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The Perfect Game: An Ecological Systems Approach to the Influences of Elite Youth and High School Baseball Socialization

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process as a whole and the role of professionalization and corporatization in this process. The unique nature of baseball's development model in the United States (U.S.) through a dual-track feeder system (college or minor leagues) allows for a wide range of challenges and sociological factors to influence elite youth and high school prospects. Understanding players' experiences exposes these challenges and sociological factors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four former elite youth and high school baseball players, one parent of a player, two coaches, and two media members. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, the authors examined multi-level sociological factors contributing to participants' socialization experiences. Key findings revealed corporate-level factors including National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) bylaws, Major League Baseball's (MLB) collective bargaining agreement (CBA), and related commercialized changes in elite youth and high school baseball all had a pronounced influence on baseball players' socialization processes. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: *baseball, ecological systems theory, professionalization, youth sport socialization*

The increased professionalization of youth and high school sport in the United States has significant negative impacts on athlete experience, including "adversely affecting the motivation of young people, exposing them to risks of injury, destroying an appreciation of sport, and often turning them away from sport and a recognition of the benefits of life-long physically [sic] activity" (Gould, 2009, p. 82). In other words, the overemphasis on sports for youth can result in burnout, extensive post-athletic career trauma, and negative socialization (also referred to as identity foreclosure) (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Coakley, 2012). These negative trends, as driven by private and corporate interest (Coakley, 2011), are heightened for elite athletes whose socialization experiences in sport last beyond high school and into the collegiate and professional ranks (Farrey, 2008). The option for graduating high school baseball players to be drafted by a Major League Baseball (MLB) team allows for a unique impact of professionalization on baseball players' socialization experiences. The increased professionalization of youth and high school baseball

highlights the multi-level influences that impact elite players through their collegiate and professional baseball socialization experience. This is referred to as the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process.

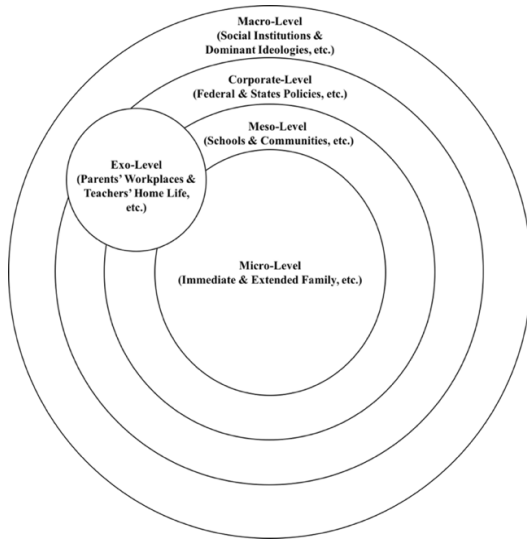
The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process in the United States (U.S.) as a whole and the role of professionalization and corporatization in that process. This study was guided by three research questions: 1) How is an elite youth or high school baseball player's experience influenced by macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-entities?, 2) Is there professionalization within elite youth and high school baseball?, and 3) If yes, which entities are fostering the professionalization of elite youth and high school baseball? If no, why was this not present? Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) was chosen as a framework for the data analysis because it allowed for the multi-level approach required in this exploratory study. While analyzing the data

using ecological systems theory, we found considerable corporate influence on the elite youth baseball socialization processes, beginning with the professionalization of youth and high school baseball and continuing through the experiences at the collegiate and professional levels. Thus, we argue the necessity to establish a separate “corporate-level” within the multi-level systems model (see Figure 1).

This study is important because it examines the professionalization phenomenon in youth sport with an Ecological Systems Theory approach that explains the corporate-level influence on this professionalization. Professionalization of youth sport not only negatively impacts athlete experience in the ways explained above by Gould (2009), but also can be a site for children to be exploited by adults (Gould, 2009; Lang, 2010; Burke 2001; Wiersma, 2000). Readership should hope to gain an understanding of the corporate-level influence on youth and high school baseball and how this connects to larger trends impacting professionalization and specialization in youth and interscholastic sport. The ultimate purpose of this type of research is to safeguard against these negative effects and push for positive policy changes.

Figure 1

Adapted Ecological Systems Theory



Literature Review

Youth and High School Baseball

Socialization is defined by Coakley (2015) as “a process of learning and social development, which occurs as we interact with one another and become familiar with social worlds” (p. 52). The distinction between positive and negative socialization through sport involves the following differences:

... sport participation is associated with positive socialization experiences when it expands or diversifies a person’s identities, relationships, and experiences, especially beyond the sporting contexts. Conversely, sport participation is associated with negative socialization experiences when it constricts or limits a person’s identities, relationships, and experiences. (Coakley, 2012, p. 184)

The present study seeks to build upon the socialization work of Coakley (2012, 2015) by exploring how professionalization and corporatization impact the socialization of elite youth and high school baseball players. The socialization process of an elite baseball player often begins with tee-ball or coach-pitch baseball, but quickly develops into a selective club system beginning around the age of 12 (Daniel, 2013). Transitioning into adolescence, summer-travel baseball becomes the primary time for recruiting and scouting. High school summer baseball is dominated by expensive travel ball and showcases, which often are inaccessible for low- and middle-income families (Butler, 2011). This can be attributed to the current trends of youth sport privatization, which include commodification, massification, and specialization at an early age (Andrews, 2011; Coakley, 2015; Hensch, 2006; Jayanthi et al., 2013; Singer 2012; Warner, 2012).

Specific to baseball, research on professionalization and socialization is limited. While most of the research on the experiences of youth and high school baseball players has occurred in the medical field (e.g., Lyman et al., 2002; Petty et al., 2004), there are a few works that help understand these experiences from a social development and experience perspective. One such notable contribution in this area was King-White’s (2010) examination of the “celebrity

identity” and “flexible citizenship” of the infamous Danny Almonte, a participant in the 2001 Little League World Series (LLWS) (p. 179).

Almonte, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, was hailed as both an American and Dominican hero during the 2001 LLWS as he led his team to a third-place finish (King-White, 2010). However, there were questions regarding Almonte’s eligibility for the 11-12-years-old age requirement, leading to parents of opposing teams spending \$10,000 to hire a private investigator to investigate Almonte (King-White, 2010). King-White (2010), examining the outcomes following a second investigation by *Sports Illustrated* that confirmed Almonte to be 14 years old, noted a shift in American media coverage from characterizing Almonte as hero to a narrative focused on him as a foreigner and “critically evaluating his supposed personal failings or immaturity” as he grew older (p. 192). The exploration of the discourse around Danny Almonte provides an illustrative example of how elite immigrant baseball players can be professionalized from an early age (King-White, 2010). While the current study does not focus on inequality in the same way as the aforementioned research, it seeks to build upon these insights by providing a broader, hierarchical systems analysis to professionalization and socialization in elite youth and high school baseball in the U.S. as a whole.

