

Epistemic communities and knowledge-based professional networks in sport policy and governance: a case study of the Canadian sport for life leadership team

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Background

There have been recent discussions regarding the emergence of new organisational forms in response to increasing political and environmental change (Misener & Misener, 2015). Furthermore, Thibault and Harvey (2013) have also called for more research that examines contemporary developments within the Canadian sporting context – particularly as they relate to governmental involvement in sport. This investigation responds to the above calls by examining the Canadian Sport for Life Leadership (CS4LLT), the group of knowledge-based professionals behind the creation, promotion, and dissemination, of the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) framework (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2014) which has emerged due to growing dissatisfaction and recognition of a plethora of shortcomings of the Canadian high performance sport system.

Objectives

This investigation examined how a network of knowledge-based professionals – the Canadian Sport for Life Leadership Team (CS4LLT) – as a newly emerging organisational form was able to influence the Canadian sport policy and governance process in an attempt to reshape Canadian sport. In particular, the investigation sought to answer the following research question: How has the CS4LLT influenced the Canadian sport policy and governance process? To this end, we draw upon the epistemic community approach to make sense of the CS4LLT as a newly emerging organisational phenomenon (pre-formalization) that was initially designed to overcome high performance related issues within Canadian sport, but has since morphed to a much broader, all-encompassing phenomenon.

Theoretical background

The analysis draws upon Haas' (1992) epistemic community approach to explain the emergence of the CS4LLT. The epistemic community approach was originally formulated by Peter M. Haas in 1992 as part of a special issue in *International Organization* (Haas, 1992) and emphasizes the role of knowledge-based experts in the co-ordination and formulation of the policy making process – particularly for decision making instances that are characterised by technical complexity and uncertainty (Cross, 2013). The benefit of the epistemic community approach compared to other meso-level theoretical policy perspectives (e.g., Advocacy Coalition and Multiple Streams Frameworks) lies in its ability to explain how and why non-state actors are able to influence policy formulation, i.e., once an issue has been identified, how do decision-makers choose a particular course of action, and its utility in demonstrating how knowledge – particularly expert-knowledge – can be used to gain power and influence over the policy-making process.

Methodology

The paper draws upon empirical data collected from a much larger doctoral thesis investigation that examined the role of CS4L and the CS4LLT within Canadian sport. The larger investigation adopted an embedded, exploratory methodological case study design to examine the leadership team (Yin, 1994). Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the entire CS4LLT (n=17) and senior Sport Canada officials (n=5). All interviews were conducted between January and September 2013, most of which took place at the CS4L's National Summit held in Gatineau, Ottawa (28th January - 1st February, 2013). Interviews ranged between 31 and 125 minutes in length and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim producing 824 double-spaced pages for further analysis. The first author was also fully-immersed within the research for an extended period (3 years) which enabled a deeper understanding of the belief system, power dynamics and inner workings of the leadership team.

Results

The analysis centres on the leadership teams' emergence from and influence over the Canadian sport policy process and support the notion that the CS4LLT, as a network of knowledge-based professionals with legitimated and authoritative and policy relevant expertise, was able to influence the Canadian sport policy process through: (i) influencing key governmental actors by (re)framing policy-relevant issues, (ii) establishing knowledge/truth claims surrounding athlete development, and (iii) direct and indirect involvement in and influence over the sport policy renewal process.

Conclusion/discussion

The case of the CS4LLT and its promotion of LTAD illustrates how the discursive interventions of an epistemic community, even in spite of political resistance, can reframe and establish scientific-like truth claims surrounding a policy-relevant issue (such as athlete development) in order to gain influence over the policy process. Over the past decade, the leadership team has used its technical knowledge to socially (re)construct and insert its own interpretation of the athlete development process (i.e. LTAD framework) that would, in time, be adopted and legitimised by government (via Sport Canada) and many sport organisations across Canada as the de facto approach to athlete development. More broadly, the study draws attention to the potential role and importance of knowledge-based professional networks as a fluid, dynamic and responsive approach to organising and managing sport that can reframe policy debates, insert ideas, and enable policy learning.

References

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