

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Football: A Metaphorical, Symbolic and Ritualistic Community Event

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the social dynamics surrounding the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football program on the community at large. The following research questions helped guide the research study: 1. What are the sociological effects of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football on the community? and 2. How is commitment displayed to University of Nebraska football by members of the community?

Six focus group interviews were conducted, each with five to seven participants. Through phenomenological analysis, it became clear that the sociological nature of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football is steeped in tradition, and the ritualistic nature that surrounds this phenomenon extends well into communities. This study illuminates three themes that emerged through data collection and analysis: 1. Harvest, 2. United we stand, and 3. Farm values. The Harvest theme represents the similarities of the agricultural lifestyle to a football season and how the entire year is dedicated towards performance. United we stand emerged as a visual, social and emotional sense of pride for the state of Nebraska residents towards the University and Nebraska and its football team. The connection between the university and the state begins early in life and grows as the years pass to become a social symbol of pride and togetherness as small towns shut down to gather and watch football games. Farm values emerged as the final theme and represented the importance of the farming value structure on the many small communities and towns in the state of Nebraska. For many small towns, a great sense of pride was generated when a local athlete was able to play for the University of Nebraska. This pride served as a means of legitimacy and hope in many struggling families that create Nebraska's farming communities.

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1. Introduction

Can athletics define the core value structure of a community? Many communities in the United States find themselves home to major National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division One college football programs and thus, are defined by these athletic programs. Moreover, they create a self and public image from their association with the university (GLADDEN, 2005). The central role that athletics, especially football, plays in the creation of sociological norms for their surrounding communities exists as one of the dominant defining roles of culture in some communities. Additionally, the culture becomes a widely shared knowledge and practice for a relatively homogeneous local community (CLAMMER, 2005). The cultural and sociological norms become similar to a policy, tacitly and gradually concocted by groups of people for the furtherance of their interests, and consists of unwritten contracts, established by practice between and among individuals (WEISNER, 2009). The effects of a Division One football program reach far beyond the boundaries of the institution. The history, traditions, and everyday processes associated with football become conversational centerpieces that dominate community exchanges and family discussions. Loyalty can be shown by wearing clothing that displays school colors with athletic trademark logos. These symbols of allegiance are also displayed on bumper stickers, mailbox flags, and common drinking cups. This symbolic association with college football becomes a catalyst for cultural development. [1]

The symbolism associated with football is ingrained in the very existence of the community and becomes a systematic process through which culture is developed. Thus, some communities define themselves by the successes and failures of their local major Division One football programs. A win is perceived as a community success and a loss a community failure. When the team wins, the mood surrounding the community is a little lighter, regardless of the weather. Just as winning can communicate a feeling of elation, a loss can dampen the spirits and seem to slow a community down. Individuals negotiate, construct, and reconstruct meanings of culture based upon daily occurrences within the athletic world around them (BORER, 2006). Thus, the accomplishments of a local university's football program help establish a sense of community-pride and meaning that confirms the values of the community, therefore influencing group dynamics through athletic affiliations. [2]

A football program generates a bond with the community, similar to the bond created between a graduate and a university. This bond can be more pronounced in small towns and cities where the university and its athletic program exist as the defining economic stimulus for the town. The identity of a community is oftentimes cloaked in university characteristics and they are perceived as one. This perception increases over time and becomes steeped in academic and athletic tradition, glory, and folklore. As time progresses, and traditions become norms, a university's football program can begin to expand across traditional boundaries and expand into the activities of daily life for some communities. [3]

2. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the social dynamics surrounding University of Nebraska-Lincoln football on the community at large. We selected the University of Nebraska due to its large NCAA fan base and its storied tradition within the realm of college football in the United States. The state of Nebraska possesses no major professional sport teams allowing the University of Nebraska to exist as the dominant athletic cultural attraction within the state. Additionally, the University of Nebraska was selected because its fan support is demonstrated annually, regardless of athletic accomplishment, as the football program's stadium sellout streak dates back to November 3rd, 1962. While the information garnered from this study cannot be generalized across the world of athletics, it builds upon the foundation of how small towns and cities across the United States adopt athletic programs into the cultural rituals of their daily lives. [4]

This study explores the ritualistic nature and sociological effects of a major Division one football team on a community. This study reveals how people, families, students, and other community members have institutionalized events and developed symbols and language to demonstrate allegiance to the University of Nebraska football program. The following research questions helped guide the research study:

