets of paired samples t-tests were run. First, the tests were run on all participants. Then, a second set of analyses were run on participants involved with Special Olympics for the first time. The results are organized by hypothesis, and are discussed in terms of sample (i.e., full or new to Special Olympics).

H1: Participating in Unified Sports® reduces stigmatization about persons with intellectual disabilities

The two scales utilized to measure the reduction of stigmatization of persons with intellectual disabilities were Yuker, Block, and Youngg's (1970) Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) beliefs subscale and Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Henry, Bradley, and Leichner's (2003) empowerment subscale of the Community Living Attitudes Scale (CLAS).

The analysis assessing all participants on the Yuker, Block, and Youngg's (1970) ATDP Belief scale showed statistically significant changes reflecting that participation in Unified Sports® reduces stigmatization about persons with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, a paired t-test showed there was a significant difference in stigmatization

levels prior to participating in Unified Sports® ($M=4.28$, $SD=0.41$) compared to scores post participation ($M=4.41$, $SD=0.43$), $t(36) = 2.25$, $p= 0.03$. The lower the mean equates to higher levels of stigma. The higher mean of posttest suggests less stigmatization towards persons with intellectual disabilities following Unified Sports®. Results of a paired samples t-test on the subgroup with no prior experience, showed that participation in Unified Sports® reduces stigmatization about persons with intellectual disabilities from pre ($M=4.318$, $SD=0.27$) to post-test scores ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.32$), $t(9) = 1.75$, $p= 0.12$; however, this was not significant.

When analyzing all participants, the CLAS-Empowerment (Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Henry, Bradley, & Leichner, 2003) revealed no significant statistical changes were produced by participating in Unified Sports®. A paired t-test showed stigmatization levels stayed consistent during the posttest ($M=4.70$, $SD=0.62$) and pretest ($M=4.61$, $SD=0.68$), $t(36) = .73$, $p= 0.47$. Looking specifically at participants with no previous experience with Special Olympics, analyses of the CLAS-Empowerment scale revealed a statistically significant reduction in stigmatization towards persons with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, the paired samples t-test showed a reduced level of stigma after participating in Unified Sports® ($M= 4.53$, $SD=0.40$) compared to scores prior to participating ($M=4.65$, $SD=0.63$), $t(9) = 0.83$, $p= 0.05$.

As a set, these findings offer partial support for H1.

H2. Participating in Unified Sports® increases empathy for people with intellectual disabilities.

The Empathetic Concern Scale (ECS) (Davis, 1980) was used to analyze empathy levels for individuals with no prior experience with Special Olympics. The ECS showed statistically significant results in the general population of participants with ($M=3.44$, $SD=0.44$) for the pretest ($M=3.59$, $SD=0.34$), $t(35) = 2.63$, $p=0.01$ for the posttest. Additionally, the study found marginally significant increase in empathy towards persons with intellectual disabilities. A paired t-test showed participants felt more empathetic towards persons with intellectual disabilities after participating in Unified Sports® ($M= 3.62$, $SD=0.26$) compared to scores prior to participating), ($M= 3.40$, $SD=0.34$), $t(9) = 1.94$, $p=0.08$.

This result provides support was found for H2.

H3: Participating in Unified Sports® increases inclusivity of people with intellectual disabilities

Two subscales of the MAS scale, which measure cognitive and behavioral exclusion, were utilized to assess desires for the inclusivity of people with intellectual disabilities. The MAS-Cognitive subscale found no significant statistical changes in the inclusivity of persons with intellectual disabilities after participating in Unified Sports®. Specifically, a paired samples t-test showed Scores taken prior to participating ($M= 2.23$, $SD=0.52$) were similar to posttest scores ($M= 2.23$, $SD=0.64$), $t(35) = 0.02$, $p= 0.98$). Alternatively, the MAS-Cognitive subscale of participants new to Special Olympics did produce results that are trending towards being statistically significance. Comparing pretest data ($M=2.49$, $SD=0.50$) to posttest data ($M=2.2$, $SD=0.48$), $t(9) = 1.60$, $p=0.15$ did reveal a change in inclusive perceptions not previously seen when reviewing the full pool of participants.

