Locating Sport and Recreation Policy in Rural Community Development

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In North America, the rise of neo-liberal policy agendas has led community development to be driven and mediated largely by organizations other than the state. Consequently, rural communities with small populations experience increasing difficulty in accessing services and resources. In addition, community capacity and metro-adjacency (distance between rural communities and urban centres) further compound the (in)accessibility of community development services and funding. Further, rural Canadian communities have experienced dramatic changes stemming from changes in the agriculture sector and the increasing globalization of primary resource industries upon which many rely. These changes also led to major political shifts. While rural policy was historically considered synonymous with agricultural policy, there is a growing awareness that this is no longer the case and all levels of government are beginning to assume roles in rural policy development. While the role of recreation in developing rural community resilience has been recognized (Oncescu, 2014), little attention has been given to the development of sport and recreation policy and its relationship to broader rural community development. Importantly, rural community development is influenced by diverse contextual factors stemming from, among other things, the extent to which economies are globally or locally based, levels of institutional capacity, and metro-adjacency (Reimer, 2002). While sport in rural contexts is an important social activity (e.g., see Atherly, 2006), the role of sport policy in broader rural community development has not been explicitly interrogated. Thus, in this paper, we examine how the changing political landscape of public policy is affecting the co-production of sport and recreation services in rural communities by examining the public policy agenda that underscores the ‘development’ of sport and recreation in the context of one rural Canadian community.

Purpose
This research will examine the development of sport and recreation policy in one rural community in relation to the broader public policy agenda. We achieve this by addressing the following research objectives: a) to provide a detailed description of the development of sport and recreation policy in one rural community, and b) to understand some of the constraints, barriers, and enablers of managing sport and recreation in rural communities.

Theory
We utilize Balfour, Mitchell, and Molestane’s (2008) framework for understanding rurality to discuss the political context of rural sport and recreation management. This framework is described as a generative theory, incorporating dynamic interactions between variables to analyze data collected in rural contexts. Balfour et al. (2008) described these variables as forces, agencies, and resources that are central considerations for research in rural contexts.

Methodology
In this paper, we employ Challip’s (1995) framework for critical policy analysis to examine the policy structures that support and enable sport and recreation in one rural community. Data are being collected using content analysis of documents and policies at various administrative levels. At the community level, data are being gathered from meeting minutes of the Recreation Committee (who oversees sport and recreation and reports to the municipal council) as well as pertinent policy documents (e.g., the Recreation Action Plan, the Trails Master Plan, and local historical documents). These data are being subjected to critical policy analysis to discuss the legitimations, focusing events, problem definitions, problem attributions, and policy frames that surround their formulation. Comparison of these findings to development policies at the provincial (e.g., The Ontario Municipal Act 2001) and national (e.g., Growing Forward 2) levels are used to draw out some of the complexities of sport and recreation development in rural contexts. The examination of sport, recreation, and development policies at the local, provincial, and national level enables the identification of the nuances of rural sport and recreation. This will allow for further exploration of
the constraints, barriers, and enablers therein, and link these community contexts to broader discussions of sport policy and rural community development in Canada.

Results and Discussion
With less public services and resources, rural communities are left to find creative and innovative ways of remaining resilient and promoting community development. In these attempts, sport and recreation feature prominently. For the community in question, a salient example emerged following the forced amalgamation of three communities in 2001. While amalgamations were enforced to encourage regional development and create more efficient municipal governance structures, the process left newly formed municipal governments to deal with new challenges in their municipalities. In this community, the changes experienced in sport and recreation were particularly salient. Upon examination of these changes, we highlight implications of and for sport and recreation in relation to provincial community development policy.

After amalgamation, in an effort to consolidate sport and recreation services, a Recreation Action Plan was developed, outlining a strategic plan for sport and recreation in the community. Consideration of the legitimations, focusing events, problem definitions/attributions, and policy frames that surround the formulation of this policy are discussed. Within this, we also attend to the public policy agenda (e.g., forced amalgamation, reduced service/resource provision) as well as the unique context of the community (forces, agencies, and resources), in order to provide a discussion of the role that sport and recreation may play in broader community development. In conclusion, our aim in this paper is to highlight the importance of considering the role of sport and recreation in rural community development, and ultimately how it can be managed. As sport remains an important social activity in rural communities, it is understood as a means of generating resilience and promoting community development. Thus the symbiotic role of sport and recreation development and community development should be further interrogated, and policy makers at the community level should be prepared to scrutinize sport and recreation development in regards to both positive and negative outcomes for their community.

References