1. What are the sociological affects of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football on the community?
2. How is commitment displayed to University of Nebraska-Lincoln football by members of the community? [5]

3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

To understand the sociological complexities of this study, the theory of social construction was used as the organizing conceptual framework. The theory of social construction offers the perspective that what people believe and see as real, is simply the result of human interaction (HUGHES, SATTERFIELD & GILES, 2007). Social construction theory allowed us to determine cultural norms as they are described by the participants. By looking at the normative aspects of the culture surrounding University of Nebraska-Lincoln football, we were able to determine the internalized values. Values can prove to be paramount in some cases. According to SCOTT (1998), norms dictate how people believe things should be done. Moreover, "all human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into pattern" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1966, p.53). Using social construction as the conceptual framework, we were able to make sense of the multiple participant experiences and the symbolic nature of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. [6]

3.1 Setting

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, founded in 1869, is currently one of the nation's largest land-grant institutions and turned 140 years old in 2009. Its Carnegie classification is a Doctoral/Research Extensive University with a total enrollment over 21,000. In 2008, the U.S. News and World Report ranked Nebraska 40th among public colleges in the United States. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln sees its role as the state of Nebraska's leading resource in academic and cultural pursuits (<http://www.unl.edu/ucomm/aboutunl/>). The athletic program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln fields 20 varsity level athletic teams and possesses arguably some of the best athletic facilities in the nation. The football program competes within a major athletic conference recognized by the NCAA and is considered a traditional football powerhouse by winning five national championships. The University of Nebraska also boasts three different Heisman Trophy winners, an award given to the most outstanding player in college football. The athletic teams of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln bear the nickname "Cornhuskers" as a reflection of the state's agricultural background and Nebraska's 85.9 million acres dedicated to the corn crop (<http://www.unl.edu/ucomm/aboutunl/>). [7]

The academic and athletic culture of University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a direct reflection of the state. According to the UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU (2006), the state of Nebraska is primarily an agricultural state that amasses over 76,000 square miles with a population greater than 1.7 million people. The majority of its population resides in Douglas County sitting on the eastern border of the state. Additionally, according to the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (2008), the state of Nebraska has 47,400 farms with average farm acreage of 962 acres. The total livestock inventory includes approximately 6,550,000 cattle and calves, 3,250,000 hogs and pigs, and 85,000 sheep. The state of Nebraska also produces more red meat than any other state; in 2007, Nebraska produced a total of 7.22 billion pounds. According to the UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (2008), the total value of the 2008 crop commodity was over 9 trillion dollars making it the state's largest source of income. This is the perfect setting to study the social dynamics of a Division One football program on the community at large since the university's athletic program exists as the highest level of athletics for the state. [8]

3.2 Design and methods

The design of the study consisted of focus groups and semi-structured interviews conducted with various members of the university community and the community at large as well as participant observations at various community events. The semi-structured interview format was designed using the purpose questions to allow the interviewees to respond freely and provide reflections in areas they believed to be important (ATHERLEY, 2006; COX, 2000; JONES & ALEXANDER, 1998). Therefore, the interviewee dictated the direction of the interview based upon responses rather than a set of pre-determined rigidly set questions. The semi-structured interview process allowed the researcher flexibility

in interview discussion to understand the interviewee's views and understanding of events, patterns, and behavior. [9]

The focus group participants ranged from university staff, faculty, former faculty, and lay persons in the community. Since the research tradition guiding this study was the interpretive approach, the use of qualitative methodologies was the most appropriate for several reasons. First, it allowed for the use of thick descriptions in the data collected, as well as enabling us to understand the meanings people have institutionalized overtime about Nebraska football (MERRIAM, 2001). Additionally, the sheer size of the institution and the community gave us an enormous sample to select from. [10]

The participants for this study were selected through the snowball sampling method. Each participant was aware of the nature of the study and signed an informed consent. Moreover, because they were largely acquired through the snowball sampling method the participants were very comfortable in providing details surround the nature of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. The use of thick descriptions by research participants are vital to the interpretive approach as this method becomes the formula by which participants describe what happens to them (GEERTZ, 1973). What is also significant about using the interpretive method is that it is "based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations" (YANOW, 2000, p.5). Additionally, we believe that strong community traditions can be achieved through social relationships. Moreover, the social capital associated with community traditions allows for normative institutionalization. [11]