The analysis of MAS-Behavior subgroup also failed to show statistically significant evidence comparing pretest results ($M= 3.67$, $SD=0.60$) to the posttest data scores ($M= 3.66$, $SD=0.69$), $t(35) = 0.12$, $p= 0.91$. Consistent with the full grouping, a paired samples t-test run on the MAS – Behavior scale produced no significant statistical evidence that participation in Unified Sports® increases the desire for the inclusivity of persons with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, the t-test revealed pre scores ($M=3.86$, $SD=0.54$) were similar to post ($M=3.90$, $SD=0.54$), $t(9) = 0.21$ $p=0.84$).

Given these results, I failed to find support for H3.

H4: Participating in Unified Sports® decreases the use of discriminatory language.

To assess discriminatory language use, a paired samples t-test revealed use of discriminatory language towards persons with intellectual disabilities went down when comparing pretest scores ($M=1.58$, $SD=0.89$) to scores from the posttest. ($M=0.65$, $SD= 1.12$), $t(59) = 7.44$, $p= 0.00$). The same paired samples t-test was run on the no previous Special Olympics experience subgroup and yielded similar results; specifically, the t-test revealed there was a statistically significant change from pretest scores ($M=1.39$, $SD=0.70$) compared to posttest scores ($M=0.50$, $SD= 0.71$), $t(17) = 4.19$, $p=0.01$.

These findings offer support for H4.

H5: Participating in Unified Sports® increases feelings of similarity towards persons with intellectual disabilities.

To measure similarity the ATDP-Similarity subscale was used. A paired samples t-test showed marginally significant changes reflecting that participants felt more similar

to persons with intellectual disabilities after participating in the program ($M=4.6$, $SD=0.60$) than prior to participating in Unified Sports® ($M=4.45$, $SD=0.73$), $t(36) = 1.90$, $p= 0.07$. Furthermore, participants with no previous experience with Special Olympics showed a statistically significant increase in feelings of similarity towards persons with intellectual disabilities from the pretest ($M=4.39$, $SD=0.50$) to the posttest ($M=4.82$, $SD=0.32$), $t(9) = 3.04$, $p= 0.01$.

Thus, support was found for H5 with results showing significant increases from both the full group and subgroup of participants.

H6: Participating in Unified Sports® increases levels of altruism among participating college students

To measure altruism, Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken's (1981) *Self Report Altruism Scale* (SRAS) was used. The SRAS found a significant change among participating college students when comparing pretest scores ($M=3.88$, $SD=0.64$) with posttest scores ($M=4.02$, $SD= 0.62$) $t(35) = 2.25$ $p= 0.03$) in the full participant group. Similarly, altruism scores show a significant increase from the pretest scores ($M=3.70$, $SD=0.62$) compared to the posttest scores ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.72$), $t(9) = 2.24$, $p= 0.01$) for individuals new to Special Olympics.

Thus, full support for H6 was found.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of participating in Unified Sports provided some very important findings that deserve further discussion. Five out of six of the hypotheses showed a positive impact for individuals participating in a Special Olympics program for the first time through Unified Sports®. To unpack these findings, I offer a discussion that includes the implications for stigmatization, implications for Special Olympics, limitations of the study, and future directions of research. Each is discussed in turn.

Implications for Theory and Research on Stigmatization

The results from the present Unified Sports® study has implications for the field of stigmatization theory and research. In particular, some of the findings from my thesis offer support for research regarding exposure to and contact with outgroups. My thesis also extends research on the circumstances in which the high reductions to stigmatization would be seen. Findings from my thesis also provide insight into how exposure through service learning, in particular, can combat stigmatization.

Reductions to Discrimination following Exposure

My Unified Sports® study looks to understand the effect exposure has on stigmatization of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The impact of exposure has been highlighted in multiple studies (Hinck, Hinck, & Withers, 2013; Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994; Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Miles & Crisp, 2013). The results from the Unified Sports® study produced results that support the idea of exposure being an effective tool to combat stigmatization.

