

# National Sport Organisations' culture and participation in sport

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## Aim of paper and research questions

This study addresses the relationship between the culture of National Sport Organisations (NSOs) and sport participation. In particular, it examines *how different organisational cultures affect participation in sports*. Despite years of coordinated policy interventions, participation rates in many countries remain low. The Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002) envisages that by 2012 “a significant higher proportion of Canadians from all segments of society are involved in quality sport activities at all levels and in all forms of participation” (p. 16 ).

The goal of this policy and one of its main instruments, the Sport Participation Development Program (SPDP), is inherently an attempt to produce a cultural change in the delivery of, and participation in, sport. This poses a number of challenges to the NSOs' organisational cultures because it involves the creation of shared systems of meaning that are accepted, internalised, and acted upon at every level of these organisations. Yet, Canadian NSOs have been under increased pressure to become more professional by demonstrating greater self-sufficiency, effectiveness and performance. This promotes an organisational culture that tends to neglect the values of sport participation emphasising socialising experiences and enjoyment.

## Literature review

Studies on the culture of sport organisations are a rarity (Colyer, 2000; Smith & Shilbury, 2004; Girginov, 2006; Choi & Scott, 2008), and virtually non-existent in relation to participation. Perspectives on organisational culture abound, resulting in a plurality of its operationalizations. This study follows Cooke and Lafferty (1989) who conceptualised organisational culture as encompassing common assumptions, values and beliefs shared by its members, and which guide the way individuals think and behave. Cooke and Lafferty developed three clusters of organisational styles and associated behavioural norms including: (a) *constructive* (achievement, self-actualizing, humanistic-encouraging, affiliative); (b) *passive-defensive* (approval, conventional, dependent, avoidance ); and (c) *aggressive-defensive* (oppositional, power, competitive, perfectionistic). This study examines the culture of Canadian NSOs using a combined qualitative and quantitative approach.

## Research design and proposed data analysis

Ten Canadian NSOs participating in the 2007-2008 SPDP formed the focus of the study.. These NSOs represent sports (Alpine Skiing, Athletics, Badminton, Ten-pin Bowling, Cycling, Gymnastics, Hockey, Rowing, Swimming and Volleyball) with different histories, constituencies and structures, and varying degrees of professionalisation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a senior executive and the SPDP representative within each participating NSO. Interview questions were based upon the cultural dimensions of sport organisations as developed by Smith and Shilbury (2004). In addition, the on-line version of the OCI – complemented by specific questions about the implementation of the SPDP – was

employed to survey the organisational culture of the NSOs. The OCI was administered and processed by Human Synergetics Inc.. Three categories of NSOs' members were surveyed: (a) *executive* (President, CEO, Secretary General, Board members); (b) *department heads* (e.g., sport development, finance, marketing, IT); and (c) *front line staff* (e.g., coaches, volunteers, technical personnel). This categorisation is consistent with Martin's (1992) three perspectives on organisational culture including: integration (a); differentiation (b); and fragmentation (c).

### Discussion of progress

People's participation in sport is marked by an interaction between personal interest and cultural context, provided in part by NSOs. It is akin to a process of acculturation where people have to cross three critical hurdles before they become sport participants. These are; learning the correct way of doing sport, learning to perceive and identify the benefits of sport, and learning to define the effects of sport as positive or pleasurable. Defined that way sport participation implies that NSOs should be seen as cultural agents as well.

Canadian NSOs promote both participation and excellence by providing services to the public and athletes. It follows that NSOs are likely to have at least two distinct 'cultural orientations' – participation and consumer/elite. NSOs that do not subscribe to a 'participation culture' requiring the promotion of consistent values, policies and services will be less likely to contribute to the behavioural changes needed to turn an individual into a physically active person. Lera-Lopez and Rapun-Garante's (2005) study landed support for this reasoning. They found that there is a difference between the factors influencing sport participants and sport consumers, as each category would have different perceptions and expectations.

At the time of writing data collection is in the final stages. A selection of the results will be available for the congress presentation.

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