The interpretive tradition embraces various fieldwork methods. It is important to note here that one of the authors was invited into communities to experience local events that enabled him to make the most of long-term participation in a field setting that led to "subsequent analytic reflection on the documentary record obtained in the field" (ERICKSON, 1986, p.121). The interpretive approach also helps answer the questions "What is happening here?" and "What do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?" (p.124). The interpretive approach furthermore allows individuals to have a voice and enables them to tell their story. Because this study is phenomenological in nature and we believe that the University of Nebraska Lincoln's football program influences the lives of numerous individuals, a phenomenological approach was appropriate. [12]

CRESWELL (1998) states that "a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (p.51). In phenomenological research, lived experiences are explored with the goal of giving the reader an accurate understanding of the essence of an experience (MOUSTAKAS, 1994). The researcher transcends past knowledge and experiences to understand a phenomenon at a deeper level (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1956). This research method seeks to understand the human experience as it is lived (MOERER-URDAHL & CRESWELL, 2004). Thus, the phenomenology method, as outlined by MOUSTAKAS (1994), was chosen as

the appropriate methodology for this research as we were searching for an understanding of the meaning of these participants' experiences. [13]

Transcendental phenomenology contains four basic assumptions (CRESWELL, 1998). The first is that the beginning of knowledge exists with a description of the experience. Second, phenomenology attempts to dissolve all judgments about reality until they are based in certainty, a process described as *epoche*. Third, the intentionality of consciousness posits that the reality of an object is intimately linked to one's consciousness of it and the meaning found within (CRESWELL, 1998; BROWN, SORRELL, McLAREN & CRESWELL, 2006). Fourth, qualitative research in phenomenological methods calls for the refusal of subject-object dichotomy. Therefore, with the knowledge that reality only exists in the meaning of the experience of the individual, phenomenological and interpretive methods were selected to examine the detailed personal experiences of the participant relationships with intercollegiate football. In addition to the phenomenological methods, we also framed the study within the theory of social construction. Organizing the study within this framework allows us to investigate both the setting in which the University of Nebraska is located along with the participants that pledge allegiance to the university located throughout the state. [14]

We made meaning of the phenomenon of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football by examining it within its own environment. This approach allows for multiple methods and multiple kinds of information. "It is the nature of the phenomena under investigation and the objectives of the study which must determine what approaches are taken and what materials are gathered by what methods" (SCOTT, 1965, p.265). This approach enabled us to collect data in a manner that permitted the conceptual framework and additional research questions to emerge directly from the data. [15]

We were also compelled to employ member checks and peer debriefing and engage in a dialogue with researchers and participants in review of the data. We participated in extensive conversations with faculty colleagues, athletic experts, and participants. Both the member checks and peer debriefing helped us insure credibility. [16]

A constructivist perspective acknowledges that reality exists as the creation of the individual. Without the individual acting as observer, reality cannot exist (LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985). While quantitative studies provide us with numerical data of the economic reality of athletics we felt the only way to fully understand the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football was through a study epistemologically centered in constructivism and specifically focused in the theory of social construction. This would allow us to explore the reality of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football from the inside observer's viewpoint of those who carry the designation of fan. [17]

3.3 Participants

Six focus group interviews were conducted, each with five to seven participants. The focus groups consisted of retired university faculty, retired and current administrators, current university staff, lay persons in the community, and native and non native Nebraskans. All participants currently live in Nebraska. Each group was interviewed multiple times to maintain trustworthiness. Additionally, some participants were interviewed individually in order to understand specific and localized experiences. [18]

With both of us having connections to athletics, and one of us a former college football player, we wanted to make sure that our inferences did not contaminate the collected data. To account for any amount of bias and to ensure trustworthiness, we engaged in what LINCOLN and GUBA (1985) call member checking and peer debriefing. These two tactics helped increase credibility of the results. Moreover, it enabled us to increase the dialogue with other members of the community. [19]

We developed a series of questions that helped garner the symbolic nature of Nebraska football. The data was collected using an interview protocol that was designed to capture: 1. the symbolic nature of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football on communities and 2. the ritualistic nature in which people operate around University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. [20]