Moreover, Sanderson and Baerg (2018) conducted a study on professionalization and neoliberalism in Little League Baseball through the influence of GameChanger, a statistic-tracking application. First, the study explained its marketing toward coaches as an application that provides statistical data to improve in-game decision-making. However, with the increased influence of statistics also come potential negative consequences for young athletes, some who have every performance metric measured as early as Little League (Sanderson & Baerg, 2018). Additionally, GameChanger has a partnership with the collegiate athletic recruitment website MaxPreps, wherein GameChanger shares data with MaxPreps, which subsequently is available to college coaches and recruiters (Sanderson & Baerg, 2018).

While Sanderson and Baerg (2018) explain how youth and high school baseball players are sub-

ject to early professionalization through the inclusion of statistical data at increasingly early ages, the present study seeks to provide an analysis of the systems influencing the socialization process including participation, scouting, and relationships. Relatedly, scholars also have investigated the baseball socialization experiences of Black players in high school as well as those who attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in connection to the decline of African-American players (Cooper, et al., 2013; Gawrysiak, 2012). Yet, there is scant research on the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process as a whole and the role of professionalization. The current study begins to fill this gap by exploring the macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-entities impacting the youth and high school baseball socialization process.

Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory provides a relevant framework for the current analysis of elite youth and high school baseball socialization. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), ecological systems theory offers the following system-level analysis:

the understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior on the part of one or two persons in the same place... it requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction... and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject (p. 514).

These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Ecological systems theory has been used in sport research to examine the development of sport talent (Krebs, 2009), the experiences of male college athletes at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institutions (Cooper et al., 2017), parental involvement in youth sport (Holt et al., 2008), sport for development programs (Burnett, 2015), cognition and action in sport and exercise (Araújo & Davids, 2009), and models of physical activity (Spence & Lee, 2003). Ecological systems theory also has been used to examine youth

programs beyond sport (Duerden & Witt, 2010). Although the theory has been used to investigate different occurrences in sport, it has not been used to examine a sport socialization process. This study strengthens the value of ecological systems theory in sport research by employing it this way.

In order to understand how ecological systems theory applies to baseball socialization, it needs to be understood as it relates to childhood development with the child existing at the center of the microsystem. The microsystem consists mainly of the child's most immediate environment such as the family, classroom, and athletic team (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Swick & Williams, 2006). The direct face-to-face interaction occurring at this level has reciprocal implications on the child as well as others in the immediate settings with whom the child interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The mesosystem is defined as a system representing the interactions between two or more settings where the developing person exists (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Socialization, and one's perceptions of society, is a process occurring not just at the micro-level, but involves interaction between broader influences (e.g., mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem). For example, a child has influences at various locations including home, school, and extracurricular activity spaces, which operate in conjunction with each other to shape the child's perceptions and values about the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Settings that do not directly involve the child, but still have an impact on development, comprise the exosystem. An example of an exosystem would be a parent's workplace, where the child does not directly interact in this setting, but the parent's experiences in this setting impact his or her perceptions and values, and in turn, how the child is raised.

The macrosystem is the highest level and encompasses the predominant features of a given society, culture, or subculture, specifically attitudes, value systems, and societal norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). An example of a macrosystem within American society is the neoliberal ideology, which attempts to explain all social outcomes by the presence of hard work (or a lack thereof). This belief system has

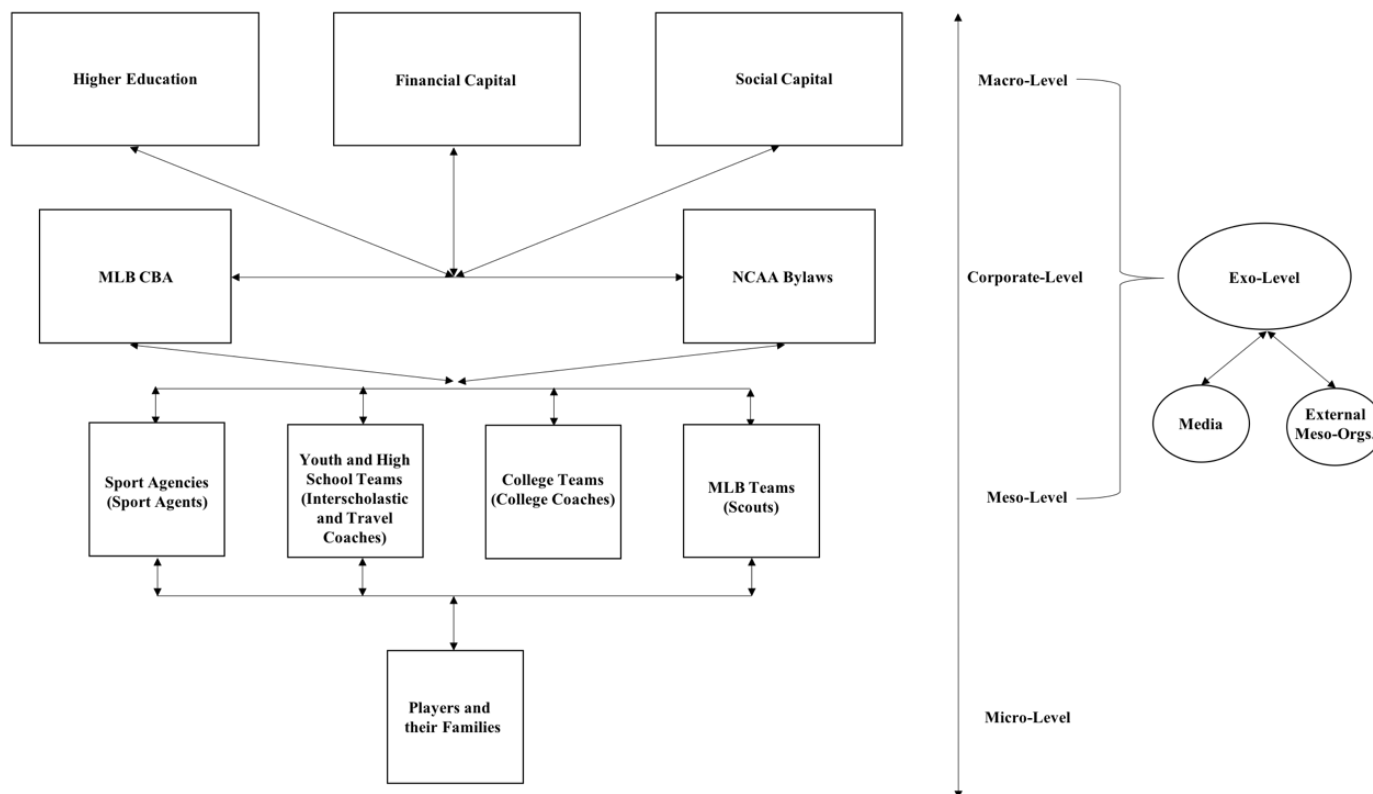
shaped federal, state, and local programs, thus creating economic inequality in the U.S. Examining this level facilitates understanding how the micro-, meso-, and exo-levels are shaped by greater societal values and societal structures. In addition to the macrosystem, another level of analysis within the ecological systems framework that refers to the evolution of time is the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The evolution of baseball over time is best explained by the history of collective bargaining agreements and current dominant attitudes, norms, and values in American society.

