Translating Change Around Youth Sport: Project Play and Community Implementation

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There is a movement in the United States to address issues of access and participation in youth sport. A key initiative in this space is Project Play, launched in 2013 by the Aspen Institute, that aims to create institutional change around youth sports and build healthy communities through developing and sharing knowledge (https://www.aspenprojectplay.org/whatwedo/). Project Play convenes experts to create reports on the state of play and “build frameworks and tools that stakeholders can use to grow access to quality sport.” These models - developed at the national level - are being implemented in communities across the U.S. in different ways. In particular, there are local initiatives in Baltimore, Harlem, Southeast Michigan, Western New York, Greater Rochester, and South Alabama that include different activities. This context prompts the question: how does the local context shape the way community organizations translate - or adapt and edit - approaches to youth sport developed in the broader institutional field?

There has been growing interest among institutional scholars within sport management in understanding institutional change (e.g., Cousens & Slack, 2005; Heinze & Lu, 2017; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). Research in this area tends to focus on change at the broader institutional field level. For new models to survive, however, they must be instantiated and translated locally. Translation is the process through which organizational actors “interpret, edit, and fill-in” models from the field level, reshaping what is finally implemented (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996; Zilber, 2006). This process introduces variation in organizational responses, even when organizations acquiesce to institutional demands (Binder, 2007; Haedicke, 2012). The community context, in particular, can shape the way local organizations translate models of institutional change (Heinze, Soderstrom, & Heinze, 2016). The social networks, shared understandings, and regulations particular to geographic communities form local forces that influence organizational practices and structures (Marquis, 2003; Galaskiewicz, 1997). Thus, different approaches to institutional change across communities can come from accommodating local interests and resources, while translating field-level frameworks (Binder, 2007; Hallett, 2010). In this study, we draw on the concept of translation to explore variation in communities’ implementation of field-level models around youth sport, and the influence of the local context.

Method

Since our aim is to derive new insights about translating change around youth sport, we will use a qualitative, multiple-case study approach (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). This approach includes an in-depth exploration using multiple forms of data, and comparisons across cases to draw inferences from similarities or differences (Langley, 2006). In particular, we will examine the six Project Play community initiatives noted above. We will collect data on the goals, activities, stakeholders, and local context of these initiatives, as well as data on the field level models of change. Our sources will include a variety of archival data (e.g. reports, frameworks, meeting notes, and media articles), as well as interviews with leaders and stakeholders at the field and local levels. We will use qualitative techniques to analyze the data, including analytic abduction (Peirce, 1955), or iteration between data and pre-existing theoretical constructs.