Of the six hypotheses looked at for this study, four provided full support of exposure being an effective resource to combat stigmatization, one provided partial support of exposure, and one hypothesis failed to produce findings that support the effects exposure has on stigma. The Unified Sports® showed significant changes in levels of stigmatization, levels of empathy, use of discriminatory language, feelings of similarity, and altruistic tendencies on participants either in the full group or subgroup of individuals new to Special Olympics. The only area that exposure did not have a significant impact on was inclusive perceptions, but it was found that individuals were already entering Unified Sports® with high levels of inclusive behaviors ($M= 3.66$), which is likely why they sought out the program. The results of the study provide evidence that being exposed to a program like Unified Sports® over an extended period of time gives participants the opportunity to gain an understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities and learn acceptable language for individuals with different experiences than themselves.

Meaningful Exposure Between In-and Outgroups

My thesis also offered support for other studies researching the impact of exposure between in-groups and out-groups. These consistencies provide further support that exposure is an effective tool to counter the stigmatization in relation to persons with intellectual disabilities. It also has the ability to highlight areas that could benefit from further research.

Results from my thesis on participating in Unified Sports® were consistent with results from Harwood, Joyce, Chen, Paolini, Xiang, and Rubin (2015) that found

sustained exposure between in- and out-group members positively impacts attitude change and increases the desire to seek future communication opportunities with the out-group. For example, every individual that participated in the survey stated that would continue their involvement with Special Olympics after their Unified Sports® experience. This commitment implicitly suggests that students are seeking additional communication experiences with persons with intellectual disabilities, which aligns with Harwood, Joyce, Chen, Paolini, Xiang, and Rubin's (2015) findings that individuals will seek future communication opportunities. Furthermore, test of H5, which asked about increases to feelings of similarity towards persons with intellectual disabilities, supported Harwood et al.'s research. In particular, participants reported marginally significant increases in similarity, whereas the subgroup of participants who had no prior experience with Special Olympics experienced statistically significant increases in perceptions of similarity. These findings support the ultimate goal of Unified Sports® to break down boundaries and create more inclusive communities (Special Olympics, 2016).

The type of exposure Unified Sports® provides plays a pivotal role in the impact the program has on participants. Unified Sports® do more than just interact with someone with an intellectual disability. Partners meet with their team on a regular basis of the course of an 8-week season (Special Olympics, 2016). Participants practice together, play together, and interact between games. This meaningful, sustained exposure over the course of multiple weeks allows for understanding and relationships to build. If Unified Sports® was just interacting with an individual with an intellectual

disability one time, it is unlikely it would be such a meaningful and transformative experience.

Additionally, Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, and Anastasio (1994) found that contact between in- and out-group members influence the perception of the out-group members and eliminated ignorance and prejudice towards the stigmatized group. This result is consistent with the results measured in H4 of the Unified Sports® study. The results provided evidence that being exposed to a program like Unified Sports® over an extended period of time results in the reduction of discriminatory language towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. Prior to participating in Unified Sports® non-person first language was used such as special needs, mentally challenged, mentally disabled, and retarded. These terms ignore the identity of the person, and instead focus on the disability. As levels of meaningful exposure increase, it can be expected that participants begin to build relationships and gain an understanding of acceptable language for individuals with different experiences than themselves. Without those meaningful and sustained interactions, individuals using the derogatory language may never learn why the language they are using is wrong.

Lack of Prior Contact with Outgroup Members and Reductions in Stigmatization

The Unified Sports® study found conflicting results with previous research that found imagined contact and contact exposure result in reduction of stigmatization and prejudice by in-group members of out-group members (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994; Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Miles & Crisp, 2013). H1 measured levels of stigmatization about persons with intellectual disabilities. Utilizing the ATDP

and CLAS-Empowerment scales, the study was unable to provide evidence that participating in Unified Sports® will always lead to reduced stigmatization towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. What H1 did prove is that individuals participating on average enter the program with reduced levels of stigmatization, but the greatest reduction is seen with individuals with no prior experience with Special Olympics. The findings suggest individuals seeking out Unified Sports® are already entering with low levels of stigmatization against individuals with intellectual disabilities, and more work should be done educating the general public about what connects us as humans, instead of what differentiates us. With Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, and Anastasio (1994; Birtel and Crisp (2012); and Miles and Crisp (2013) all finding a conflicting result it can be determined more data is needed to know if contact exposure truly does reduce levels of stigmatization of persons with intellectual disabilities. The conflicting findings of the Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, and Anastasio (1994; Birtel and Crisp (2012); and Miles and Crisp (2013) studies and this Unified Sports® can most likely be explained by how participants of the study were selected. The others studies brought in members of the general public as opposed to focusing on a specific group of people like the Unified Sports® study.

