Building and Sustaining Partnerships in Sport for Development and Peace: Challenges, Tensions, and Strategies

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Much of the research to date in sport for development and peace (SDP) has examined the efficacy of interventions on achieving a variety of outcomes, such as facilitating social inclusion of marginalized individuals (Sherry, 2010; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Welty Peachey, Lyras, Borland, & Cohen, 2013); building social capital (Burnett, 2006; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008); and contributing to cross-cultural understanding and peacebuilding (Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schenker, 2011; Sugden, 2010; Welty Peachey, Cunningham, Lyras, Cohen, & Bruening, 2015). An emerging line of research in SDP is evaluation of the nature of partnerships (Burnett, 2008; Schulenkorf, Sugden, & Burdsey, 2014). Partnerships are the lifeblood of SDP organizations, and are undertaken for multiple reasons, such as monitoring and evaluation, funding, and program design and implementation (Burnett, 2008; Coalter, 2013; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015). However, very little research has examined partnership development and sustainability in SDP, particularly across a wide range of organizations with varied missions and foci.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine challenges faced by SDP organizations when forming and sustaining partnerships across contexts and partnership types, and to uncover strategies they have employed to overcome these challenges. Two research questions were developed: (a) What are the challenges and barriers SDP organizations have encountered when forming and sustaining partnerships?; and (b) What strategies have they employed to address and overcome these challenges and barriers? This research is significant, given that most SDP organizations need partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and other public and private entities in order to survive and carry out their missions (Burnett, 2008; Coalter, 2013; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015). The limited previous partnership research has predominantly examined single SDP organizations, and has not investigated challenges and strategies in a wider context.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To guide the current study, a collaboration theory perspective was adopted (Gajda, 2004; Gray, 1989). Gray (1989) suggested collaboration can be characterized as "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [or issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (p. 5). Gajda (2004) elucidated four stages of collaboration. First is to 'assemble and form', a step often facilitated by a program evaluator or key stakeholder. The second is 'storm and order', where collaborative partners ascertain their roles and strategies of the relationship. The third phase, 'norm and perform', occurs when members have achieved a working rapport and focus efforts on performing the task rather than planning. The final phase, 'transform and adjourn', is when key stakeholders assess and evaluate their findings and determine if any modifications to leadership or strategies need to take place to enhance effectiveness.

Despite the benefits of partnerships, scholars have identified challenges and tensions, most notably revolving around trust, philosophy, decision-making style, and power and control (Plough & Olafson, 1994; Ponic, Reid, & Frisby, 2010). Faraj, Jarvenpaa, and Majchrzak (2011) identified specific resources which can create tensions among partners: passion, time, social ambiguities, social disembodiment of ideas, and temporary convergence. They noted the important need for research to focus on how collaborations "respond to the tensions that will inevitably arise" (p. 1236). With SDP partnerships, the challenge of inequitable distribution of power and control is often encountered (Burnett, 2008; Svensson & Hambrick, 2015), sometimes emerging from the neocolonial view of external funders who may be based in the Global North but partnering with SDP organizations in the Global South and subjugating local knowledge (Jeanes & Kay, 2013; Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2011). This can result in local SDP
providers becoming tied to the agendas of international partners instead of their own missions (Banda, Lindsey, Jeans, & Kay, 2008). In terms of strategies for effective partnerships, consistent operating norms and procedures that substantiate key elements of the collaboration should be developed (Svennson & Hambrick, 2015; Treleaven, 1994). Common goals should be established (Cosier & Glennie, 1994), a democratic decision-making process utilized (Kumpfer, Turner, Hopkins, & Librett, 1993), and international partners should be sensitive to local context in program delivery (Shulenkorf et al., 2014).

Method

Purposive sampling is being employed to identify 40 to 50 SDP organizations worldwide to take part in this study representing diverse partnership contexts and types (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, we are conducting personal, semi-structured interviews by telephone, Skype, and face-to-face with a key leader in each organization who is responsible for the organization’s partnership cultivation and implementation. Qualitative methods are being utilized for this exploratory study in order to gather in-depth, robust data (Creswell, 2012). The interview guide has been developed informed by collaboration theory (Gadja, 2004) and the partnership literature. All interviews are being audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis consists of identifying a priori codes and themes grounded in the theoretical framework and literature (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), as well employing an inductive strategy of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Dependability and credibility are being enhanced through establishing intercoder reliability and by conducting member checks with study participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where they are reviewing their transcripts and study interpretations. At present 20 interviews have been conducted, with the remainder to be completed by the end of 2015.

Findings and Discussion

Guided by Gadja’s (2004) four stages of collaboration, our findings suggest several challenges regarding successful partnerships within the SDP landscape: (a) goal alignment during assemble and form (e.g., ”Having people who really think it’s a priority and want to collaborate. Some people don’t see the value of it”); (b) establishing trust throughout all partnership stages (e.g., ”If you’re not delivering you actually start to undermine trust. The first essential element to any partnership is trust”); (c) establishing oneself within the field to gain credibility for partnerships (e.g., ”It’s very hard to be new to the field, which we struggle with”), and (d) unequal power relations across all stages (e.g., ”It’s hard for our funders to treat us as equals. That doesn’t come naturally”). In addition, the data reveal key strategies for SDP organizations to succeed in establishing partnerships along with growing and sustaining them: (a) networking and outreach; (b) finding partners with similar goals; (c) utilizing a third party broker to help navigate partnerships in the assemble and form stage; (d) designing mutual and beneficial outcomes; and (d) constant evaluation of partnerships and outcomes during transform and adjourn.

Theoretically, this research maps Gadja’s (2004) four stages of collaboration onto SDP partnerships by illuminating challenges in forming and maintaining them, and strategies for tackling these challenges across stages. The implications suggest partnership development is a process that occurs over time and is not a simple undertaking (Burnett, 2008; Gray, 1989). Practically, this study highlights key strategies SDP organizations can use for forming and sustaining partnerships. Future research directions will also be discussed.