Corporate-level. Yet another level of the ecological systems theoretical lens germane to the current analysis is the corporate-level, which initially was introduced by Klein, Macaulay, and Cooper (2016, 2017). The corporate-level is situated between the meso- and macro-levels (see Figure 2). Corporate was chosen over institutional and organizational because these are represented in the macrosystem and mesosystem. In juxtaposing institutional theory and organizational theory, Hatch and Zilber (2012) defined institutions as "shared systems of meanings comprised in discourses" and organizations as "assumptions and values concerning how the world works and how people can work together" (p. 94-95). The operational definition we use for corporate-level, or corporate system, is a system comprising public and private structures whose procedures and policies govern how organizations and individuals create values and perform social norms and individual actions (this concept is discussed in greater detail later).

Figure 2

Elite Baseball Ecological Systems (EBES) Model

Policy and Regulation Context: Collective Bargaining in MLB and NCAA Rules



The influence of the MLB collective bargaining agreement (CBA) and NCAA rules were discussed among all participants in this study. As such, both are discussed to explain how baseball players historically and currently have been impacted by policy at the highest levels of baseball. The most current iterations of the MLB CBA have their greatest impact on the structure of the amateur draft and international signing process. However, since the inception of the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA), players’ rights have increased exponentially. The MLBPA was founded in 1954, yet, it was not officially recognized as a union until 1966 and the first CBA was later signed in 1968 (Rascher & DeSchrive, 2012). Strides in competitive balance and players’ rights in the 1970s and 1980s led to owner backlash against the MLBPA and work stoppages in the 1990s. Tensions boiled and on August 12, 1994, the MLBPA

began the longest strike in baseball history, including the cancellation of the 1994 World Series. In response to the strike, the owners stopped making scheduled payments into players’ pension funds and began the 1995 preseason with non-union replacement players until then-U.S. District Court judge (Southern District of New York) Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued an injunction against the owners to return to the terms of the previous CBA (Rascher & DeSchrive, 2012). The 2000s and 2010s instituted new revenue sharing plans, increases in player salaries, and mandatory drug testing programs for human growth hormones, a shift in the international signing process, and additional draft changes (Rascher & DeSchrive, 2012; White, 2017). The CBA serves as the structural foundation for MLB as both the governing document and the place for negotiation to occur.

The evolution of the MLB CBA has a direct impact on the current state of elite youth and high school baseball, college baseball (i.e., NCAA by-laws), and related complex socialization processes. The variety of these influences (e.g., increased privatization, race, geography, etc.), as well as many others mentioned later in this study, that undergirds this process are shaped by individuals, policies, and social trends. Hence, the current analysis incorporates a theoretical framework with multi-level systems in order to better understand the interplay between these various organizations, their policies, and players' decisions and outcomes. A discernable variable created by the interaction of these multi-level systems are the player categories for the MLB amateur draft. These categories define the various types of players who are eligible to be selected in the MLB amateur draft, as stipulated in the CBA: 1) high school graduates, 2) junior college players 3) four-year college players who have completed at least three years of school, and 4) any player 21 years old or older (Gordon, 2015). This creates a dilemma for elite high school players and collegiate non-seniors as to either sign a professional contract or attend/return to college.

According to the current bonus pool system of the 40-round MLB draft, as initiated by the 2012-2016 MLB CBA, a team's bonus pool is determined by the sum of the slot value (pick value as assigned by MLB) of all of their picks in the first 10 rounds (Rascher & DeSchraver, 2012). Any signing bonus given to a player drafted from rounds 11-40 exceeding \$125,000 is considered part of the bonus pool as of the 2017-2021 CBA (Callis, 2017). Comparatively, the NCAA, as stated in the Division I Manual (section 15.5.4), allots a maximum of 11.7 scholarships to be divided among 27 players on a roster of 35 for Division I baseball (NCAA, 2019) making a full athletic scholarship to play college baseball extraordinarily rare. Compared to Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level football (85 scholarships), men's basketball (13 scholarships), and women's basketball (15 scholarships), which are required to cover the entirety of one's tuition (sections 15.5.6.1, 15.5.5.1, and 15.5.5.2) (NCAA, 2019), there is less perceived value in pursuing or persisting in college baseball.

Method

Sampling and Participants

This study incorporated a range of techniques that included criterion sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2002). The criteria for this study is discussed in the following paragraph. Criterion sampling was utilized to ensure participants possessed the necessary experiences and credentials for insights into the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling, also known as selective or subjective sampling, involves selection based on characteristics of a population (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling was incorporated in order to identify participants who could provide the most information-rich responses related to the phenomena under investigation (Patton, 2002). The last sampling technique used was snowball (or chain) sampling, which involves existing participants recruiting future participants. Using snowball sampling meant participants provided contacts leading to referral chains of potential participants who met criteria for the various population categories in the study (Patton, 2002). Industry gatekeepers, who are known by the first author, participated in the study and also contributed by creating referral chains that led to the final sample size.

The scope of inquiry included seven participant categories: 1) players, 2) parents, 3) agents, 4) scouts, 5) college coaches, 6) travel ball coaches, and 7) media members. Due to funding and deadline requirements, the participants ($n = 9$) emerged from only four of these categories: former elite youth and high school baseball players (4), a parent of a former elite youth and high school baseball player (1), college baseball coaches (2), and media members (2). The selection criteria for the categories that generated participants is as follows: For the players, the following criteria was used: 1) interaction with both MLB scouts and college coaches, 2) recipient of scholarship offers or professional contract offers, and 3) a baseball career that continued beyond high school. For the parents, the criteria included: 1) being a parent or guardian of a player who met the player criteria and 2) involvement in the socialization process of that player. The college coach criteria included: 1) the

participant being head or assistant collegiate baseball coach and 2) having involvement with the recruiting process. For the media members, the criteria were: 1) a participant who has worked in baseball media and 2) who has had interaction with former elite high school players. The use of data triangulation with participants across multiple categories and the use of three collection methods led to data saturation being reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data Collection

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, a six-item demographic survey, and a three-question follow-up survey (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow participants to explicate in detail their experiences and perceptions of the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process. This method also allowed the primary researcher¹ an opportunity to probe for elucidation on relevant insights for the current study. Interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, and/or via email. Interview protocols focused on personal background, the transition to collegiate and professional baseball, and reflections about the baseball socialization process (see Appendix A). Personal background explored the individual's entry into baseball and the beginnings of the socialization process. The transition to collegiate and professional baseball explored personal involvement in this critical process that explains the impact of the socialization process and interaction with baseball personnel as influential factors in this process. Reflection allowed for personal reflection about the baseball socialization process and an examination of the ecological system at every level.

The demographic survey was administered to each participant immediately following the completion of the interview and was completed by eight of the nine participants. This instrument gathered information about age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, and household income. Although this demographic information may or may not have been discussed in the interviews, collecting it was vital to ascertaining a clear picture of participants' backgrounds

and their socialization experiences. The participants in the player category were asked to examine household income at the time of their college-professional decision as opposed to current household income and additionally were asked for parents' education level. One week following the interview and demographic survey, participants were emailed a link to a three-question follow-up survey on Qualtrics, which was completed by five of the nine participants. This instrument asked if there were any questions about the purpose of the study, the benefits and detriments of choosing to play professionally or attend college as a culmination of the youth and high school socialization experiences, and the most important social influences contributing to that decision.

