

McFarland, USA Movie Project

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Introduction

Summary

McFarland, USA is a movie based off of a true story. The movie begins when Coach White gets fired. Coach White and his family then moved to McFarland which is primarily a Latino community. This change was rough for his family, and his family were considering moving away immediately. However, Coach White's wife convinced the family to attempt to make the best out of their situation.

Once at McFarland High School, Coach White struggled to gain the respect of his peers. He did not trust anyone and was scared and frustrated with his surroundings. Many of the families in McFarland live in poverty which was a change of scenery for Coach White. At McFarland High School, Coach White found out there were many fast kids during his PE class. Seeing these kids run, Coach White decided to attempt to revive a cross-country team. He barely got enough runners in order to be considered a cross-country team.

After the team was created, Coach White figured out just how rough these kids' lives were. During some of the races, they experienced racist remarks and comments from their peers. Also, Coach White almost lost multiple members of his team due to cross-country taking away from their work as pickers. This work is extremely tiresome and painful on the body as Coach White found out when he joined them in picking. Lastly, one of the best runners on the team, Thomas, was sitting on the edge of a bridge when Coach White approached him. Thomas was there because of constant fights that occurred at his home. Coach White talked him out of doing anything and encouraged him to talk and he listened.

Once the team is created, the team actually performed well winning multiple dual meets. Since they keep winning, there was potential to make the California State Finals. The community of McFarland embraced this team and together they had a car wash to get the team better equipment. Also, the community helps celebrates Coach White's oldest daughter quinceañera. This celebration ended in gang violence which made Coach White consider a cross-country position at another school.

Despite this attack, the family did not want to leave. There were people from the community who stepped in to protect his daughter from being seriously hurt. After McFarland made state, they actually won with many members of the McFarland community attending the race. The movie ends with the Coach staying in McFarland, and by announcing to the audience that all of the members on the team attended college.

Relevance to Sport Sociology

McFarland, USA is a sports movie showing how both sports and society interact. This movie showed how a community can embrace and root for the success of their youth through sports. Also, it showed people who were deviant from this community, and how their deviance can have a drastic impact on their communities. Lastly, race plays an extreme factor in this movie. The McFarland community experiences many stereotypes and generalizations from other communities, which affects the way they are treated by others. Overall, this movie shows the audience how sports can lead to community unification as well as how sports can show social inequality.

Sociological Theory

Functionalism

Functionalism is the sociological theory that is most applicable throughout McFarland, USA. This theory shows society as a system full of interconnected parts. These interconnected parts create stability and order (Nickerson, 2024). The main concepts of functionalism are latent and manifest functions. Manifest functions are the intended and expected consequences, while latent functions are the non-intended consequences (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 55).

McFarland, USA demonstrates how both latent and manifest functions shape communities, which helps illustrate a key concept of functionalist theory.

Once Coach White arrived at McFarland High School, his goal was to leave as soon as possible. However, during a PE class he taught he found out many of the kids were fast runners. With this in mind, he decided to ask the principal to reinstate a cross-country team. The goal for the creation of this team was to compete and win. This correlates with manifest functions and is an expected consequence of creating a cross-country team with fast runners. From this, there became so many non-intended consequences that benefited the cross-country team as well as the community of McFarland.

When the cross-country team kept winning, it gave the community a source of pride and support. This support was shown even before the team qualified for state in a car wash in order to give the team better equipment. After the team qualified for state, the community of McFarland kept showing even more support for the team. This support also came during the state final where many members of the community showed up for the team. Notably, a store owner who never closed his store in twenty-five years closed his store on the day of the meet to support the team. This positive side effect of community unification motivated the McFarland runners to give their all during the race.

The cross-country runners also experienced non-intended consequences that changed the course of their lives. Cross-country became an escape from their hard lives and brought them closer to each other and their families. This is shown through their support for one another and pride in each other's success. Also, by running cross country the possibility of attending college started to look possible. College seemed like a far-fetched idea for these kids, but all of the kids who were on the team attended and graduated from college.

Conflict

From the perspective of conflict theory, the picking scenes showed unfair power and control the farm owners had over the pickers. This theory suggests society is always fighting for a limited number of resources (Janse, 2025). In McFarland, USA, the pickers had practically no other choice except to pick crops. This hard and exhausting work was not even paid by the hour but rather by how much they picked. This made the pickers push their bodies to the limit just for the chance to make money. The picking scenes in McFarland, USA showed how inequality can restrict opportunities for success.