We transcribed the data immediately following the interviews and performed an interactive thematic analysis described by MILES and HUBERMAN (1994) and LINCOLN and GUBA (1985). Significant statements and meanings were pulled out of the interviews and grouped into separate meaning units based upon statement similarities and meaning cohesiveness. The meaning units were further organized into meaning clusters as specific ideas, statements, and cultural and sociological perceptions arose from the data. Finally, themes were developed to describe to overall sociological and cultural importance and meaning of the phenomenon that is University of Nebraska football and its connection to the state residents of Nebraska. The data was simultaneously coded to reflect and interpret the experiences of the participants. In addition, a philosophy of perpetual analysis was maintained throughout the coding process to help build categories and preserve the meaning provided by the participants. By doing this analysis, we were able to draw out three specific themes displayed through events, symbols, language, and other institutionalized actions. [21]

4. Results

It became clear through the course of focus groups and individual interviews that the sociological nature of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football is steeped in tradition and the ritualistic nature that surrounds this phenomenon extends well into communities. According to HART and BIRRELL (1981), the ritual power drawn from sports provides fulfillment for both the individual and the community. Likewise, this tradition has become the center and driving force for many aspects

of local life. This study illuminates three themes that emerged through data collection and analysis: 1, Harvest, 2, United we stand, and 3, Farm values. These three themes emerged through data collection and carry specific cultural meanings for people in Nebraska. [22]

4.1 The harvest

The state of Nebraska has a rich agricultural tradition and today much of the state remains agricultural. In many communities agribusiness is the primary source of income for many families. As America's economic structure changes and our economy becomes more of a global market farms across the state are becoming fewer in number and the traditions of the harvest have carried over into other aspects of life in Nebraska. [23]

According to participants, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football season is a time to come together, share experiences, see old friends, and revel in state pride. One participant said,

"I grew up on a farm. The days are long and the work never ends. But the fruits of your labor come in the fall when you have harvest. The whole town would come together at the town hall for every game and share food from our farms and cheer our boys on." [24]

Traditionally, in agrarian societies "planting and harvesting ceremonies" marked important economic pursuits and provide community-gathering points (CHESKA, 1972). Additionally, much like a formally structured organization, the ceremonial and ritualistic nature of organized events such as this demonstrates a social fitness (MEYER & ROWAN, 1977). In this case, the ritual of coming together at the town hall symbolizes the importance of preserving and communicating a value structure (CHESKA, 1972). It also offers legitimacy to things by transmitting culture and shared meanings (BAKER, THORNE, BLAIR & GAMSON, 2006). It became evident that participants saw football at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as an event that symbolized a process. In the case of football, the long practices in the hot summer days, the preparation work for the season to come, and spoils of victory and the pain of defeat remind many Nebraskans of the feelings associated with the process of seasonal harvest. One participant described the similarities between football and farming as: "Everything associated with football reminds me of what farmers go through. Preparing the earth, sowing seeds, hoping you have a good crop, and if not doing what you can to correct the problem the next year." [25]

We were able to experience the transmitting of culture and shared meaning first hand when during a participant interview it was suggested we visit a local fall harvest festival in the community. When arriving in this town along the banks of the Missouri River, we were shocked by the number of people we saw wearing the color red. From above, it must have appeared like a red carpet with a few stains of various colors scattered about. While walking around we stumbled across one festival outpost that was dedicated to showing the University of

Nebraska-Lincoln football game. The game was being projected onto a big screen with speakers on both sides in a partitioned off area that was about the size of a movie theater. Just outside the entrance was a large black slate chalkboard that had red writing on it reading "Go Big Red." As we watched people file in and out of this area, it seemed each person knew without being told that this is where to watch the football game. [26]

When we walked into the room, we independently noticed the area consisted of men, women, and children of all ages scattered about lying on blankets, sitting in lawn chairs, or standing around. As we walked around and tried to take in the experience, we came across a man and his young son experiencing the football game together. The little boy could not have been more than four or five. He wore fire engine red overalls with black boots and carried a stuffed version of the Cornhusker's mascot "Lil Red." He did not appear to be overly interested in the game on the screen; however, every few minutes the father would yell out "Go Big Red" and the young boy would immediately stop what he was doing, turn to the television, and point to the screen and respond "Go Big Red." Perhaps this was a father's way of staying engaged with his son to make sure he knew where he was while he watched the game. To understand what we were experiencing, we moved closer and waited for this individual to shout the cadence "Go Big Red." When he shouted the words loud enough for his son to hear, he responded immediately with the same words and again pointed at the television. One of us took this time to make an offhand comment "your boy sure does love the Huskers". The father responded by saying "yeah, I got to make sure I train'em young." This example is further testament to the importance of transmitting cultural values. Moreover, when events and activities like this occur, it becomes central to a person's identity (ATHERLEY, 2006). [27]

