Moving Down the Field: The Spread of Youth Sports Concussion Legislation across States

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The Problem and Objectives
Concussion in young people attributable to sports is an important public health issue (Moser & Schatz, 2002). Youth athletes are more susceptible to concussions, mainly because their brains are not yet fully developed, and thus are more vulnerable to injury (Buzzini & Guskiewicz, 2006). One of the most significant changes around youth sports-related concussions is the passage of concussion legislation across states (Adler, 2011; Ellenbogen, 2014). In 2009, Washington State passed the first concussion legislation in the country: the Zackery Lystedt Law. Concussion legislation, similar to the Lystedt Law, passed very quickly across states. By 2014, all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the U.S. passed similar youth sport concussion safety laws. These policies represent innovations in youth concussion.

I examine the puzzle of how youth sports concussion legislation got passed so quickly by all 50 states to better understand the diffusion of policy innovation across states. In particular, with a qualitative design, I look at the passage of concussion legislation from the lens of neoinstitutionalism and diffusion (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983, 1999; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009). Early evidence suggests the role of coalitions at different levels (state and national) in this diffusion process. Powerful, high-status sports governing bodies (e.g., National Football League) are also important actors in these coalitions. Therefore, using a multilevel (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005) approach (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005), I address the following questions: How do coalitions at different levels facilitate the diffusion of sport policy innovation across states? What is the role of powerful sports governing bodies in this diffusion process? This study will extend the sport management literature by elaborating on the role of powerful sports governing bodies in the diffusion of sport policy innovation across states. The adoption of a multilevel approach (Schneiberg & Soule, 2005) also better captures interactions that exist between coalitions at different levels.

Theoretical background
Diffusion refers to the spread of an innovation within a social system (Rogers, 1995; Kostova & Roth, 2002). Traditional diffusion models are depicted as S-shaped curve (Griliches, 1957), where the adoption of an innovation begins slowly, accelerates, and then declines, reflecting the saturation of a population at risk of adopting. Rogers (1962; 1971) later classified the potential adopters into five categories based upon how long it takes for them to adopt the innovation: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. In recent decades, institutional researchers have produced various concepts and factors to unpack the diffusion process. In their classic study on the diffusion of formal organizational structure in civil service reform, Tolbert and Zucker (1983) proposed a two-stage model to account for the diffusion process. They argued that early organizations adopted the new form to improve internal processes with city characteristics predicting adoption, whereas later organizations adopted the form symbolically for societal legitimacy (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983).

Previous institutional and sport management literature has examined the influence of institutional pressures (e.g., Slack & Hinings, 1994; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011), networks (e.g., Davis & Greve, 1997), and social movements (e.g., Lounsbury, 2001; Briscoe & Safford, 2008) on diffusion process. To promote the passage of a new policy or practice, some organizations may form a social-movement-like coalition to facilitate the spread of new policies or practices among organizations or states (Sabatier, 1988; Zakocs & Edwards, 2006). However, less is known about the explicit role of coalitions in the diffusion process. Furthermore, coalitions could take place at different levels, for instance at national and transnational levels (Levy & Egan, 1998). There is a need to better assess the influence of multilevel coalitions in the diffusion of new policies or practices in sport. Addressing the spread of new concussion policies across states, this study examines the role of coalitions at different levels in the diffusion of sport policy innovations.
Methods
Because my overall research objective is to examine how coalitions at different levels facilitate the diffusion process of sport policy innovation across states, I adopt a qualitative approach. The analysis time period for this study is defined as 2008 to 2014; it starts with the year when the first state-level coalition was formed to promote the passage of concussion legislation in Washington. This is an ongoing study.

Data sources. I collected multiple forms of data on coalitions at state and national levels. Five state-level coalitions were chosen for an in-depth analysis. I first drew on legislation history to list when concussion legislation passed in all 50 states. Based on the rates of passage, I adapted Roger's (1971) adopter categories to further classify these states as innovators (2009), early adopters (2010), early-majority states (2011), or late-majority states (2012-2014). To further a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of state-level coalitions over time, I chose at least one state in each adopter category. The sampled states also cover four regions of the United States: the West, the Northeast, the South, and the Midwest. Data sources include interviews with key local coalition actors who have participated in the enactment of concussion legislation in the sampled states, and archival documents in the form of legislation histories, related publications, articles, and powerpoint slides that have documented the passage of concussion laws. In addition, I am collecting data at the national-level coalition. These data sources include interviews with key national-level coalition actors, and mainstream news articles from the NYT and the Los Angeles Times (the LAT) to gather direct quotations from key national coalition actors.

Data analysis. I am using qualitative, content analysis for theory building. I am conducting multiple rounds of coding, iterating between interview transcripts, archival documents, and news articles, and pre-existing theoretical constructs (Yin, 2009). For instance, when an interviewee mentions a specific activity, if possible, I look for archival documents recording that activity. These triangulation strategies help me gain “a more secure understanding than a single data source would have allowed” (Tilesik, 2010, p. 1478; Maxwell, 1996). I use Nvivo to facilitate the coding process.

Discussion and Implications
My initial results indicate several features of coalitions at different levels that may contribute to the diffusion of new concussion policies, including diversity in coalition membership, co-optation in coalition building, shared vision at both state and national levels, and leveraging of a powerful story. I expect the findings of this research will add knowledge to the role of coalitions and associated actors across levels in the diffusion process. More broadly, the study will also contribute to a better understanding of how sport organizations interface with policy issues in addressing a public health challenge (Mildner & Santo, 2010).