Symbolic Interactionism

A symbolic interactionism approach maintains the belief individuals modify their behaviors to meet the needs of a present and immediate environment (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 66). This is shown very clearly with the character Danny Diaz. Danny was viewed as the weakest runner of the group and someone who would never contribute to the success of the team. In cross-country, only the top five runners are counted towards the final score. Through the early parts of the season, he was constantly viewed and treated as the "weakest link". These interactions begin to change when Coach White and his teammates start to embrace his effort and

resilience. These interactions start to change his attitude and behavior towards running. In fact, during the state meet one of the runners ran too fast at the beginning and gassed out. McFarland High School was more than likely not going to be able to get first place due to this. However, when Danny passed his teammate, he gave him a nod and was able to get fifth place on his team. By being fifth place, Danny was able to have his time have a drastic importance to the result of the state meet which they won. His ability and belief in himself to rise to the occasion for his team shows a key symbolic interactionism idea that his ability and belief in himself were reshaped by his social interactions.

Chapters Related to McFarland, USA

Chapter 11: Race and Ethnicity in Sport

The United States of America is one of the most diverse countries in the entire world. Many people come from all over to have an opportunity at the “American Dream”. When people come to the United States, they bring their own cultures and identities with them. However, many individuals around the United States partake in interpersonal racism. Interpersonal racism is a stereotypical, discriminatory, and prejudicial form of racism that occurs when someone of one race treats someone differently based off of preconceived notions (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 397). Interpersonal racism affects how people in society treat each other.

Interpersonal racism begins at the beginning of the movie when Coach White and his family moved to McFarland. Originally, the family viewed McFarland as dangerous and wanted to leave. This belief was reinforced when they saw fights occurring at school and how impoverished the community looked. Also, even other parents from other schools showed worry and sympathy for Coach White’s family for moving from a rich community to McFarland. These

beliefs of preconceived notions continued to grow until Coach White and his family saw just how difficult the lives of their peers were.

A main turning point in the movie is when Coach White joins his players in picking food. He found out the day to day lives of his team and began to realize his team was trapped in being unable to get potential opportunities. The goal was to survive the day and put food on the table rather than build towards a future. Coach White figured out through picking how disciplined and dedicated his team was. Also, he learned every single member of the team considered each other family because they understand each other. This helped him with coaching his team because he now understood his team can use the discipline, dedication, and brotherhood to unite and win in cross-country.

While running, the McFarland High School cross-country team faced an extremely difficult challenge. This challenge was participating in a sport that was predominately white. Since the sport was predominately white, McFarland's cross-country team experienced a sense of not belonging. These feelings were enhanced by what the other runners were saying as well as the other coaches.

Other schools had a feeling of superiority over the McFarland cross-country team. A feeling of superiority can lead to racism, prejudice, or discrimination in order to maintain an advantageous social position (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 395). It took McFarland winning dual meets and qualifying for state in order for them to be given some respect from their peers. Once McFarland showed they belonged, it then led to the high school winning many more state championships in cross-country.

There are many examples of athletes tearing down racial walls in order to open opportunities for younger generations. One of the most prominent examples would be Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. During his time in Major League Baseball, he experienced much pressure and racism by his peers. Baseball at this time was segregated with the MLB and Negro Leagues. Jackie Robinson was given an opportunity to play in MLB due to his talent and his ability to “have the guts to not fight back” (Humphries, 2023). Without Jackie Robinson’s courage and bravery, racism in MLB would have continued.

Chapter 4: The Impact of Sport on Culture

Culture is best defined as the shared knowledge, values, language, norms, and behavioral patterns that are passed down from generation to generation (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 117). Culture has a tremendous effect on how individuals interact with each other in society. Society provides a form of social structure. The two main components of culture, material and nonmaterial, have an effect on how people live their lives.

Material culture includes the physical objects that societies create and use. Material culture is clearly shown throughout McFarland, USA and shows how McFarland compares to other communities. The team bus the McFarland cross-country team used to travel to their meets showed how less privileged they were compared to other teams. Their bus was less than half the size of the other buses and was worn down. Also, when McFarland got off the bus their differences in equipment showed. Coach White paid out of pocket to give his team a uniform. He found shoes and a uninform at cheap discounts. This drastically differs from the other cross-country programs with nice uniforms as well as warm-up suits.