Data Analysis

The primary data for this study was collected through recording interviews and subsequently transcribing them by the primary researcher using InqScribe. This project utilized an inductive data analysis procedure that included two rounds of coding with the NVivo software to identify emergent themes from the transcriptions and help shape the direction of the theoretical praxis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The preliminary round of coding was conducted without pre-established themes, as they materialized based on the data. For example, the theme of signability (i.e., the likelihood for a player to sign a professional contract) was translated to mean the sustainability or attempt at upward mobility of financial capital. The secondary round of coding was conducted with the data fitting explicitly and implicitly into the themes established in the preliminary coding process. The themes and references coded per theme are presented in the "findings" section within the EBES model shown in Figure 2. All data collection and analysis was conducted by the first author, while the second and third authors served as peer debriefers. Peer debriefing is when a researcher "engag[es] in dialog with colleagues outside of a research project who have experience with the topic, population or methods being utilized" (Lietz et al., 2006, p. 451). Peer debriefing had a significant role in this study, as it was used to shape the themes for the second round of coding and creating the model in the EBES model (Figure 2).

Additionally, follow-up surveys were analyzed using an inductive data analysis procedure based on

1 The primary researcher is the first author.

themes established from the semi-structured interviews. They also were coded in a single round using NVivo. The purpose of the follow-up surveys was to check if the participants had any final thoughts about the study during the week between the completion of the interview and receiving the follow-up survey. Lastly, the demographic surveys were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel.

Results

Figure 2 shows the EBES model that was construed following the secondary round of coding. Following the demographic surveys, the findings are discussed through this model.

Demographic surveys

The demographics of the participants are limited in race, as the eight participants who answered the demographic survey are all White. In terms of age, five of the eight participants were in the 25-34 age-range, with one younger and two older. The participants also showed a high, yet limited range of education level, with seven completing a bachelor's degree and one completing an advanced degree. Three of the four player-participants (extenuating circumstances for the fourth) also were asked to cite their parents' education level, with two selecting bachelor's degree and one selecting graduate-level degree (the same participant who completed an advanced degree). Lastly, the non-player-participants were asked to identify their current household income and the player-participants were asked to identify their household income while going through their baseball socialization process. This reported back the exact same data: one person at less than \$20,000 per year, one person at \$50,000-\$74,999 per year, one person at \$75,000-\$99,000 per year, and one person over \$100,000 per year.

Macrosystem Influences – Meritocracy, Capitalism, and The American Dream

The macro-level influences in this study represent larger social institutions and ideologies and their effect on elite youth and high school baseball socialization. The data revealed three macro-level influences: a) the ideology of meritocracy and higher education, b) capitalism and the acquisition of financial capital, and c) the American Dream and access to valuable social capital.

Higher Education. In this study, higher education was operationally broken down into the importance placed on it and the opportunity to pursue it because of baseball. Higher education was discussed by all nine participants, reaching a total of 107 codes. While discussing the importance placed on higher education, the four player-participants alluded to influence of family as well. When asked if his family contributed to education as a strong value Larry, a player-participant, responded, "Absolutely. My parents really stressed education growing up and I am so thankful that they did." The demographic surveys revealed two players (Larry and Steve, who are brothers) marked bachelor's degree as the highest level of education completed by their parents, while another player-participant (David) marked graduate level. Three of the player-participants went on to complete a bachelor's degree, while David went on to complete an advanced degree. In this case, the micro-organization of the family had a direct impact on the macro-level factor of the importance of, and ultimate choice to, pursue higher education.

Comparatively, higher education also was examined as it related to the opportunity existing because of baseball. This sub-factor of higher education notably intersected with financial capital (macro-level), the NCAA rules (corporate-level), and college coaches (meso-level). Johnny, a player-participant, described the influence of financial capital on his college decision by stating, "So, those were the two that I was interested in and [University A] ended up giving me a much better scholarship package, so I ended up going to [University A]." Aside from explicit references to financial capital, this statement contains an implicit reference to the NCAA rules, which limit the scholarship packages offered to baseball players. Another player-participant, Steve, described the influence a college coach had on his higher education recruitment when telling the coach he wanted to assess all his options:

I told the [University B] coach, 'Hey, I'm still leaning towards [University B], but I'm going to take a visit to [University C] because they just gave me a call, I want to weigh all my options...' And the coach basically chewed me out, started yelling and swearing at me on the phone.

For Steve, while he just wanted to explore his college options, a coach felt threatened at the possibility he would attend a different university. This conversation shaped Steve's decision-making experience, because as a result he chose to attend University C, specifically citing the recruiting style of its coach compared to that of the coach at University B.

Financial Capital. Financial capital was split into sustaining current economic status and an attempt for upward economic mobility. When asked the most notable influence shaping the transition to college or professional baseball, all nine participants referred to financial capital, totaling 115 codes. For example, Diego, a college coach-participant, said the following when asked what he believed to be the main reason an individual signs a professional contract: "I think the prime motivator is fear. They're fearful that they may get hurt, they're fearful that the money might not be there in three years. I think that's the chief motivation to sign." This quote from Diego contains an explicit reference to financial capital that may or may not be available if an individual decides to forego signing a professional contract. Furthermore, Diego outlines how the incentive of financial capital can impact the baseball socialization process by contributing social influences such as pressure to succeed and access to financial mobility.

In contrast, Doug, a parent, explains this from the perspective of those who have financial status and are focused on sustainability. He states that he, his wife, and his son came to an agreement: "If [his son] go[es] in the top two rounds, the money's good enough to sign and go." Doug and his family had the financial and social capital to make a decision about his son's draft status where he only would sign a professional contract if there was significant financial capital available. Where a second-round pick likely is to receive a signing bonus around \$1,000,000, a later pick likely only is to receive around \$125,000. A \$125,000 signing bonus represents significant financial incentive to some but does not have long-term sustainability. For Doug and his family, \$125,000 was not a strong enough financial incentive to shape their son's baseball experience, as their focus was on sustaining their current financial status in his son's baseball future.

Social Capital. The third and final macro-level influence was found to be social capital. This consisted of three subthemes: access, trust, and pressure. Access, as referenced 100 times across all nine participants, refers to an individual's ability to move within the baseball industry through the building of social connections. This showed a strong intersection with financial capital and summer travel coaches, college coaches, and major league scouts. Larry describes how his access on playing for an elite summer team led to his being able to attend college by stating:

I was playing... for a pretty elite team, I just hadn't been picked up yet. At one of our games in August, one of the assistant coaches was there and saw me play. He was also an associate scout for [MLB Team A] at the time... I told him I didn't have money for college, and he said not to worry about it.

