Perceptions of the Organizational Legitimacy of Youth Hockey Associations Supporting Girls’ Hockey

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In the last 25 years women and girls participation in ice hockey has grown exponentially, from 5,500 female players registered with USA Hockey in 1991 (USA Hockey, 2012; the governing body of hockey in the United States), to 67,230 female players in 2014 (USA Hockey, 2014). However, that is still well below male player participation, which was 452,187 in 2014. Due to the low registration numbers of girls in the United States, creating girls’ teams and leagues is challenging and often impossible in many parts of the country. As a result, several different organizational structures are now common ways to support girls’ participation. Girls often play in one of three different gendered organizational structures: girls on predominantly boys’ teams, girls-only teams within coed organizations (organizations with both boys-only and girls-only teams), and girls-only teams in girls-only organizations. While the three different structures all serve the purpose to support girls’ participation in hockey, the different structures may impact the experiences of the players and their perceptions of organizational legitimacy.

Organizational legitimacy considers whether an organization and its actions are deemed to be appropriate, desirable, or proper within the local, socially constructed set of norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). Stakeholders, in this situation, judge whether hockey as a greater institution, or an individual organization, is legitimate. A legitimized organization act in accordance with local norms and values (Suchman, 1995). In considering the development of a new or growing sport, it is important for the sport and the organizations supporting the sport, be perceived as legitimate in order to continue to develop. Athletes, or their parents, may be less likely to participate if they do not perceive the sport or its supporting organizations to be legitimate or normatively acceptable for their population to participate. This poses added challenges for developing girls’ participation in sports that are traditionally considered masculine sports as the sport must fight social norms of acceptability for girls to participate. Due to the fact that hockey is a traditionally masculine sport (Messner, 2002), and that women are still relatively new to the sport, it is important to determine the perceptions of legitimacy of hockey for girls’ and women when considering girls’ hockey specific sport development.

In respect to increasing participation and perceptions of legitimacy, mechanisms of sport development must also be considered. For sport development, there is also a need for participant recruitment, retention, training, and transition. In order for a sport, or a sport organization, to develop, it must recruit new participants at the broadest level, keep them interested and active in the sport, and continue player development in a way that allows them to transition through developmental stages (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). Sport organizations must understand how to retain athletes and continue to positively develop the participants, whether in high performance models or recreational settings (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Particularly in the high-performance setting, these strategies, such as the Canadian Longer Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, has been based on male sport programming. However, sport organizations, particularly in masculine typed sports, where female athletes may still face heavy stigmas and stereotypes for participating, may need consider recruitment and retention strategies and sport development models that focus on the specific needs of female athletes. The purpose of this study was to understand how players perceived organizational legitimacy of their youth hockey associations in supporting girls’ hockey.

This study used additional coverage mixed method design with qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey to address the research questions. Quantitative surveys were sent to youth players, male and female, ages 14U-19U in eight states across the United States. These surveys addressed the players’ experiences, background, association type, and perceptions of organizational legitimacy to understand how players perceive organizational legitimacy of their associations supporting girls’ hockey and the different playing experiences that may impact these perceptions. The survey data was analyzed using SPSS. MANOVA’s were used to analyze the impact of different playing experiences.
on dimensions of legitimacy. Semi-structured interviews with 25 female players, ages 14U-19U, in Illinois to understand the actions of associations that may impact players’ perceptions of organizational legitimacy. Interviews were analyzed using the tenets of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2013).

The results show that those playing in organizations with only boys’ teams who play in all boys’ associations (both male and female players) were less likely to perceive their association as engaging with women’s hockey in a legitimate way than those playing in associations with girls’ teams. This finding shows that while integrating girls onto boys’ teams is still a valid pathway for girls to develop in hockey, players within these associations that did not have girls’ teams, did not perceive their associations as engaging with girls’ hockey in a legitimate fashion. Building on that finding, in the interviews the players talked about the importance of girls-only spaces in perceiving an association as supporting girls’ hockey. This was discussed in relation to girls-only teams as well as designated girls’ locker rooms when on boys’ teams, as well as girls’ focused recruitment tools. Moreover, female player perceptions of organizational legitimacy centered on a desire for equity with the male counter parts. The female players emphasized the need to receive equitable, treatment, resources, and opportunities as male players to perceive their association as supporting girls’ hockey in a legitimate way. Providing equitable opportunities for participation was the most salient aspect by which players judged perceptions of organizational legitimacy.

This research advances the legitimacy literature through challenging the understanding that legitimacy either exists or does not exist in an organization. By considering the specific context of girls’ hockey and the perspectives of the various stakeholder groups in girls’ hockey, it became evident that perceptions of organizational legitimacy are not black and white, but rather varied along a spectrum. Stakeholders could perceive an action of an association as lending legitimacy in one aspect while the absence of a different association attribute could hurt perceptions of legitimacy. For instance, players perceived that having consistent teams across all age levels lent legitimacy to an association, however, if an association gave girls’ teams less ice and worse times than the boys’ teams, that was a detractor of legitimacy. An associations’ legitimacy is dependent on the stakeholder and what aspect of legitimacy is being considered. Additionally, this research advances the literature on women’s sport development. Particularly for traditionally masculine sports, creating environments that explicitly support girls’ participation and focus on girls from recruitment, through long term development can further support and grown girls’ participation in the sport.