The theme of harvest was also supported by the participants' idea of regularity. The regularity of the processes associated with farming has been institutionalized over a period of time, thus, making the celebratory nature of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football a group norm. During a focus group session, a participant described an event in his community:

"My mother is from Kansas and my father is from Missouri. My parents met while in college in Kansas. Neither of them have any Nebraska ties. The only thing that brought my parents here was my father's job in insurance. Every year when we played Oklahoma, my family along with two other families in our neighborhood would roast a pig the night before, eat all day, and watch the game. To this day I don't know what was more important the game or the pig or just being around each other. My wife would say being around each other because she was in one of the families that got together with us." [28]

Events like these show that sports can infiltrate culture enough to influence group dynamics. These events are reminiscent of the German sociologist Ferdinand TÖNNIES' (1957) ideas of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* [community and society]. It is clear here that the traditional idea of harvest emerged as modern institutionalized culture. "Institutionalization yields robust culture, which in turn

creates entities known as institutions" (BAKER et al., 2006, p.6). In this case, the idea of a yearly harvest manifested itself into a strong local culture that supports University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. [29]

4.2 United we stand

While attending a nationally televised University of Nebraska football game we witnessed a series of events that provided evidence for the theme united we stand. This theme is also supported by several participant comments. Numerous respondents suggested that people in Nebraska are united around a set of values that some might consider being traditional American values. Interestingly, participants made comparisons of American values to what they believe are the values needed to play football at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. During an occasion of participant observation, we witnessed some of these values expressed publically. On a clear and unseasonably cold night for late summer in Nebraska, the Huskers took the field in a stadium filled to capacity with a total of 81,067 people. Standing among the thousands there was a consistent deafening hum from the crowd. It seemed as if everyone was speaking and cheering at the same time, making it virtually impossible to know what anyone was saying. As the time drew near for the team to make its entrance onto the field, the crowd noise became even louder in anticipation of an event that brings both team and spectators together as one. Like many rituals in sports, most events affect people both personally and socially (HART & BIRRELL, 1981). Prior to the start of the game, the importance of the relationship between fan and team became evident. [30]

As the announcer readied the fans for the game, he said, "And now let's meet your Cornhuskers." The jumbo screen then displayed video from current players walking down a hallway making their way to the field. We later learned this event is called the "tunnel walk" and dates back decades in University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. This event seemed to bring the fans and the team together as one. Activities like this inherently become a part of a larger event overtime and ultimately help create a social reality (MORGAN, 2006). [31]

As with all things social, a social reality is socially constructed (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1966; NEWMAN, 1995). The American tradition of singing the National Anthem before the sporting event did not appear out of the ordinary. Yet, something was different about this moment. It is commonplace to hear cheers and outburst during the National Anthem in anticipation of a sporting event. Nevertheless, on this occasion when the announcer instructed the crowd to stand, they rose in silence, seemingly waiting in respect. With the crowd standing silently for a moment, the announcer took an opportunity to remind everyone there is something more important than this on-field conflict by asking the crowd to "please place your right hand over your heart," and the crowd complied in almost complete unison. This display of community through the symbolic yet meaningful gesture of placing the hand over the heart promotes calls communal bonding (TURNER, 1974; INGHAM & McDONALD, 2003). Moreover, it involves a level of social commitment. Thus, during this event it became evident that

socialization through a shared communal experience further solidifies the importance of values (PETRIE, 1971; WEED, 2008). [32]

The unity expressed through the crowd behavior at the beginning of the football game is not the only evidence of the theme "united we stand"; participants also echoed the idea in the midst of the football teams recent losing seasons.