Although Larry did not have the financial capital to attend college at the time, the access provided by his summer team led to a college coach who helped advance his educational and baseball careers. In conjunction with the opportunity, Larry was able to achieve access to higher education through his social connection to high-level baseball, and consequently he also placed an immense amount of trust into the college coach. Trust, the second aspect of social capital, was referenced 54 times across all nine participants and alludes to the belief placed in industry connections to provide career advancement. For Larry, the trust he placed in this coach paid dividends, leading to a college scholarship. However, placing trust in connected individuals did not work in every case. For example, Steve described how a scout he placed trust in did not contact him when the organization decided to go in another direction:

He had me do a little individual uh, after practice one day. Just throwing some balls... and taking some [batting practice]. And then we met afterwards, and he seemed pretty high on me, you know saying... that I was one of the only guys he could actually see making it to the big leagues... I came out of that meeting thinking [MLB Team B] would draft me fairly high and then I didn't really hear from him once, uh, once the draft came.

Along with increasing access and the need to place trust in individuals or the system, pressure explicitly and implicitly was identified as a common theme a total of 94 times by all nine participants. In this case, pressure is the influence placed on individuals by the industry that leads to mental or physical exertion beyond what is reasonable. David explained the pressure to play through injuries as a high school athlete during summer baseball:

My arm would... pop out again and pop back in... It was really pretty painful, and it happened every time I threw the ball as hard as I could... I had a pretty good arm, so that was a tool to show off for scouts on the scouting circuit. That summer it was something that I had to be pretty careful about.

For David, in order to fully benefit from his access to the scouting and recruitment circuit provided, he had to manage the mental and physical pressure of playing through an injury.

Corporate System Influences – MLB CBA and NCAA Bylaws

MLB CBA. In relation to youth and high school baseball players, the MLB CBA is the governing document for how MLB teams are able to operate in the amateur draft and in international signing. However, as the agreement is between the owners and the MLBPA, there are no guidelines for minor league, youth, or high school baseball players. These groups also do not have union representation. However, it is important to note that minor leaguers are employees, while youth and high school baseball players who are not signed with a professional team are not. The fact that unsigned youth and high school baseball players cannot unionize means there is no governing body monitoring youth or high school baseball player-scout relationships. Further, the MLB CBA does not provide guidance on how a MLB team should interact with a youth or high school prospect. All nine participants discussed how the MLB CBA shaped/shapes their experience. The MLB CBA was coded a total of 123 times. Steve, a player-participant, describes his experience doing continuous workouts with an MLB team:

The [MLB Team C] had me come and work-

out my senior year of high school. They had picked three guys who they really liked apparently, that were high schoolers and... had [us] work out, it was either once or twice a week at [their stadium].

For Steve, he was being treated as a professional baseball player in high school, working out weekly at an MLB stadium in front of team executives and scouts. While this can be regarded as access, it also forced early professionalization of Steve's baseball abilities, while he received no direct benefit.

Since the CBA does not govern how MLB teams interact with youth and high school players, they can act freely. Similarly, Johnny describes how his injury and lack of union protection kept him from being signed by an MLB team:

I got the [MLB Team D] to give me a try-out. I threw 90 at the tryout. They had said I was as good as anybody they had in their minor-league system... I actually physically signed a contract with them, that was amazing. Um, but five hours later they called me back and they said... it had been nullified, because after seeing the x-rays they didn't want to take a chance on me.

For Johnny, the team did not exercise due diligence prior to offering a contract, instead nullifying the contract after it had been signed. This represents another instance of the lack of coverage by the CBA leading to professionalization where it cannot appropriately be provided.

NCAA Rules. In contrast to how there are no guidelines in the MLB CBA as related to interactions with youth and high school baseball players, the NCAA bylaws have legislated recruitment. One college coach-participant, Miguel, describes the most notable recruiting guideline as related to high school athletes:

By NCAA rule, you cannot call a kid until September 1st of their junior year... If they give us a call and we don't pick up or we miss the call for whatever reason, we can't call back. The player must, or the student-athlete, must give us a call again.

The intention of this rule may or may not be to protect high school freshman and sophomores from constant calls from coaches. Nonetheless, it carries the unintentional consequence of early professionalization of youth and high school athletes and shifts the power to adults, such as college coaches. This rule professionalizes youth and high school athletes because they are in the position where they must call the college coach even if the coach happens to miss the initial call. Additionally, the power shifts heavily to summer coaches, because college coaches are required to go through them in order to make contact with players. Doug described how the coaches of his son's summer team would talk to college coaches: "They say, hey, [three universities] want to talk to you, call [these] guy[s]." This further shifts the power-balance of recruiting by removing power from the athletes and giving it to collegiate and high school/travel coaches. This process creates a situation in which an athlete is expected to make a transactional decision based on their skills, something that occurs in a professional context, while they have little control over the process.

Microsystem Influence – Families

The family is the micro-organization that operates as the most immediate to the player, because the other four all emerge as a result of the individual's status as an elite youth and high school baseball player. Family was referenced 59 times across eight of nine participants (excluding an individual who lost his parents). The most common individual(s) representing the family is the parent(s)/guardian(s). The level of parental involvement varies based on the player, but even if the parent/guardian did not have direct involvement in the socialization process, his or her status as a parent still was found to have an effect on the belief system of players, specifically as it relates to higher education. Parents who had a larger role on the socialization process were more continually involved in the baseball experience, both as a parent and a pseudo-business manager. Doug explained his role in the agent selection process for his son: "I said to [my son], 'If agents want to talk to you and they call you, just [have them call me]. This way you're focusing on baseball and I'm focusing on business.'"

Similarly, David, who grew up playing baseball abroad, described the role his dad had in talking

to scouts to gauge his talent level:

My dad, kind of talking to those scouts, and then the scout who was affiliated with the [MLB Team E] ... he felt pretty confident that when we moved back I would still be considered a pretty good player and would be able to make it high school level or college, and possibly beyond.

These experiences of Doug as a parent and David as a player explain how the meso-level can influence baseball socialization processes. In choosing to deal with the agent selection process in this way, Doug took an active role in his son's elite youth and high school baseball socialization experience. Although David's parents were not as active, their impact still is present. When parents/guardians have an active role in the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process of their children, the microsystem of the family provides a direct level of influence over the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process.

Mesosystem Influences – Sport Agencies, Interscholastic/Summer Teams, College Teams, and MLB Teams

Sport Agencies. The first meso-level influence on players' baseball socialization processes was sport agents, coded 24 times by seven of nine participants. In describing the process of selecting an agent, Doug stated that "between myself and my wife we probably met with 12-15 different agencies... and then narrowed down to the top three... at that point then we introduced [our son]." Although not every parent had this level of control, their influence cannot be understated. Doug and his son's agent continued to heavily be involved, handling contract negotiations with the MLB team after his son was drafted. Doug described the process leading up to the draft:

You know, the week leading up to the draft, scouts are calling every week and several times saying, 'I need a number (a dollar value your son will sign for) to take to the draft meeting.' And [his agent] and I both agreed, it's not my job to give them a number. You give me the number, you're the one spending the money.