Nonmaterial culture includes the things shaping society that are intangible. These include beliefs, values, norms, and ideology (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 118). The belief of hard work is shown throughout the whole movie. The kids at McFarland High School show their hard work and dedication to provide support for their families. They believe if they do not work hard, then they are failing their families. In McFarland, respect for elders is a critical belief every kid shares. The kids believe they are a representation of their elders and want to act in a way that shows respect to them. In many cultures once kids grow up, they leave their elders and become out of touch with them. However, in McFarland many elders live with their families and are taken care of by their family.

In McFarland, support was given by the community for their members. For example, when Coach White originally moved, he was given a chicken by his neighbor. Gifting a chicken to someone is viewed as a sign of respect. Originally this chicken frustrated the family, however eventually they started to embrace this gift. They embraced this gift by providing the chicken food and allowing it to live on their premises.

Symbols provide an important aspect on culture. Symbols are items that possess meaning and represent something of resemblance to a society (Delaney & Madigan, 2021, p. 119). While driving to one of their first meets, the team sees a huge mountain on the horizon. The team learned they would be running on this mountain during their race and were overwhelmed. When they saw this, they believed they would not perform well in their meet. They did not believe they were prepared to take this challenge on. This belief had an influence on the outcome and made the team finish last. Coach White took accountability for not preparing them for this mountain and led an extremely difficult practice after this meet. After this practice he told the team the

mountains they run on are nothing compared to the obstacles they deal with in their everyday lives.

Subcultures provide identity through shared views and beliefs. However, there are times where subcultures can be dangerous to a society. In McFarland, USA there is a gang subculture shown. There are multiple gangs in the community who fight over territories. These fights over territories even lead to an implied stabbing scene where Coach White's daughter was injured but protected by members of the community.

Outside Reading

NFL: Violence Sells, but at What Cost

Concussions are a topic of discussion for many in the world of player safety in the NFL. Originally, people just viewed concussions as something that passes by after the short-term effects occurred. By studying the brain of Mike Webster, Dr. Bennett found a buildup of protein called "tau" forming in clumps. These clumps kill cells that control and regulate the brain and help with its functions. This discovery led to Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy to be discovered (Singh, 2023). When CTE was found out, it led the NFL to have stricter protocols as well as more funding for research to improve player safety.

Violence is a common and dangerous part of football. In the NFL, they have implemented protocols and procedures to see if specific collisions need to remove players from a game. In order for a player to reenter a game, they must go through a neurological test before they are allowed to reenter the game (Rhoden, 2007). While full understanding of concussions and CTE is not currently known, practices are being implemented to reduce the potential for long-term effects.

In McFarland, USA, Coach White initially came in as an assistant football coach. McFarland's football team was not good and were severely undersized compared to their competition. One of the players, Johnny Sameniego, experienced a hard hit by an opposing player. Johnny showed signs of a concussion, but the head coach kept him out there to have the proper number of players on the field. If Johnny left the field, the team would have to play with only ten players on the field. Coach White overruled his head coach because he identified and cared about the symptoms Johnny was dealing with. After this act, Johnny gained respect for Coach White and helped recruit for the cross-country team Coach White was attempting to revive.

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

Theories such as conflict, symbolic interactionism, and functionalism help show the events and situations occurring during the McFarland, USA. This film shows how race can have an impact on sports and how race influences and shapes society. Also, the film shows the impact of culture on sports as well as how sports can have an impact on a culture. Lastly, the movie shows how respect is earned through actions, such as when Coach White protected Johnny from playing football with concussion symptoms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, McFarland, USA provides its audience with evidence about how sports and sociology intersect. This intersection is shown through McFarland High School's cross-country team and their everyday lives. Their everyday life is what makes them strong and able to deal with any challenges life throws their way. Coach White as a coach was able to provide a

positive and hopeful influence for his team and their future. This optimism for their future leads to the team having success and the community to unite together to cheer on their youth. Overall, this movie shows sports are able to be used as a unifier that reflect and transform beliefs and culture.

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