A Longitudinal Multiple-Case Study of Attention-Based Sensemaking in Public Recreation

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Public recreation programs for youth and adults are an integral part of the contemporary sporting landscape (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014). Children and teenagers in particular benefit from these sport offerings, for “it is typically the context in which many individuals first experience sport as a precursor to elite sport involvement or lifelong participation” (Legg, Snelgrove, & Wood, 2016, p. 370). Moreover, public sport programs have been hailed for their health benefits (Librett, Henderson, Godbey, & Morrow, 2007), while access to organized sport and recreation has been linked to lower crime rates (Hartmann & Depro, 2008) and improved levels of perceived social support and self-efficacy (Hooker et al., 2005).

Despite the importance of public organizations in the development of sport and life skills, scholarly examinations of this context are scarce. Prior sport-related change management research has focused predominantly on elite level sport or national governing bodies (for exceptions see Stenling, 2013, 2014). Such a narrow view, reflecting, in part, “a far more focused representation of sport management” (Bowers, Green, & Seifried, 2014, p. 566) than promoted by NASSM’s very own constitution, does not adequately capture the manifold nature of sport and play available to consumers today. Moreover, it misses opportunities for contextualized theoretical expansion through sport-based inquiry into unique challenges faced by organizations at the nexus of sport and public service. These challenges include, for example, budgetary constraints while being expected to expand sport programming (Kraus & Curtis, 2000; Pitas, Mowen, Liechty, & Trauntvein, 2015), as well as having to adapt to evolving and diverse consumer preferences that oppose traditional models of public organization, which have favored rigid structures and stability over adaptability and change. Sport and recreation professionals have tried to address these issues, but it appears that “little real headway has been made” (Stanton, Markham-Starr, & Hodgkinson, 2013, p. 145).

Accordingly, drawing on Ocasio’s (1997) attention-based view of the firm and Weick’s (1995) sensemaking perspective, this interpretive multiple-case study contributes to sport and change management scholarship by examining the reorganization of a large public recreation department in-situ over the course of a 12-month period. Drawing from Herbert Simon’s (1947) thoughts on bounded rationality, Ocasio (1997) suggested that decision-makers actions depended on their focus of attention, which in turn was affected by their specific circumstances, which were in turn dependent on the extent to which organizational configurations favored certain procedures and organizational behaviors over others. These “attention structures” include formally and informally agreed upon standards of appropriate conduct, the influence of particular individuals over others’ issue perceptions, specialized and functionally different roles, and the organization’s resources. Together, these four interconnected factors influence attention and subsequent action by legitimizing certain behaviors, regulating decision-making processes, and emphasizing specific interests and identities at the expense of others. In other words, they affect individuals’ sensemaking efforts, especially when faced with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Interviews with supervisors from 18 recreation centers, 68 in total, typically lasted 20-45 minutes. Furthermore, the researcher attended meetings and strategy briefings and analyzed internal as well as external correspondence in order to triangulate data. Interview transcripts and other qualitative data were analyzed using MAXQDA and coded for references made to how supervisors made sense of the change process, what affected their narratives, and the issues to which they attended. Specifically, the researcher followed Tesch’s (1990, p. 142-149) eight-step coding procedure in order to analyze particularly significant statements.

The results revealed how organizational communication practices and structural configurations framed change recipients’ sensemaking processes by providing reference points for issue and answer distribution and allocation. Supervisors with the closest spatial proximity to and highest frequency of interaction with those who were bound to
benefit the most from the change exhibited the strongest level of support. More interestingly, attention to this particular aspect of the change initiative overrode uniform acknowledgement of the organization’s problematic history of restricting the participation in decision making processes to a small leadership group at the very top of the department.

The present research supports previous scholarship that has called for stronger attention to the multi-vocal nature of change (Bartunek et al., 2006; Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Dawson & Buchanan, 2005). Additionally, it identifies change ambivalence as a powerful narrative used by supervisors. Aimed at neither the support nor outright rejection of the proposed change, this narrative is concerned with placing and understanding change in the larger organizational context, thus relegating it to a trigger event for building discourse around non-change issues and concerns. Here, supervisors’ mental models revolved around attempts to connect the change initiative to dormant yet readily accessible negative perceptions of the organization at large. Extant organizational change scholarship has, not surprisingly, focused on change-related outcomes and reactions. That change can create or activate other, more fundamental, contestations over the organization’s direction is a notion that deserves future attention.

Finally, this study shows that change in public sport is constrained by structural forces and simultaneously open to interpretation within the organization’s institutional framework. Whereas rigid communication channels, a poor history of change attempts, and centralized decision-making processes directed supervisor attention to a limited set of cues and issues, breakdowns in framework consistency and localized fraying of conceptions of identity and behavior allowed for divergent change responses. Thus, the present research accords with Weber and Glynn (2006) who argued that “institutions are intricately woven into sensemaking” (p. 1654). Furthermore, it highlights the existence of various, at times competing, frames and identities that might be more varied and nuanced than often depicted in public organization management literature. For instance, Osborne & Brown (2005) argued that ‘the ‘difficulty’ in implementing change in public services is argued to stem from the culture or specifically, an identifiable ‘public service’ culture and the related imperviousness of this culture to change” (p. 86). However, the present study casts doubt on the existence of such an easily identifiable culture as impediment to change. Rather, identity only played a role insofar as it was affirmed by change. Change resistance or ambivalence, on the other hand, arose from non-identity-related concerns about chance processes, outcomes, and culture.

“The future of the profession of sport and physical activity management will depend on the way such programs of a public, semi-public, semiprivate, and private nature are administered in the years ahead” (Zeigler, 2007, p. 42). This study provides a cautionary tale of how a seemingly beneficial and straightforward organizational change initiative in a public sport organization can prompt discourse and sensemaking about unrelated issues and concerns. The findings from this research thus hold value for both sport management and general change management research and practice alike.