In contrast to the experience of Doug and his son, Johnny did not end up playing in an MLB organization. He had a successful career in independent baseball and a number of interested MLB teams, but he never got a chance. Johnny also did not have an agent: “I handled the majority of it on my own, but I definitely relied on my resourcefulness as much as I could. I did have one guy... that was like very much a mentor.”

The combination of having a trusted agent to handle contract negotiations and a plan for how to communicate with scouts allowed Doug and his son to have increased access in the baseball industry. While his son had the baseball talent teams were seeking, the agent’s understanding of the system allowed for Doug and his son to control his son’s ability as a resource by combining it with the agent’s competence in the business of the baseball industry. On the other hand, Johnny handled contract negotiations and communication with scouts on his own. Even though Johnny is intelligent and resourceful, not having agent representation and needing to handle everything by himself may have kept him from reaching the same level of access reached by Doug and his son.

Interscholastic/Summer Teams. While interscholastic baseball impacts a player’s career, the summer travel circuit is the place where a substantial amount of scouting and recruiting occurs. Thus, the travel coach becomes an important figure in the youth and high school baseball socialization process. This was referenced 38 times by all nine participants. David recounted his mixed experience with his travel ball coach stating: “He was kind of a bad person, but he also was a pretty good coach in that he was really well connected...” Even though David’s summer travel coach lacked the necessary skills to be an effective teacher, his connections led to increased recruiting and scouting. This transaction is common, as travel/high school coaches were referenced in relation to the increased recruiting or scouting attention they can provide players, leading to a higher likelihood of receiving college scholarship offers or being drafted by an MLB team. While David described possible issues with his travel coach’s persona, he understood a transactional relationship could be had because of the travel coach’s connections to college and MLB teams.

As a college coach-participant, Miguel explained how having a rapport with travel coaches can impact recruiting: “It’s up to us to develop a relationship with their coach to get a really good sense [of how they are as a player]. So, it is very important for us... to develop [those] relationships.” Although Miguel wants to rely on himself and his staff, he knows that hearing about players from a previous coach greatly can prepare them for recruiting and developing. Miguel knows bringing players to his college program requires building relationships with travel ball coaches who have influence.

College Teams. College teams and college coaches are the most directly affected by the NCAA bylaws aspect of the corporate-level. College coaches have the clear interest of getting a player to choose their college over others and potentially over signing a professional contract if the player is drafted. This led to college teams being referenced 100 times across all nine participants. A common reason many players choose to attend college is because they feel college initially is the best place for personal and baseball development. Media member-participant Jack explains this concept by stating:

A college may have a great track record of developing pro players, so that coach may sell the idea of that kid becoming a much better player in his time there, while also getting an education and having a more nurturing environment in which to grow, develop, and mature.

Additionally, David details his experience with a college coach who was known for his charismatic personality while recruiting: “Our head coach was really good at recruiting and fundraising. He is a very good salesman, especially of himself and his program. And so, he actually did do a really good job selling the program.”

Both Jack and David refer to how college coaches and teams can impact the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process and the transition to baseball beyond high school by selling their program as a path to professional baseball. Where college is viewed as an intermediary to professional baseball and recruiting often begins as early as 14

years old, NCAA rules and regulations operate within a broader sport industry to create early professionalization of elite youth and high school baseball players.

MLB Teams. Similar to the way in which college teams and coaches are impacted by the NCAA rules, MLB teams and scouts most directly are affected by the MLB CBA aspect of the corporate-level. This code was referenced 76 times across all nine participants. After having a difficult time getting a chance in college, Johnny described his experience at an open tryout for one MLB team:

[I] got this opportunity to go to an open tryout... for [MLB Team F]. And I went there and just was kind of lights out for like 30 pitches, I threw a great bullpen... this was for a[n] [MLB Team F] scout, who was linked to the [another] scout that was interested in drafting me.

While Johnny had little social and financial capital, he had to place increased trust in MLB scouts in order to have an opportunity to extend his baseball career. On the other hand, Miguel recounted the influence of scouts on college teams:

And you know, we know a lot of scouts in the area, a lot of scouts come to a lot of our games. Um, and, and they're great with us. You know, and they talk to us, you know, they'll give us a heads up, like, "Hey [this player] showed really well last summer, a lot of teams are going to be following him."

The similar experiences of Johnny and Miguel represent how scouts have influence as the gatekeepers for MLB teams. Scouts hold tremendous control over the socialization experience and decision-making of elite-level youth and high school baseball players by making their presence necessary for individual players and college teams to succeed.

Exosystem Influences – Media and External Meso-Organizations

Media. Despite the fact the media does not have the same level of influence as the larger themes of the macro-level, the institutional documents of

corporate-level, or the individuals and organizations at the micro- and meso-levels, it still can impact the interest players receive and how players are compared to their peers. Six out of nine participants referenced the impact of media, for a total of 16 codes. Media member-participant Guillermo explained how when covering baseball he is careful not to delve too much into personal experiences, by stating: "I try to stay out of it as much as possible, because that's such a, a grey area in terms of what I'm allowed to talk about..." In his role as a member of the media with a public voice, Guillermo attempts to provide an objective view and discuss player accomplishments while not pushing ethical boundaries. Notably, three participants mentioned how being rated as a top prospect by specific publications led to enhanced interest. For each of these participants, the media impact provided increased access to the baseball industry, but also sped up professionalization with their name and personal information becoming more public.

External Meso-Organizations. External meso-organizations do not directly interact with players but still can have an impact on their socialization processes. These organizations represent the organizations in the mesosystem not directly interacting with an individual player (e.g., a university not recruiting that player or an MLB team that did not draft that player). These organizations have indirect influences by adjusting the behavior of the meso-organizations (i.e., the recruiting patterns of one university may shape how another university talks with potential players). External meso-organizations were referenced 40 times across all nine participants. The behavior of external meso-organizations most profoundly impacted the behavior of the meso-organizations and individuals interacting with players. Diego explained the effect other universities can have on his recruiting of a player:

And like I say... there's Nike and there's Converse and they cost different amounts. You know, there's steak, there's hamburger, that costs different amounts of money. And we like to think that we're the steak in the region or the Nike in the region.

The impact of other meso-organizations allow Diego

to use the regional positioning of his university as a recruiting tool. In the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process, external meso-organizations have an indirect but significant impact controlling the conduct of those within the mesosystem.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process as a whole and the role of professionalization and corporatization in that process. Considering the current trends of professionalization, specialization, privatization, and corporatization have led to further organizational and institutional influence over youth and high school sport, this study proposes an ecological model that outlines the multi-level factors influencing the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process (Figure 2). Additionally, we found using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory requires an additional corporate-level to help bridge the gap between immediate settings and social systems. The most significant factors influencing elite youth and high school baseball socialization were found to be social capital (operationally defined as access, pressure, and trust), the MLB CBA, and the NCAA bylaws. However, as explained by the model displayed in Figure 2, all of these multi-level factors act in conjunction to influence the player and each other.