"We have not been doing well as of late. But people still support the Huskers. Win or lose, people believe in them. I think they give people a sense of pride and let the country know who we are. Face it; we're in the middle of the country and not known for much, so it felt good when we were winning in the 80s and 90s. Winning became part of our identity so like marriage and family we have to take the good with the bad and support the Huskers no matter what." [33]

This quote is an example of the ritual nature in solidarity that displays a sense of pride and provides symbolism to the country that Nebraska is a first-class state and embodies ideal values. Rituals like this further communicate that people understand and support specific values and are able of satisfying expectations (HART & BIRRELL, 1981). [34]

4.3 Farm values

For years, athletic scholarships have been used as a means to earn a college education and increase one's social and economic status. Every year, student athletes from all over the world enter college, bringing with them their cultural backgrounds, conflicts, and religion. Perhaps one of the most intriguing findings in this study was the desire of some of those within the local farming community to maintain community values for their children, but not wanting to perpetuate the farming lifestyle. [35]

In rural communities, the enculturation of values occurs through a process of institutionalization that helps perpetuate traditions that are developed over time. SCOTT (1987, 2001) describes institutionalization as a process that creates a system of values. Like most societies around the world, establishing a system of values is vital to strengthening the community. This establishment of values ultimately leads to the institutionalization of a normative value structure. However, outside pressures can lead to a process of deinstitutionalization (ZILBER, 2002). A small rural community we visited is doing its best to maintain its system of values. One of the oldest members in the community spoke of what it means to him: "If we didn't do things in our community that reinforced our values our children would forget where they came from, or worse our values would disappear." A local high school teacher expressed another example of a community's unyielding quest to perpetuate its value system. She spoke of a young man who was able to try out for the football team at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"We are a small struggling farming community. The last few years have been very hard on a lot of people in this community; people are literally losing the farm, so when Ken (pseudonym) was able to walk on the football team he became a bright spot. Ken is the perfect young man to uphold our unofficial obligation of young kids who leave coming back and speaking with our kids about how small town values can help you survive in the world. But even better than that, we take as many kids as we can to a game and allow them to see one of ours run out on the field and see what we represent. We make signs and hold them up and let people know where we are from and that we support the Huskers and especially one boy in particular. It's just one way we let people know who we are and just how proud of our community we are. Selfishly, it kind of puts us on the map and reassures me that farming values are still what our children need." [36]

Sporting events increase the social status of a city and enhance the quality of life in a community (SCHIMMEL, 2006). In this case, a young man playing football at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers an entire community hope and reassures them that its value structure is essential to long-term success. Moreover, it helps maintain the belief in the economic vitality of farming. In fact, this small rural community is doing what WERBNER (2005) calls the translocation of culture. By Ken leaving for school and making the team, it most assuredly helps maintain a value structure. More importantly, it exposes its cultural values to an outside community and further institutionalizes its way of life. [37]

The decreasing population of privately owned farms has affected the economic status of the agribusiness in small towns (TONTIS, 2000). While a decrease in local economic opportunities can be devastating to a community, according to TONTIS (2005), athletic events have the ability to increase social capital in rural communities. Social capital can be defined as value within social networks (DEKKER & USLANER, 2001). BOURDIEU (1986) described social capital as assets that provide for the greater good. [38]

A small town on the Colorado/Nebraska border offered an amazing display of social capital. On a crisp fall day with the air just moist enough to chill the bone, one of us was introduced to a young man that was a University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate and former football player. He came back home to visit and talk to a local youth group about college. This demonstrates what COX (2000) noted as strengthening community via social relationships. In this small rural community, the time a person spends as a college football player gives him social status as well as social capital and allows for further development of complex social community networks (JONES & ALEXANDER, 1998; ATHERLEY, 2006). [39]

5. Conclusion

For years, baseball has been seen as America's game; however, all evidence points to the state of Nebraska notably coming together around the sport of football. The ritualistic nature in which the state residents show allegiance to University of Nebraska-Lincoln football demonstrates their values and qualities as

a community. Yet, it also further demonstrates evidence that sports deserve to be examined as independent cultural activities (FOLEY, 1990). [40]

In Nebraska, football is not just a sport that occurs in the fall or as a means to pass the time on a Saturday afternoon. Football is a way of life. Football exists as more than a sport and creates a community that connects individuals through an allegiance donned in red clothing. It creates a sense of pride and recognition for each individual, each community and for the state. Individuals are trained at the youngest of ages to respect the traditional norms and thus, continually create a social reality of importance. Participation in athletic events through viewership, financial donations, and symbolic displays becomes a religious act within the community. Just as Blue Laws were created to protect the sanctity of Sunday church services, an unspoken normative dynamic has been created to protect the sanctity of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. The customary practice of a community gathering to view a game is similar to the practice of attending church. Let us be clear, we are not viewing University of Nebraska-Lincoln football as a deity or savior in any way. However, it does metaphorically explain the actions of those that follow the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football and consider themselves a part of the fan base. Financial donations made to the university help ensure athletic dominance and longevity; they are similar to donations made to religious organizations to pronounce faith. [41]

