Investigating the Structure of a National Sport and Recreation Network

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Introduction
Since 2005, a Canadian, nation-wide network has raised over $127 million to help kids stay active through sports and organized recreation by removing the financial barriers associated with recreation and sport registration, equipment and transportation costs. The diverse organizations linked to this network constitute a unique interorganizational form that links sport and recreation organizations to a broader inter-firm network of private, non-profit and charitable organizations. This network is evidence of a shift in inter-organizational governance in sport and recreation “away from an emphasis on competition between agencies (markets), to a model of inter-agency coordination and collaboration (networks)” (Lewis, 2005, p. 1). Increasingly, organizations in the sport and recreation sectors are adopting network approaches. As a result, these organizations reside within dynamic shared networks wherein the structure of interorganizational relationships are continually evolving (Lui, Oiu, Zhong, & Gao, 2011). In sport, networks are increasingly common (Cousens, Barnes, & MacLean, 2012; Gerke, Washe & Giannakis, 2017), however little is known about the potential of these networks to achieve public goals and the opportunities generated from the activities of networks that encompass sport and recreation organizations. An exception is the work by Casey, Payne & Eime (2009) which examined partnership development and capacity building strategies across sectors. Network analysis, which originated in sociology and organizational studies, seeks to further our understanding of relationships between organizations or individuals and the patterns and implications of these relationships (Wausserman & Fraust, 1994). Network analysis holds particular promise as a perspective to enhance our understanding of community sport and recreation delivery in Canada. Beyond the shared goal of improving the lives of individuals’ recreation and sport activities, these two sectors share the need to secure resources which is predicated upon working collaboratively with a multitude of partners in a network-type approach.

Objectives of the study
This research uses a quantitative, social network analysis approach to explore and understand the structure of the network. Specifically, this research: 1. identifies the location (i.e. central, periphery) of each actor in the network; 2. identifies how information, knowledge, and ideas are shared across the network; 3. identifies actors who play key roles in helping others within the network; and identifies both friendship ties and professional ties in the network.

Related Literature
In the context of sport, there is evidence of linkages that create networks (Cousens, Barnes, & MacLean, 2012), however silos of sport organizations that are not connected to firms beyond their sport remain prevalent in this sector (Barnes, MacLean, Cousens, 2007). Research suggest that the silos result, in part, due to the challenges associated with collaboration that outweigh the advantages (MacLean, Cousens, & Barnes, 2011; Nichols et al., 2005; Shaw & Allan, 2006; Simmonds, 2000; Stockdale & Williams, 2007). Networks are conceived of as a means to overcome the limitations of traditional bureaucracies, as cites for the dissemination of information, as problem-solving arenas, or as contexts to mobilize others for goal achievement (Berry, Brower, Choi, & Goa, 2004). The extensive literature surrounding cooperative behaviour of organizations within networked environments has produced streams of research in sociology, political science, and public administration/public management (Berry et al.). Research on sport networks have exhibited evidence of fragmentation, a lack of orderly administrative structure to coordinate interaction among partners, and loose coupling across organizations wherein the frequency and duration of interaction is limited (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Barnes, Cousens, & MacLean, 2007; Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2017). As well, research with community sport networks (i.e. swimming and basketball) indicated that organizations pursue low levels of commitment, and “easy to do” linkages such as sharing information (Cousens, Barnes, & MacLean, 2012). The lack of enduring and strong linkages translates into weak networks where organizations and/or individuals are unable to leverage their relationships. Alternatively, there is evidence to suggest that networks can facilitate coordination in various settings. Yet little empirical evidence exists that explores an
enduring networks aimed at enhancing participation in community sport and recreation. This research examined an enduring and effective network, as evidence by the duration of the network’s existence and the amount of funds raised annually, using social network analysis and in doing so, answers a call put forth by Quatman and Chelladurai (2008) to implement “the unique methodological tools social network analysis has to offer” (p. 339).

Methodology
The network being studied represents a unique collaboration because it has linked organizations in the sport and recreation sector to a multi-sector network. In its 12 years of operation, the network has assisted more than 1 million children stay active through over 300 chapters across Canada. To understand the network and its structure, a questionnaire was developed based on the work of researchers studying the evolution of information-seeking networks in public health units in Ontario, Canada (Yousefi-Nooraie, Dobbins, Marin, Hanneman, & Lohfeld, 2005) as well as Cross, Borgatti & Parker’s (2002) work on social network analysis survey development. The on-line questionnaire was administered to all individuals in the network (approximately 800 individuals) including staff and partners across the province using an on-line software platform (i.e. Survey Monkey). The questionnaire was analyzed using the network software program Ucinet 6, which has the capacity to evaluate over 50 network measures (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) and an ability to discern the structure of the network. Responses to the questionnaire enabled the researchers to situate each actor in the network and evaluate the structure of the network. The results of the network provide insight into the position of sport and recreation organizations among other collaborators in the network and their roles in the network.