

Creating Professional Women's Sport Competition: Contribution of Institutional Work

Encel, Kim Jolyon and Phillips, Pamm

Deakin University, Australia

k.encel@deakin.edu.au

Aim

This research aimed to explore the contributions of institutional work in the creation of a new professional women's Australian rules football league in Australia, the Australian Football League Women's competition (AFLW competition). The key research question is: What were the contributions of institutional work in the creation of the AFLW competition?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

In institutional theory terms, management of professional sport has evolved from an amateur ethos to a professional logic where the dominant ways of operating have changed from survival to a strategic focus on products and services that turn a profit (Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014). This transition has required organisational, structural, and human resource management change (Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye, & Darcy, 2006). As such, many sport organisations have moved from being largely run by volunteers who were responsible for all of the operational and strategic responsibilities, to professional entities employing professional staff to deal with the same responsibilities (Dowling et al., 2014; O'Brien & Slack, 2004).

However, there is little research that understands the transition of volunteer to professional sport with an institutional work framework. Institutional work is a key tenet of organizational institutionalism and focuses on the work that actors (or individuals) complete to shape (or contribute to) the institution in which they exist (Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017). Institutional work is often used as the overarching concept where institutional entrepreneurship (i.e., changing an institution), deinstitutionalization (i.e., disrupting an institution) and institutional maintenance (i.e., stabilizing an institution) are discussed (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009).

The Australian Football League (AFL) is the governing body of the largest and arguably most successful football code in Australia (Stewart, Stavros, Phillips, Mitchell, & Barake, 2016). In the case of this research, the AFLW competition represents the first time the AFL (which manages and delivers the men's professional Australian rules football competition) has embraced, supported and created a professional competition for women. The AFLW competition (the institution of interest for the purposes of this research) participants are drawn from amateur Australian rules football women's competitions which have developed chaotically around Australia. Previous literature exploring the transition of a volunteer sport to a professional pursuit has not considered the role that individuals have in contributing to the institution in which they exist. To fill this gap in the literature, this research aimed to explore the institutional work contributions in creating the AFLW competition.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

A case-study approach and qualitative methodology was employed for this research.

Participants were selected based on their previous dedication to amateur women's Australian rules football and subsequent integral management position within the AFLW competition. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes in duration) were conducted with two

AFLW competition managers, six AFLW competition team managers, and seven AFLW competition team coaches. All semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were de-identified, coded line-by-line for discussion relating to institutional work, and cross checked by two researchers.

Results and Discussion

The key institutional work contributions of the AFLW competition managers was getting support from staff members within the AFL to add tasks for the creation of the AFLW competition on top of their full-time allocations. That is, there was a reliance on existing personnel and expertise within the professional governing body of the AFL. The key institutional work contributions of the AFLW competition team managers was the labour required in running the amateur and volunteer women's Australian rules football competitions. By running amateur and volunteer women's Australian rules football competitions, these AFLW competition team managers facilitated participation opportunities for women to play Australian rules football. The key institutional work of the AFLW competition team coaches consisted of often unrecognised coaching contributions within women's football which then created personal opportunities to be hired as AFLW competition team coaches.

Conclusion and Implications

This research revealed that there were important entrepreneurial institutional work contributions in creating the AFLW competition from key actors who have their roots in the largely volunteer and amateur ethos of women's Australian rules football. The foundations to create the AFLW competition were laid by the entrepreneurial key actors within the amateur women's Australian rules football institution in which they were embedded. The contributions to create the AFLW competition included getting work-related support from other employees within the AFL and ensuring that there were participation and pathway opportunities for players and coaches. This research has filled the gap in the literature by understanding the important contributions that actors make to their institution in the transition from volunteer to professional sport. For sport management practitioners, recognising and rewarding work that normally goes unnoticed (in the volunteer to professional transition) could lead to the creation of more successful and sustainable competitions. Future research could employ a macro-level approach to determine if an institution can influence institutional work.

References

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