The loyalty of The University of Nebraska-Lincoln football fan base produces an affiliation similar to religious views and affiliations that are represented through community expectations, commitments, and coercive conversation. An individual who experiences this level of commitment would be no more likely to miss a game than a parishioner would miss a religious service. [42]

The mental, social, and physical commitment to football is represented through community actions that promote game viewership and supportive community gatherings. These community actions and interactions are representative of the community's connection to The University of Nebraska-Lincoln football program that produces a social reality of normative actions dedicated to supporting sports. This happens because over time, norms become embedded into the everyday life of the community to the point at which they are indistinguishable from one another. The social reality surrounding University of Nebraska-Lincoln football helps guide the actions of the local communities and helps create a sense of identity through self-pride and community purpose. Even if many of the community members are unaffiliated academically with the institution they obtain a connection to the university via the football program. Football creates a subculture with socially constructed norms and beliefs. The subculture is reinforced by the symbolism and cultural norms that are created to display the community's dedication and loyalty. These actions develop a sense of unity between the community and university that creates the perception that being a member of the community means you are also accepting the role of supporting the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football team. [43]

This social reality of University of Nebraska-Lincoln football community exists only in the meaning of the experience for the individual. Football becomes an emotional support system for the state and influences the thoughts, actions and values of its residents. The socially appropriate actions and athletic affiliations are taught to the children of the community at the earliest possible age. The symbolism, team loyalty, and community connection is exerted through family trends and reference groups in which a social reality of being born into a fan base is constructed. The social reality thus creates the idea that to be a part of the community, each member will express their loyalty to football in a manner that their symbolic actions become entrenched over many generations. Thus, this is not a choice or something to be bargained with: it is a way of life. [44]

Football season in the state of Nebraska is a time to come together as a single network of communities with the purpose of supporting a value structure that is expressed as University of Nebraska-Lincoln football. Communities gather for the purpose of sharing experiences, visiting friends, and to revel in state pride. Town Halls host events supporting football to represent the unity of members of the community. This unity is developed with a connection to Nebraska football as the football season coincides with the agricultural harvest. For many, this represents a time in which supplies are plentiful, hard work has paid off, and an appreciation for understanding the daily toils of farming is celebrated by sharing food from individual farms and cheering on the cornhuskers. Football contains the essence of farming. The work, dedication, nurturing, and preparation is built into a twelve week period in which so many things can go right just as they can go wrong. An early frost can severely limit a crops output just as an injury can dramatically affect the performance of a team. This association between farming and football creates the community connection, and because of the unique agricultural history of the state of Nebraska, this connection exists statewide. [45]

Another connection between the agricultural lifestyle of the state of Nebraska and University of Nebraska-Lincoln football is the focus on creating and uniting behind a value structure. Just as a team must come together and unite behind a specific set of values and goals, farming communities rely on these values to maintain belief in the economic vitality of farming. The athletes on a football team must learn to work together and work unselfishly for the greater good and success of the team. This same value structure can be associated with farmers who often rely on one another for assistance in times of need. Communities work together unselfishly for the greater good of the whole community to offer hope and reassurance. These value structures become central to a person's identity. This value structure in Nebraska is considered to be an example of traditional American values of hard work, family, and community. This unifying concept is also seen in team-sports, in that individuals lose their identity as a person in exchange for a greater team identity. The similarities between the sport of football and farming are in the values structures of each activity. [46]

The greatest benefit of being a part of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln football fan base is the communal bonding. The social commitment of gathering to view the game and community coordination for planning events throughout the season

creates a community bond that is nurtured and passed down along traditions lines. The act of supporting Nebraska football is not just about football, it is about maintaining a set of standards for the community, providing hope in difficult economic times, and most importantly, developing a sense of national identity for communities located in unfamiliar parts of the country. Communal bonding is a process of socialization that solidifies the importance of values and truly creates the experience of being a part of the Nebraska football nation. [47]

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