Humans, it is often posited, “are inherently social beings” (Guiffre, 2013, p. 1). People shape communities and communities shape people; however, the dynamic between communities and people can be different depending on various attributes such as geographical location of communities or demographic characteristics of inhabitants. Among the most critical attributes that influence the dynamic of this relationship between communities and people are relational attributes of community members. In other words, cohesiveness in the constitutive relationships of community members is crucial for shaping and developing community identity. To this end, Collins proposes that “the more tightly that individuals are tied into a network, the more they are affected by group standards… Isolated and tightly connected groups make us a clique; within such highly cohesive groups, individuals tend to have very homogenous beliefs” (Collins, 1988, pp. 416-417). A structural attribute such as cohesion can be a crucial factor for strategies toward the development of a certain community.

Community development initiatives are beneficial for members of community to facilitate more opportunities for connection and communication across “sectoral, identity, and geographical boundaries” (Gilchrist, 2000, p. 264). In particular, it is argued that networking is a critical element of community development because networking results in robust, yet flexible forms of collective actions (Gilchrist, 2000). Networks of social interaction are shaped and reinforced through different types of activities in people’s daily lives (Cohen, 1985). Social networks of individuals with members of a given community—such as family, friends, colleagues, or neighbors—form their social identities and personal narratives (Maffesoli, 1996). Additionally, members gain access to support and resources through their own social networks within the community. Consequently, one of the most significant aspects of community development is the stimulation and enhancement of people’s capacity to broaden and develop their networks (Gilchrist, 2000).

Although the development and management of community sports can be critical pathways to enhance community networks, its role in network enhancements has not yet been fully disclosed. The National Council of Youth Sports (2013) estimated that more than 60 million children have participated in organized youth sports with more than 200 public organizations and corporations. As the size and impact of youth sports have grown continuously, several studies have reported that youth sports are physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially beneficial for children (e.g., Small, 2002; Vierimaa, Erickson, Cote, & Gilbert, 2012); while many others have disputed their positive influence due to parents’ overzealous involvement (e.g., Martin, Dale & Jackson, 2001; Spies, 2006; Swanson, 2009). Yet despite the attention received by youth sports and their provision of opportunities for adults to broaden their social networks with other community members (e.g., other parents, coaches, etc.), to date no studies have investigated the benefits for adult spectators. Consequently, this study focused on the positive role of youth sport leagues in the community for adults as community members.

The present study explored dynamics of social networks of parents through youth sport leagues. The purpose of this study was to explicate sport-specific social networks so that community sport administrators and scholars might better legislate, organize, and manage the inter-relationships founded through, and developed within, youth sport league participation. The study is further premised on the assumption that youth sport leagues can be developed to boost networking opportunities within communities. To this end, the authors of this study employed social network analysis to map out and analyze socializing effects of parental involvement in community-based youth sport leagues. Social network analysis focuses on the relations among the members of a system rather than the individual characteristics of those members. These analyses provide a stimulating lens through which to explore communities...
due to the fact that they allow scholars to investigate the relations between the people and groups who constitute those communities (Guiffre, 2013). Freeman (2011) illustrated the defining features of social network as: (1) importance of links among social actors, (2) data with relational information, (3) visualization of graphic imagery of networks, and (4) development of mathematical and computational models to explain structural patterns of networks. With these four characteristics, social network analysis provides a unique analytical tool to comprehend group dynamics and structural cohesion (Warner, Bowers, & Dixon, 2012).

More specifically, the authors developed an extensive network analysis of parents’ involvement in youth sport leagues in the Southeastern region of the United States. The sports were tackle football, volleyball, and cheerleading across a range of age divisions (e.g. Pee Wee, Intermediate, Junior, Senior) involving participants ages seven to seventeen. In order to explore the role of youth sport leagues as networking opportunities, a longitudinal research design was used. Pre-season questionnaires were distributed before the season started and post-season questionnaires were distributed at the end of season to assess the networking effects of parental involvement in youth sport leagues. By comparing the dynamics and shapes of social networks of parents between pre-season and post-season, the researchers examined the impact of youth sport leagues in developing community networks. Specifically, the present study compared the mathematically calculated social network indices that elucidate the structural patterns of networks to examine if there were significant differences in terms of the shapes of social networks among parents throughout the season.

Following data collection, matrices of each team’s network of parents were created so that these networks can be visualized through UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). Each visualized network of parents at the team-level was integrated into a network of parents at the league-level so that a multi-level analysis could be conducted. In addition, mathematical social network indices (of cohesions including density, reciprocity, homophily, and reachability) were examined to evaluate the level of cohesions of parents’ networks throughout the season. Outstanding subgroups and cliques were identified highlighting the role and power of each node within parents’ networks for the future community development.

Based on the emerging social networks, further strategic implications for staff and officials of sport leagues, parents, and coaches such as suggestions on policy network structures and hosting events and workshops for participants will be discussed at the presentation.

This study explored the network dynamics of parents in youth sport leagues to investigate the influence of youth sport leagues on community development; however, future studies need to focus on multifacets of relationships by differentiating between different types of relationships (e.g., friendship, trust, advice, small services, large services, etc.) (Warner, & et al., 2012; Wellman & Wortley, 1990).