Implications for Special Olympics

The implications can provide critical insight to Special Olympics, and the findings align with Special Olympics (2016) efforts to promote inclusion, and combat stigmatization. The analysis of participating in Unified Sports® provided results with important implications for Special Olympics. Key implications include: individuals most

likely to participate in Unified Sports®, impact on individuals after participating, and suggestions for the future of the program to increase its benefits. The first key finding with important implications for Special Olympics includes individuals that are attracted to participating in the program.

H2 of the Unified Sports® study predicted that “participating in Unified Sports® increases empathy for people with intellectual disabilities.” Analysis of the Unified Sports® data found students had increased levels of empathy towards individuals with intellectual disabilities after participating in the program. Additionally, the hypothesis revealed that participants were also entering Unified Sports® already possessing high levels of empathy towards persons with intellectual disabilities. Individuals scored themselves on a scale of 1-4, with four scoring the highest level of empathy. Participants scored ($m=3.36$) prior to Unified Sports®, and ($m=3.41$) after participating. This finding shows people that are involved with Unified Sports® already have high levels of empathy to individuals with intellectual disabilities, most likely attracting them to the program. The next key implication for Special Olympics is the overall impact of participating in the program.

College students participating in Unified Sports® experience a number of changes from extended exposure to the program and persons with intellectual disabilities. Two areas showed significant changes in individuals participating in Unified Sports®, including a reduction of discriminatory language and an increased feeling of similarity towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. Hypothesis 4 predicted participation in Unified Sports® would “increase person first language usage.” The study found that there was a significant reduction in the use of discriminatory language after

participating in Unified Sports® ($M=.65$, $SD=.1.12$), $t(59) = 7.438$, $p= 0.00$) compared to prior ($M=1.58$, $SD=0.89$). The proper use of person first language is not a discussion point of Unified Sports®, so the change is strictly from extended exposure between persons with and with intellectual disabilities. Another significant change for participants were increased feelings of similarity.

Hypothesis 5 predicted “participating in Unified Sports® increases feelings of similarity towards persons with intellectual disabilities.” Unified Sports® consists of six-week seasons, and provides an experience of extended exposure as individuals participate with persons with intellectual disabilities. Due to the extended exposure, it is proven that it fosters growth of feelings of similarity. Feelings of similarity increased from ($M= 4.45$, $SD=0.73$) the pretest to ($M=4.6$, $SD=.60$), $t(36) = -1.903$, $p= 0.07$ the posttest. While these results are consistent for all participants of the study, the effect is even greater when focused on individuals participating in a Special Olympics program for the first time.

When participating in a Special Olympics program for the first time, individuals saw significant changes in levels of stigmatization, levels of empathy, use of person first language, feelings of similarity, and altruistic tendencies towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. These findings show that the impact of participating in Unified Sports® is amplified when it is the individual’s first interaction with a Special Olympics program. Results from the previous sections show the scores of the general population come into participating in Unified Sports® already at high levels, most likely acquired from previous experiences with the program. When a student doesn’t have that prior

experience, it allows for them to gain a new understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities by having dialogue and sharing experiences together.

As stated earlier, five out of six of the hypotheses showed a positive impact for individuals participating in a Special Olympics program for the first time through Unified Sports®. Hypothesis 1 “Participating in Unified Sports® reduces stigmatization about persons with intellectual disabilities” was proven to produce change among participants by measuring levels of stigmatization with ATDP and CLAS-Empowerment scales. The ATDP had a marginally significant increase from ($M=4.318$, $SD=0.27$) to ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.32$), $t(9) = -1.75$, $p= 0.12$ after participating. CLAS-Empowerment scale shows a statistically significant increase from ($M= 4.53$, $SD=.40$) to ($M=4.65$, $SD=.63$), $t(9) = -.832$, $p= .05$ after participating in the program. These results show individuals participating in Unified Sports® as their first Special Olympics experience carry less stigmatization towards individuals with intellectual disabilities after participating in the program.