The first research question was: How is an elite youth or high school baseball player's experience influenced by macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-entities? For the purposes of this study, the individual athlete and their families operated within the micro-level, whereas the macro-level was represented by the major social institutions of higher education, financial capital, and social capital. The meso-level is composed of agencies, summer travel/high school teams, universities, and MLB teams. Along with parents/guardians (micro-level influence), these meso-organizations each are represented by individuals that engage in direct, micro-level interactions with players': a) agents, b) interscholastic/summer travel coaches, c) college coaches, and d) MLB scouts. The exo-level represent external meso-organizations (e.g., opposing summer travel teams, MLB teams that do not draft a

given player, etc.) and the public media. Ultimately, the experiences of elite youth and high school baseball players are influenced by all of these factors (and likely others) operating in a recursive manner.

The work of King-White (2010) focused primarily on the influence of the exo-level on a single baseball player, Danny Almonte, through an analysis of the mediated discourse between specific systems and the individual. Additionally, Almonte's experience greatly was impacted by external meso-organizations (opposing teams spending \$10,000 hiring a private investigator) and public media (a secondary investigation conducted by *Sports Illustrated*) (King-White, 2010). In critically analyzing the discourse on Almonte, King-White (2010) highlighted the complex interplay between multiple factors (distinct and overlapping influences). However, the current study differs from King-White's (2010) work by exploring the multi-level factors that influence elite youth and high school baseball more generally with the inclusion of multiple perspectives from current and former baseball players, a parent, college and high school coaches, scouts, and agents. Along the same lines, Sanderson and Baerg (2018) took a multi-level approach to examine the impact of the GameChanger application within the context of Little League Baseball on players, parents, and coaches. For example, they said coaches are impacted by GameChanger as they are provided with quantitative data that shapes their approach to coaching and managing players, while a parent who utilizes the app more often may be taking a mathematically rational approach to their child's sport development, possibly leading to further questioning of a coach's tactics. Their study revealed the GameChanger application's influence on coaches and parents resulted in additional influence over the players (Sanderson & Baerg, 2018). The current study found similar multi-level impacts (i.e., pressure) while utilizing a qualitative exploratory approach to understanding the influences embedded within elite youth and high school baseball.

Spence and Lee's (2003) ecological model of physical activity (EMPA) is one of the seminal studies using an ecological systems theory approach in sport and physical activity research. In addition to discussing individual factors on physical activity, Spence and

Lee (2003) explore how extra-individual, or environmental, factors within the EMPA influence physical activity. The present study is consistent with Spence and Lee's (2003) explanation of extra-individual factors as to how the most significant influences on the professionalization of youth and high school baseball players was found to be environmental. While Spence and Lee (2003) also found that biological factors serve as mediators between extra-individual factors and behavior, biological factors were not included in this study. Further, Krebs (2009) takes a psychological approach to discussing Ecological Systems Theory in the context of the development of sport talent as broken down into four proximal processes: the stage of sport stimulation, the stage of sport skills learning, the stage of sport practice, and the stage of sport specialization. Each of these stages was assessed in terms of organization, "the interdependency of the elements of the setting," and "the complexity of the activities experienced by the persons participating in that setting" (Krebs, 2009, p. 131). As an athlete moves through the proximal processes and his or her sport development intensifies, the organization and complexity both increase. This follows with the outcomes of the present study that is assessing athletes at the stage of sport specialization. At this stage the elemental influences of the youth and high school baseball industry at the macro-, exo-, meso-, micro-, and corporate-levels all are heightened, and the resulting athlete experience is highly complex and difficult for the athletes and their families to navigate.

In taking a sociological as opposed to a psychological perspective, Cooper et al. (2017) uses a macrosystems lens to explain how the abundance of postseason intercollegiate football games has led to an increase in media coverage, economic investments, and involvement from stakeholders across youth, high school, college, and professional sport. While Cooper et al. (2017) specifically examines Black, male intercollegiate athletes, some outcomes are transferable to this study. Youth and high school baseball have gained prominence in the baseball industry, which may not have led to the same increases in media coverage, but has led to increased economic investments from corporate sponsorships and financial resources used by stakeholders at the Major League (i.e., ama-

teur scouts) and intercollegiate (i.e., college baseball coaches) levels.

In addition to the macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-entities working in conjunction, they impact the elite youth and high school socialization process by fostering an environment for early professionalization. This led to answering a second research question in the affirmative: Is there professionalization within elite youth and high school baseball? Thus, an analysis of the first part of research question three: If yes (to question two), which entities are fostering the professionalization of elite youth and high school baseball? These entities were found to be social capital (operationally defined as access, pressure, and trust), the MLB CBA, and the NCAA bylaws. Social capital helped create an environment for professionalization through its shaping by the presence of heavy professional scouting and collegiate recruiting during summer travel baseball. As such, summer travel coaches, who also often are high school coaches, can greatly impact players' socialization processes beyond youth and high school.

Relatedly, Coakley (2015) explained how the current trends in youth and high school sport have led to a reduction in publicly funded programs and a concurrent increase in privatized sport clubs. As commercialized youth baseball has superseded community baseball, the youth baseball industry has shifted to a private industry that promotes individual and family wealth and professionalizes youth and high school athletes. Coakley (2015) asserted that a negative consequence of privatized youth sport programs is that they "reproduce the economic and ethnic inequalities that exist in the larger society" (p. 87). The current study reflects this trend, as the heavy influence of financial capital and social capital highlights the importance of economic ability and social relationships on the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process. Furthermore, Donnelly and Petherick (2004) explicated that the of treatment of professional athletes as "commodities to be bought, sold, drafted and traded" (p. 311) apply to children in high-performance sport. This study is consistent with these findings, as many of the experiences of elite youth and high school baseball players in this study (e.g., playing through a major injury, selecting an agent, etc.) re-

flect the expectations and experiences of commodified professional athletes.

In addition to social capital, the corporate-level of the MLB CBA and NCAA bylaws also heavily contributed to the professionalization of youth baseball players. The purpose behind the MLB CBA is to create an agreement between the MLBPA and the owners, whereas the NCAA bylaws were created to set universal guidelines for NCAA member universities. As such, both of these binding documents were not created to protect the minors impacted in the athletic industrial complex (Smith, 2014), and therefore allow for the professionalization and commodification of youth and high school baseball players. The influence of this level was notable, as the MLB CBA and NCAA bylaws were referenced by all nine participants as the two most referenced single items. Gordon (2015) explained how the MLB CBA dissuades collegiate baseball players from returning for their senior year if drafted as a junior. As drafted college graduates have no leverage in returning to school, Gordon (2015) referenced that in the 2013 MLB amateur draft, college seniors drafted in the first ten rounds only received 19.77% of their expected draft pick value compared to 119.40% for high school graduates and 95.83% for college juniors.

