UNDERSTANDING INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE CANADIAN SPORT SYSTEM: A NETWORK APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

In order for Canada to achieve more gold medal podium performances it is vital that those organizations, agencies, and individuals involved in delivering sport work collaboratively and effectively to maximize existing resources. Towards achieving this end, Sport Canada has identified as one of its goals to increase "collaboration, communication, and cooperation amongst the partners in the sport community" (Canadian Sport Policy, 2002, p.19). In order to ensure the efficient use of scarce resources, a co-ordinated collaboration among National and Provincial sport organizations, schools, YMCAs, sport clubs, leagues, or Boys and Girl's clubs, is seen as an effective way to improve the outcomes of athletes.

However, it is unclear as to the level and quality of integration that is already in place and the current and future impact of these existing, and potential linkages. Thus, research was needed to develop and evaluate critical linkages that will increase the "performance, effectiveness, and efficiency of the Canadian sport system" (Canadian Sport Policy, p. 3). **Therefore, the purpose of this research was to examine the quality and quantity of existing partnerships in order to determine the effectiveness of existing networks of local sport organizations.** A network approach was selected for this research given the extensive literature surrounding cooperative behaviour of organizations within networked environments (Berry, Brower, Choi, & Goa, 2004). This ongoing program of research has focused attention on the social structure of networks wherein actors participate in and are reference points for other actors' decisions (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1991). In this interpretive view of networks, Knoke and Kuklinski suggest that the relationships a given organization has with others in the system may affect that focal actor's perceptions, beliefs, and behaviour. Two key concepts encompassed within the literature exploring inter-organizational networks include the structure of the networks, and the relations among actors and their behaviour as a consequence of their location in the network.

Indicators of network structure include cohesion and clustering which evaluate, according to Webster and Morrison (2004), its density. Network density, the most common measure of cohesion, considers the extent to which all possible ties are present for any one network (Webster & Morrison). Given the apparent lack of cohesion in networks encompassing sport organizations, this measure of network density holds particular relevance for this research. The types of ties that link actors, or nodes, in a network are also of particular importance given that strong ties are associated with enhanced trust and influence between actors. An examination of the ties that link organizations that delivery the same sport holds promise to enhance our understanding of the factors that inhibit strong ties between organizations.

METHODS

The connections and levels of dependence between organizations were assessed using a mixed methods approach. First a survey was used to gather quantitative data concerning the structure of the networks of basketball providers in the Regional Municipality of Niagara. The survey tool also gathered information pertaining to the location of these organizations in their respective network, the resources shared between organizations, the level of trust between partners, as well as the organizations or individuals deemed crucial to network formation and sustainability. The survey was distributed to over 30 providers of basketball and their network partners in the Niagara region, and to the national and provincial governing bodies for basketball. Data

from the surveys was entered into the network analysis software titled UCINET 6 for analysis. This software enabled the researches to capture the structure of the network, density of the network, the equivalency of actors, and the types and number of ties between and among organizations in the network. Importantly, this software generated visual maps of the network for further investigation.

In the second phase of the research, a qualitative approach was used to gather information about the factors that contribute to or limit interdependence and collaboration between organizations in the network. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals identified by survey respondents as "crucial" to the overall formation and integrating of the network, and those that represented organizations with central positions in the networks. The interviews enabled the researchers to expand on the information gathered in the survey, and to uncover information about the institutional (regulative, normative, cognitive) structures that inhibited or facilitated integration and interdependence among network partners. In sum, 25 interviews were completed and the data was analysed using the qualitative software package N-Vivo 2.0.

RESULTS

The results of this research provided insight into the level of cohesive and collaborative interaction among the two networks under study as only a limited number of horizontal ties between same-sport providers were found to reside in the same locale. Similarly, the vertical linkages between the providers of basketball, that is linkages between the local organizations and their national or provincial governing bodies, exhibited little collaborative interaction related to shared resources, funding, information, or marketing. Overall, the level of trust among network partners was low, with several respondents suggesting that autonomy and control over decision-making were the primary reasons for low levels of integration across organizations.

DISCUSSION

The factors contributing to the limited level of integration across same-sport providers included the lack of expertise to effectively manage inter-organizational partnerships, the existing policies and procedures of the organizations, as well as the historical and take-for-granted assumptions that perpetuated autonomous actions by these organizations. This was particularly interesting in light of the policies of Sport Canada and Canada Basketball, the national governing body for this sport in Canada, that have sought to encourage increased interaction among local sport organizations. Factors that facilitated interaction were primarily those related to resources acquisition as the respondents clearly understood the advantages of partnerships as a means to access facilities, coach training, insurance, and sponsorship revenue.

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