A New 'Arena': Social Responsibility through Nonprofit Community Sport

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Introduction / Problem
As awareness of social issues grows in our increasingly connected world, the notion of social responsibility is gaining widespread attention. While corporate social responsibility (CSR) among commercial sector organizations has become a focus of research in the past few decades, studies investigating the practice of social responsibility within nonprofit organizations are much less prevalent (Persson, 2008). Perhaps this is because, as providers of a ‘social good’ or service, nonprofit organizations are automatically viewed as being socially responsible. However, social responsibility encompasses more than just providing a particular ‘good’ to society; it refers to ethical practices and a more generalized concern for the community beyond an organization’s narrow mandate and which is not required by law (Babiak & Wolfe, 2013; Carroll, 1979; Persson, 2008). The justification for and positioning of social responsibility is also intricately linked with an organization’s stakeholder base, where expectations and demands beyond those directly associated with a product or service, can impact an organization’s reputation, financial performance, citizenship behaviour, and customer loyalty among other outcomes (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Ullmann, 1985; Walker & Heere, 2011). To date, the CSR literature in sport has mainly focused on professional sport teams, athlete philanthropy, and major sports events and has examined their involvement in environmental, educational, and humanitarian campaigns (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; 2009; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Carey, Mason, & Misener, 2011; Hamil & Morrow, 2011; Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014; Walker & Heere, 2011; Walters & Tacon, 2011). Indeed, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) argue that sport is a unique context for CSR for four main reasons: passion, economics, transparency, and stakeholder management. While these reasons were developed for the professional sport context, similar unique features of sport can be extended to the nonprofit realm including passion, (collective) governance, transparency and stakeholder management. Research shows that social involvement varies considerably within the sport industry and is partially determined by geographical reach and stakeholder influence (Walker & Parent, 2010). As such, it is important to expand the scope of sport-CSR discourse to include organizations that serve the population at the grassroots/participatory level.

Conceptual Framing
Persson (2008) argued that a type of social responsibility mirroring the CSR movement should also be examined in the nonprofit domain. He warned against assuming that all nonprofit organizations behave ‘responsibly’ merely because they are set up as public benefit organizations. While initial evidence from the nonprofit sector suggests that Carroll’s (1979) four orientations of social responsibility (i.e., economic, legal, ethical and discretionary) are indeed valued by nonprofit organizations (Acar et al., 2001), the data were based on self-reports of CEOs which may not accurately reflect the broader strategic views of decision-making teams/boards - a central component of nonprofit management. Acar et al. (2001) also conclude that other paradigms and ways of research are needed to uncover the complexity of social responsibility in nonprofits and to assess stakeholder influence. In conjunction with the theoretical developments in the literature on social responsibility, institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Garrett, 2004; Oliver, 1991) may also be instrumental in understanding social responsibility in nonprofit organizations. Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how norms, values, and environmental pressures act as forces that enable or constrain an organization’s strategy and actions. When considering social action at the community level, Houlihan (1997) and Marquis, Glynn, and Davis (2007) suggested that there is an underlying value consensus (also known as normative pressure) that guides behaviour of organizations and encourages conformity to particular cultural and social norms. This framework is useful for uncovering the non-economic rationale and conditions under which socially responsible behaviour is likely to occur (Campbell, 2007).
Research Context and Purpose
At the local level, Community Sport Organizations (CSOs) are a prevalent type of nonprofit organization that provide accessible pathways for children, youth, and adults to take part in a range of sport participation opportunities within the club context (Cuskelly, 2004). Given the growing competition and commercialization within the community sport context (Wicker & Breuer, 2011), engaging in social responsibility practices in addition to sport service provision can provide important benefits to the club such as enhanced stakeholder perceptions of the club, increased participation numbers, and greater overall impact on a given community. Indeed, recent research has demonstrated that CSOs are continually broadening their scope and program offerings in order to remain relevant and sustainable. For example, initial evidence suggests that CSOs may engage in social responsibility through environmental initiatives, poverty awareness-raising campaigns, and youth justice issues (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Misener & Doherty, 2009). Thus, a systematic investigation of social responsibility in this context is important to uncover the ways in which CSO mandates are expanding, and explore the notion of inherent responsibility in these nonprofits. The purpose of this study is to examine factors influencing CSOs’ decisions to integrate concerns and action on wider social issues into their organizational mission and how this is perceived to impact their role in the broader nonprofit and voluntary sector’s agenda of community development. The specific objectives of the study are three-fold: (1) explore how nonprofit sport leaders define and understand social responsibility (2) uncover the rationale for engaging in social responsibility practices beyond sport service provision in the community sport context; and (3) explore the norms, values, and pressures that influence social responsibility in CSOs as well as the interorganizational relations that enable or constrain social responsibility.

Methods / Analysis
In order to uncover the meaning, rationale, norms, values, and pressures that influence social responsibility in CSOs, focus groups are currently under way with the Board of Directors of six CSOs identified from a prior study, that show variation from one another in their social responsibility orientations (Carroll, 1979). The Boards range in size from 7 to 12 members. A separate focus group session will also be conducted with a random sample of general volunteers and other key stakeholders (approx. 8-10 people) from each club in order to gather perspectives from those in non-board level positions within the organization. In total, 12 focus groups will be conducted. Focus groups provide a means of collecting data that are social in nature and enable participants to consider their own perspective in relation to others through collective consciousness-raising discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). The open-ended interview guide explores the institutional environment of CSOs cultural cognitive, social normative, and regulative forces. The focus groups will be transcribed and inductively analyzed through a multistep coding process that involves analysis of context, internal consistency, extensiveness, specificity, and intensity of themes (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Further, all formal organizational documentation (e.g., constitutions, annual reports, contracts, web pages) is being collected from each of the participating organizations. These documents will be content analyzed (Schwandt, 2007) as a secondary data source in order to provide further insight into the relative importance organizations place on integrating social issues into their strategic planning and management.

Implications / Conclusion
This research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of what responsible behaviour means to nonprofit organizations, and will provide evidence of the specific ways that community sport clubs contribute to society using novel practices outside of their basic sport delivery mandates. The study advances the scope of scholarly investigation on CSR in sport into a new context and will enrich our understandings of the meaning, scope, and scale of social responsibility in sport while articulating a broader role of sport in society. The results will also be shared within the community sport sector and other related nonprofit agencies in order to begin new discourse around the multiple meanings of responsible organizations and potential new practices. Our presentation will conclude with recommendations for areas ripe for future research in this domain as well as highlight the implications for practice in nonprofit management.