While the present study does not analyze the socialization of collegiate baseball players, it does posit that the influence of the MLB CBA and NCAA bylaws extends to create an environment of professionalization at the youth and high school level. Given the importance of higher education in American society in the early 21st century, the NCAA rules and MLB CBA do not place a high value on a baseball player enrolling in higher education or graduating once enrolled. Reviewing these documents makes this abundantly clear, as the NCAA bylaws only allow universities 11.7 scholarships for 35 players (NCAA, 2019). Additionally, as explained by Gordon (2015), the MLB CBA disincentivizes drafted college players from returning through graduation because at this point, they lose the negotiating leverage of returning to college. On the other hand, the MLB CBA's and NCAA's extensive influence allows for communication with professional scouts and college coaches to occur as early as freshman year of high school, or

potentially even middle school (Fader, 2016; Forde 2007), benefitting those who have the resources to navigate the potential pitfalls of the system. The MLB CBA and the NCAA work in tandem, as the corporate-level system allows those who are privileged to build social capital (via interactions with MLB owners and clubs, well-endowed colleges, and fellow upper-class families) and expand opportunities for increasing their financial wealth.

Aside from social capital and higher education, the corporate-level impacts the behavior of the organization and individuals at the micro- and meso-levels. The lack of widely known and easily accessible public knowledge sources of the elite youth and high school baseball socialization process, the MLB CBA, and the NCAA bylaws places players and their families in a situation where they must rely on the opinions of others. These individuals/informants often are agents, advisors, or summer travel coaches who provide players and their families with expertise of the corporate-level, but are not devoid of having their own agenda. Agents, who are compensated with a signing bonus and contract commissions, often communicate with college coaches on behalf of their clients and are responsible for pre- and post-draft negotiations with MLB teams. Conversely, summer travel and high school coaches leverage their connections with college coaches and scouts while representing organizations that charge thousands of dollars per player per summer. College coaches and MLB scouts are most directly impacted by the corporate-level, as their behavior directly is impacted by the guidelines written in these documents. The NCAA bylaws are in place to govern university athletic programs, while the MLB CBA is in place as an agreement between the MLBPA and the team owners. These documents both fulfill their intended purpose, but also lack ethical behavior guidelines that educate, inform, and protect players prior to entry into these organizations.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is the sample size and the fact there were not equal numbers of participants across each category. Additionally, three categories had zero participants (agents, scouts, and travel ball coaches), which limited the generalizability

and ability to examine consistency across multiple groups with equal representation. The authors acknowledge there are limitations to the generalizability of the conceptual claims asserted in this exploratory study. Nonetheless, the study included four unique participant groups representing different aspects of the elite youth and high school baseball social world, combined with three methods of data collection, leading to 1,076 generated codes. Furthermore, the core focus of this type of qualitative inquiry is to explore a specific context, and therefore, generalizability is not the aim (Tracy, 2010).

Similarly, the use of snowball sampling versus randomized sampling limited the number and range of potential participants. The period of data collection was one year, which shortened time to access potential participants over a longer period of time (i.e., longitudinal study) or conduct multiple interviews. The participants interviewed also lacked racial diversity, as every participant who filled out the demographic survey identified as White. The limitations related to data collection include interviews not being conducted in the same way (i.e., probing questions were based on specific responses with each interview) and not every participant completed the demographic and follow-up surveys. Providing three different options for interviews allowed for more flexibility but may have affected the consistency of each interview. Lastly, as an exploratory study, the focus of this study is to determine how elite youth and high school baseball players are socialized. This means the scope of this study did not explore how race, gender, and a range of other identifying factors impact this process. While more research needs to be completed, this study provides initial insights into elite youth and high school baseball and the corporatization and professionalization of the game.

Conclusion

This study offers an ecological approach to analyzing elite youth and high school baseball socialization and development, which can be used to understand the complex youth and high school baseball industry and identify targeted areas for improvement. The data and subsequent examination with ecological systems theory found the most significant influencers are the social capital aspect of the macro-level and the corporate-level (MLB CBA and NCAA bylaws).

While higher education and financial capital were heavily discussed among all nine participants, themes of social capital were discussed more than twice as often. Being able to access the showcase and tournament circuit and/or build relationships with college coaches and scouts greatly shaped players' opportunities to pursue baseball beyond high school and ultimately shaped their socialization experiences. Additionally, the early professionalization that occurs in youth and high school baseball led to themes of pressure. The last aspect of social capital revealed how the complexity of the industry required players to place trust in connected individuals and the system.

Furthermore, the corporate-level influences of the MLB CBA and NCAA bylaws were found to have a significant impact on elite-level youth and high school baseball socialization and professionalization. This was because the governing bodies' (MLB and NCAA) regulation of scouts and college coaches were explicated both explicitly and implicitly. These effects were discussed explicitly when players described the financial considerations they were able to receive (e.g., draft signing bonus pools, limited college scholarships, etc.). They were discussed implicitly when player-college coach and player-scout interactions were described (e.g., playing on a summer team coached by scouts, travel coach having connections, etc.). Corporate-level influences also were found to lead to the early professionalization of youth baseball players. The MLB CBA does not include guidelines for scout-youth relationships and the NCAA bylaws have the unintended consequence of accentuating the pressure applied from early recruiting. The corporate-level is at the root of the socialization process, as it acts as an axis connecting the macro-, exo-, meso- and micro-levels.

Implications for Policy and Research

In order to limit the early professionalization of youth baseball players, policy recommendations are provided. First, we recommend communities make an investment in creating better youth sport programs and that individuals begin to participate in public youth sport. This recommendation is based on the increased privatization and monetization of youth sport that has occurred and detrimentally impacted youth participants (e.g., burnout, injury, psychological outcomes as a result of intense stress and pressure, etc.) (Coakley,

2012, 2015). Public youth sport programs remove the profit incentives private programs have, which lead to high costs for participation and disparately impact those who cannot afford to participate. Second, we recommend the NCAA increase limits of early recruiting by not allowing scholarship offers to occur prior to junior year of high school. Although this will not fix every problem, it will alleviate the pressure of early scholarship offers. Lastly, we recommend the MLB incorporate ethical guidelines for scout behavior with youth and high school athletes, including a detailed explanation of the draft and college commitment process. This inclusion will not only create an ethical plan for scout-player relationships, but also will improve upon the lack of public knowledge about the complexity of the baseball draft industry. Along with the above policy recommendations, recommendations for future research are provided as well. This study was limited by the number and demographics of the participants. A study that examines the same issue with more diverse participants may identify other influences as well as offer more in-depth insights into the phenomena examined in the current study. Additionally, a study examining how this model applies across other men's and women's sports would expand the youth and high school sport literature. This study ultimately outlines how the inclusion of the corporate-level into ecological systems theory can increase understanding of complex socialization processes.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Example Questions

Participant Category (n=9)	Personal Background	Transition to Collegiate and Professional Baseball	Reflection about the Process
Players (n=4)	When did you first become interested in playing baseball?	Can you please describe your college recruitment process?	Would would you say had the biggest impact on this process?
Parents/Guardians (n=1)	When and why did your child first become interested in playing baseball?	When did you realize there was a chance for your child to play beyond high school?	When it was time for your child to make the college-professional decision, did you feel adequately prepared?
College Coaches (n=2)	Please describe your career in baseball before you became a college coach.	How does your recruiting process vary for players with draft potential?	What do you believe are the main reasons a committed player chooses to sign a professional contract?
Media Members (n=2)	Why has baseball become a focus of your media career?	Please describe your experience in covering or interacting with top draft prospects?	What do you believe are the main reasons a drafted player chooses college?

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