

Examining the impact of organisational context on innovation in community sport organisations

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Aim of paper and research questions

Community sport organisations [CSOs] comprise the largest proportion of non-profit organisations in Canada (Hall et al., 2004). These small, volunteer-run organisations exist primarily to benefit members through the delivery of sport-related programs and services at the local level (Cuskelly, Hoye & Auld, 2006). Although CSOs tend to be characterised by a culture of tradition and informality in their operations (Taylor, 2004), they face pressures from internal and external stakeholders to become more professional and formal (Cuskelly et al., 2006). Additionally, the social, economic, and political environments in which they operate are changing.

Our response to these stakeholder demands and changing environments is to innovate. However, we know little about how CSOs innovate, as there has been virtually no empirical study of innovations in CSOs specifically, or sport generally, despite calls for such research (e.g., Mahony & Howard, 2001; Slack, 1997). In an effort to increase our broad understanding of the management of CSOs, we have begun to address this gap in the literature through a systematic investigation of innovation within these organisations. The purpose of this presentation is to examine the impact of organisational context on innovation in community sport organisations.

Literature review

One area of particular interest in the innovation literature is the determinants of innovations (cf. Wolfe, 1994). Damanpour and Schneider (2006) suggest these may be considered at three levels of analysis: (a) managerial (i.e., individuals in leadership or decision making roles), (b) organisational (i.e., elements and characteristics of the organisation), and (c) environmental (i.e., elements external to the organisation). In this presentation, we focus on the impact of the organisational context. CSOs differ in member participation rates (growing, stable, declining), participation structure (team, individual), participation demographics (children, younger adults, older adults), focus (recreational, competitive, mixed), staff involvement (volunteer, paid) and age (old, new) (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Taylor, 2004). We hypothesise that these contextual factors will have an impact on the types of innovation explored or undertaken, as well as the process of innovation itself.

Research design and proposed data analysis

Semi-structured, telephone interviews were conducted with 42 volunteer presidents or designates of CSOs. Curling, soccer, swimming, and ultimate Frisbee were purposefully selected (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) as four sports that differed in organisational contexts. The sample of CSOs was drawn from communities of various sizes in two Canadian provinces

(Saskatchewan and Ontario). Participants were asked to identify and describe recent examples of innovations, which was defined as anything new and different to their organisation (Zaltman, Duncan & Holbek, 1973). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were uploaded to Altas.ti to assist with data analysis. These were organised, reviewed, reflected upon, coded, categorised, compared, and themed (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss, 1994).

Discussion of progress

Preliminary data analysis has revealed some differences in organisational contexts that appear to impact the innovation type and innovation process. Sports with declining membership (e.g., curling) tended to implement innovations, such as new programs, new target markets, and new fee structures, to increase membership numbers and ensure the survival of the clubs. In comparison, we found that innovations focusing on securing access to more playing space were more common in sports with increasing membership (e.g., soccer). Innovations based on social responsibility were more likely in sports with primarily young adult members (e.g., ultimate Frisbee). With respect to the innovation process, paid technical staff proposed many of the innovations in sports with a predominant competitive focus (e.g., swimming). In contrast, volunteer executive board members, club members, and parents were the ones who brought forward most of the innovation ideas in sports with a recreational or mixed focus (e.g., curling, soccer, and ultimate Frisbee).

While there are many other determinants that contribute to innovation (cf. Damanpour & Schneider, 2006), these findings suggest that the innovations CSOs undertake and how they proceed with them appears to be a function of certain contextual factors such as needs, membership, and structure. There is no consistent innovation across all CSOs, and not all CSOs experience innovation in the same manner. These findings have implications for what innovations a CSO many consider or be about to undertake, given contextual factors. An awareness of organisational context is needed in order to promote and encourage innovation within CSOs. As well, they may find it beneficial to look outside of their sport context when seeking innovative solutions to problems that are non-standard within their sport. Future research directions include examining the openness of CSOs to innovations outside of their sport.

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