Using the Empathetic Concern Scale to measure Hypothesis 2 “Participating in Unified Sports® increases empathy for people with intellectual disabilities,” the results were able to prove a marginally significant increase in empathy towards persons with intellectual disabilities after participating in Unified Sports®. Empathetic levels changed from ($M=3.62$, $SD= 0.26$) compared to scores prior to participating, ($M=3.40$, $SD=0.34$), $t(9) = -1.941$, $p=0.08$) showing more positive empathetic feelings. It proves what was expected, that after spending time with individuals with different experiences, a person will begin to feel more empathic to their situation. Unified Sports® provides individuals a space for this interaction to take place over the course of the program’s season.

Another area of significant change was the use of discriminatory language. Using a scale that was developed to find how a person would describe an individual with an intellectual disability, the study found a significant decline in use of discriminatory language from the pretest ($M=1.39$, $SD=0.70$) to the posttest ($M=.50$, $SD= 0.71$), $t(17) = 4.19$, $p=0.01$. This proves Hypothesis 4 “Participating in Unified Sports® increases person first language usage” among individuals involved with a Special Olympics program for the first time. The proper use of first person language is not discussed during the Unified Sports® season, and it can be suggested that the change in use of discriminatory language comes from shared extended experiences over the course of the sports season.

The next hypothesis to show significant change among individuals involved with a Special Olympics program for the first time was Hypothesis 5 “Participating in Unified Sports® increases feelings of similarity towards persons with intellectual disabilities.” Using the ATDP-Similarity subscale, the results showed a statistically significant increase from pretest ($M= 4.39$, $SD=.50$) to posttest ($M=4.82$, $SD=.32$), $t(9) = -3.040$, $p= 0.01$. The goal of Unified Sports® is to promote inclusion, friendship, and understanding while breaking down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities (Special Olympics, 2016). This result shows that the program also creates a feeling of similarity between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities.

Lastly, H6 also showed individuals involved with a Special Olympics program for the first time, and for participants with prior Special Olympics experience became more altruistic upon completion of the Unified Sports® program. Both results were significant, but the increase was larger among individuals with no prior Special Olympics

experience. This may be due to lack of service-learning experience among new participants, but also shows how great of an impact being involved with Special Olympics has on an individual. This raises a few key questions. How should Special Olympics market Unified Sports®? Why are new individuals volunteering with Special Olympics in the first place? Do individuals participating in Unified Sports® for the first time have lower stigma levels than the average person causing them to participate?

For marketing purposes, Special Olympics should focus more on getting new individuals involved with Unified Sports®, as opposed to retention. This study showed the greatest impact happened to individuals with no prior experience with Special Olympics. By recruiting new individuals each season, Special Olympics would be maximizing the impact of the program. This leads into the next question, why are individuals getting involved in the first place?

Knowing why individuals are getting involved with Special Olympics and Unified Sports® will provide a better understanding of what individuals find appealing about the organization and program, and help with marketing efforts. This study showed individuals are already coming into the program with lower levels of stigmatization towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. This could mean that stigmatization is keeping people from participating in the program, and that more work should be done to educate the public in order to reduce that stigma. Once the stigma is reduced it could be predicted that more people would seek out Unified Sports®. With the implications for the study on Special Olympics detailed, it's important to look at suggestions for the future of the program to increase its benefits.

The Need for Debriefing

Following the completion of this study, there are suggestions for Special Olympics to implement in order to further enhance the Unified Sports experience, and provide lasting, positive impact for participating students. The key suggestion for Special Olympics is to implement a debriefing piece at the end of each Unified Sports® season. Previous service-learning research has shown debriefing on an experience can magnify the learning from the experience. Special Olympics has stated the purpose of Unified Sports® is to promote inclusion, friendship, and understanding while breaking down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities by bringing people with and without intellectual disabilities together on the same teams to play sports like basketball, softball, volleyball, soccer, and flag football. (Special Olympics, 2016). The program does an effective job using sports to facilitate learning of inclusion, friendship, and understanding while breaking down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities, but an additional step of debriefing with participating college students would allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of Unified Sports®, and allow participants to articulate their experiences. Debriefing following the participation in a service-learning project facilitates changing in beliefs, and the ability to properly articulate what they experienced (Maher, 2003). Now that the implications of the study on stigmatization, implications on Special Olympics, and suggestions to Special Olympics have been detailed the focus can now look at limitations of the study.

