Developing Community on the Sidelines: A Social Network Analysis of Youth Sport League Parents

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Human interaction is the constitutive currency of community formation, and those communities influence and often constitute many of the experiences, identities, and values developed therein. We learn our place within community structures, and we perpetuate those structures through our everyday practices. Sense of belonging to and within the community structure is influenced by a number of interrelated characteristics (e.g., Calhoun, 1998; Giuffre, 2013). Of these characteristics of community structure, cohesion is crucial in the development of community identity and experience, particularly considering that group standards are more likely to be internalized and activated by members of tightly tied networks (Collins, 1988). Community cohesion refers to "the degree to which members of a community are actually tied to each other, either directly through personal contact or indirectly through joint group membership" (Giuffre, 2013, p. 31-32). Networking between social actors stimulates cohesion within communities (Gilchrist, 2000), and—as a key ingredient for healthy societies and communities (Hipp & Perrin, 2006)—cohesive social connections within communities lead to feelings of safety, comfort, and support for members. In particular, dense relations and contagion are preferred characteristic to satisfy human basic motivations—to feel safe and to reach out (Kadushin, 2012).

Along with cohesion, homophily is one of the key social phenomena that propel the formation of social relations. Colloquially described by the notion that “birds of a feather flock together”, homophily refers to the propensity of individuals to shape relations with people whose salient characteristics are similar to their own (Blau, 1977; McCulloh, Armstrong, & Johnson, 2013; McPherson, Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Exploring homophily effects is vital, in that interactions among homogeneous actors can reduce opportunities for individuals to challenge and/or modify their ideology and value systems. This can lead to social conformity, as actors’ commonalities are perpetually validated, resulting in even greater homogeneity (McCulloh et al., 2013).

Research on community sport has burgeoned, as its role in addressing social policy issues and maximizing social benefits has been expanded (e.g., Doherty & Cousens, 2013; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013). To date, a plethora of studies have confirmed the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social benefits of youth sport participation for children (e.g., Bruening, Dover, & Clark, 2009; Eime, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; Fraser-Thomas, Coté, & Deakin, 2005; Sabo & Veliz, 2008; Small, 2002; Warner et al., 2013; Wright & Coté, 2003); while many others have disputed their net positive effects as a result of parents’ overzealous involvement (e.g., Engh, 1999; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; Martin, Dale & Jackson, 2001; Skirstad, Waddington & Säfvenbom, 2012; Spies, 2006; Swanson, 2009). As Green and Chalip (1997) recognized, despite numerous studies regarding the quality of children’s sport experience, relatively few scholars have investigated the quality of parents’ experiences (Warner, Dixon, & Leirer, 2015).

Thus, to better understand sport’s community building capacities and complexities, we conducted a detailed empirical analysis of the current status of social networks within, and constituted by, public youth sport leagues (YSL). The aim of this research was to investigate the role of youth sport in the enhancement of social networks among parents of youth sport participants. We investigated social networks of parents whose children are participants in a community youth sport program, based on the central concepts of social network formation—cohesion and homophily effects. To be specific, we employed social network analysis (SNA) to empirically examine how the structural patterns of parents’ social networks were different between before and after a YSL season based on two hypotheses: the density of parents’ recalled post-season social networks will be higher than the density of pre-season social networks (H1) and homophily effects exist within recalled social networks of parents in youth-
based community sport programs (H2).

Online questionnaires were distributed to the parents of children who participated in a YSL run by a city government organization in the Southeastern United States. The questionnaires were distributed for a total of three seasons to parents of children participating in five sports: volleyball, soccer, basketball, and baseball and softball. Distribution occurred at the end of each season. A total of 1,954 households were identified as actors within the larger network (i.e., those households that either participated in the survey or were identified as being a social connection by respondents). Based on the network information from all surveys, we created two $1,954 \times 1,954$ matrices (one for pre-season, and one for post-season) in which cell $ij$ indicates parent i’s report on their relationship with parent j. In addition to items pertaining to structural data, the questionnaires also recorded composition data, such as demographic information (i.e., race, education achievement, annual income) to assess the homophily effect.

We employed two different analytical procedures for two different sets of hypotheses: Quadratic Assignment Procedures (QAP) t-test for Hypothesis 1 and QAP correlation for Hypothesis 2. QAP enables scholars to test statistical significance using social network data (Krackhardt, 1988). In the first step, QAP calculates the statistics across the corresponding cells of the matrices—in this case, two matrices are parents’ relational matrix and parents’ compositional matrix. For the QAP correlation, the Pearson coefficient is computed. During the second step, the rows and columns of the parents’ relational matrix (i.e., pre-season matrix, post-season matrix) are randomly permuted. After the permutation, the Pearson coefficients are recomputed and restored. This second step of permutation is repeated 5,000 times in order to calculate an empirical sampling distribution appropriate for determining whether or not the observation from step one is statistically significant (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). The observed values are compared to the distribution developed in step two. If the observed value is greater than 95% of the values in the empirical distribution computed in step two of permutations, this indicates statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level (Whitbred, 2011). Three series of QAP Correlations were assessed: (1) tie formation and race, (2) tie formation and education level, and (3) tie formation and annual income level.

The density of overall parents’ post-season network was significantly higher than the density of parents’ pre-season network ($p < 0.001$). Within each sport, parents’ post-season network was significantly denser than the pre-season network in volleyball ($p < 0.01$), soccer ($p < 0.001$), basketball ($p < 0.001$), and baseball/softball ($p < 0.001$). Racial homophily in parents’ networks was significant in basketball and baseball/softball before and after the season ($p<0.05$).

Overall, we found empirical support for the assertion that youth sport programs can make important contributions to parents’ intra-community social networks. Additionally, the results implied that the effect of racial similarity was significant during the socializing process in YSL, as indicated by parents’ networks both prior to, and after the season. Neither education level nor level of income were influential characteristics during the formation of new social relations through youth-based community sports. During the presentation, detailed results and implications about the impact of YSL on community cohesion and inclusion will be discussed.