Understanding Adult Sport Participation and Community: A Multi-National Inquiry

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This symposium communicates three components of a multi-national study aimed at understanding how sport structures and communities impact adult sport participation. The results from each specific inquiry, using multi-national focus group data, will be presented. Following these presentations, the discussant, Dr. Packianathan Chelladurai, will comment on the content and importance of the findings.

Despite significant advances around the world in understanding the participation patterns and motivations of youth sport participants and adult sport spectators, relatively little attention has been given to the underlying factors that impact adult sport participation especially over the life course. Understanding such participation could help sport managers better meet the needs of this consumer group and could lead to greater lifelong sport participation in a variety of contexts. The youth sport literature suggests that sport structure and program implementation strongly influence participation (King, 2002; Rinehart, 2000). Where there are multiple sport opportunities (e.g., elite, recreational, informal), more children participate in sport compared to areas where only one type of structure (e.g., elite) exists. As with other services, more providers offering more and varied choices can increase the size of the market by attracting new market segments (cf. Green, 1998). There is no reason to believe that this is limited to youth sport participation. The structure and variety of sport programs may influence the number and longevity of adult sport participants as well. Sport systems and structures have evolved differently in many parts of the world. One of the major consequences of the industrial revolution in Great Britain was the establishment of public schools, where the youth of nobility and the well to do middle class youth came together and start to play regulated forms of the 'rough games' of the middle class youth (Dunning & Sheard, 1979). The regulation of these schoolyard games led to modern sports such as football, rugby and field hockey, and soon these sports permeated all layers of society, ranging from businesses, churches, universities and neighborhoods. These groups soon founded clubs to administer sport which ultimately led to the development of national and international sport associations. Even as sport became more globalized, nations gave rise to a variety of sport structures. Countries such as the Netherlands, Poland and other continental powers, followed Germany's lead and forced team sports outside the educational system. According to the elite in each country, the English sports were too playful and sports like gymnastics were a better fit with the education system. Currently, education-based sport programs are almost non-existent in these countries. Club-based systems, organized under a national federation, hold a monopoly on participation in team sports. In the U.S., conversely, sport participation became an integral part of the education system. At the same time, a variety of sport structures appeared outside of schools, resulting in a fragmented and chaotic sport system. In Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan, one often will find a mixture of club-based and education-based sport, which is further confounded by a strong presence of corporate sports (Van Bottenburg, 2000). The distinctive sport structures present in these countries provide a natural context in which to study the effects of structural elements on participation decisions. Consequently, this study will examine adult participation in three different national contexts and structures: The Netherlands, The U.S., and South Korea.
International research on sport participation is beginning to demonstrate the importance of community in developing attachment and commitment of participants to certain sport structures. A research project focused on sport participation in the European Union (Van Bottenburg et al., 2005) identified interpersonal factors as one of the key drivers of sport participation. One such factor, social support, consistently correlates with increased exercise adherence particularly for women (Henderson, 1996). Factors related to our need for social affiliation (e.g., Chalip, 2006) suggest the importance of community (e.g., family, neighborhood, school, club) to sport participation. Community can create the requisite social support for individuals to take advantage of new sport opportunities, to become more involved in existing sport settings, or to create their own sport settings. However, many traditional sport structures fail to facilitate a sense of community. It is likely that both structure and community impact adult sport participation. The purpose of this study is to examine adults' sport experiences across three nations with different sport systems: The Netherlands, The U.S., and South Korea. Specifically, the study will compare participants' perceptions of the sport opportunities provided to them through existing sport structures, and will examine the role of community to develop sport and of sport to develop community.

Data will be collected via asynchronous online focus groups, which provide the format necessary to assemble a group of participants who are separated geographically (cf. Burton & Bruening, 2003). Using snowball sampling, 48 participants from each country will be identified. To the extent possible, participants will reflect a balance of genders, and will represent a range of socio-economic classes and sport interest levels (i.e., current, former, and non-participants). Participants in the study will complete a background questionnaire regarding their interest in sport, their participation patterns, and demographic backgrounds. Participants will be placed into one of six focus groups with others from their country. They will be directed to give themselves a pseudonym such that their responses and identities remain confidential throughout the process. There will be two female-only, two male-only, and two coed focus groups in each country. Data will be collected over a 6-8 week period. Following a semi-structured interview guide, a question will be posted every 4-5 days, giving the participants the opportunity to respond to the question and to interact with each other. The moderator will post follow-up questions for clarification or further probing. Data will be coded and analyzed using NVIVO 8 software. An open-coding process will be utilized with data first coded within nation, followed by cross-nation comparisons. Themes will be generated and compared for each research question using the entire pool of data collected from the focus groups.

It is a widely held belief that participation in sport provides multiple benefits ranging from improved health to accruing social capital in the community. Social capital refers to the networks of trust, solidarity and reciprocity that exist in a well functioning community (Putnam, 2000). It provides the basic levels of trust and mutuality which allow people to work together to solve problems or administer activities, as well as provides a sense of belonging and community. Communities are cited for providing structure and meaning to sports, as well as mediating the motivations for and participation in sport (Chalip, 1992). The social capital inherent within communities is apparent in the structure and participation in sport; what requires further investigation are the components of social capital that community members perceive to affect their sport participation. Communities are present in many different forms and structures, and depending on these structures, they can have a positive or negative impact on one's participation in society. By examining the role of community in three different nations, we hope to prov...