Limitations

There are some key limitations to this study including the attrition of participants from pretest to posttest, to the amount of people participating in the study. Correcting these limitations would help answer some of the research questions that stem from this study. The main limitation for this study was attrition.

The (*n*) for the Unified Sports® study had 140 participate in the study. Of those 140 only 37 completed both the pretest and the posttest. There are a few variables that are believed to have played a role in students not following through with both parts of the survey. One variable being timing, the end of a Unified Sports season generally falls during the final week of classes for students at their respective universities. The other factor could be the length of the survey itself. Multiple scales were used to measure each variable in order to obtain as much data as possible. To correct this going forward, items will be dropped to shorten survey length, and provide a more well-rounded survey that correlates to less attrition. An additional solution could be to increase the value of the gift card awarded for completing the survey. The other key limitation is the number of people participating in the study.

To combat attrition, it would be helpful to expand this study to more universities across the country to increase the number of participants. While helping with attrition rates, it would also help with the generalizability of the data. Unified Sports® is still a relatively young program growing by the year (Ekonen, 2016). As the number of participants continues to increase it will be important to continue running the study to track changes in perceptions over time.

Future Direction

The results of this study have implications that will guide future research on this topic. The quantitative data has provided a foundation of research showing the impact of extended exposure between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities through organized activities. With the foundation set, there are a few directions future research can take the study. Future research should focus on qualitative data of participants' perceptions while going through the program, study why individuals choose Unified Sports® over the other intramural sports options, a comparative study of people's perceptions of individuals that participate in Unified Sports® versus individuals who do not, and the introduction of a weekly reflection journal to track participants' experiences throughout the course of a Unified Sports® season.

The primary focus of the current study was to gather quantitative data measuring the impact of Unified Sports® on participating individuals as they are exposed to persons with intellectual disabilities. The study could benefit greatly from opening up to qualitative responses. Quantitative data was able to show trends for individuals participating in Unified Sports®, and by adding the qualitative aspect for the study researchers could further explore those trends and gain an understanding of why significant results of reduced discriminatory language, an increase in feelings of similarity, and an increase in altruistic feelings occurred among participating individuals. By pairing both quantitative and qualitative, the full picture of the Unified Sports® experience can be brought together, and researchers can begin to fully understand the impact of the program.

The Unified Sports® study was able to show the impact of the program on participating college students. A research question that came up from the results of the study is, why do individuals choose to participate in Unified Sports® over other intramural sports options offered by their universities? The Unified Sports® study found that individuals enter the program with high levels of empathy and perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Individuals with no prior experience with a Special Olympics program showed significant increases in those areas, but why did these individuals choose to seek out this intramural option? Finding out why individuals pick this program can reveal why college students seek out the Unified Sports® experience, and help Special Olympics with its recruitment effort for its programs. In relation to understanding why people choose Unified Sports® over other intramural sports options, another future direction for the topic is to compare individuals participating in Unified Sports® versus those who don't.

With a data foundation of the impact of Unified Sports® on participating college students, a comparative study collecting data on individuals who participate in other intramural programs would be able to show the benefits of participating in the Unified Sports® intramural offerings over a non- Unified Sports® intramural experience. Reasons for selecting intramural experiences can vary, but a predictable reason could be expected level of competition. Results from the study showed individuals participating in Unified Sports® found the experience to both be transformative, and maintain the sports competitive nature. Looking at data from people that do and don't participate in Unified Sports® can solidify the impact that the program has on individuals that participate.

The final suggestion for future direction is the introduction of a weekly reflection journal to track participants' experiences throughout the course of a Unified Sports® season. By implementing the journal, researchers can look at how perceptions change week to week with the participants' own words, as opposed to just seeing a scaled number prior to and after the season. By combining the pretest-posttest, and the weekly journal, researchers can encapsulate the full experience of participants, and have a better view of changing perceptions, and learn what aspects of Unified Sports® are causing the most change.

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