Integrating Theoretical Approaches: Practice Theory and Neo-Institutionalism in Sport Management Research

Kerri Bodin, University of Ottawa
Laura Misener (Advisor), Western University

Socio-Cultural - Other (Youth Sport)  Saturday, June 1, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  2:20 PM
Abstract 2019-407  Room: Napoleon D1

Sport management scholars have made calls for broader research approaches in regard to theoretical perspectives, and the need for critical studies in the field. In her Zeigler address (2005), Frisby called for scholars to conduct research from varied paradigmatic lenses, and to incorporate critical social science perspectives across the sport management space. Recently, scholars have begun to employ innovative ways to use new methodologies, engage different groups of participants, and apply theories from other disciplines to the study of sport management (e.g. Amis & Silk, 2005; Love & Andrew, 2011; Kitchin & Howe, 2013; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Despite this shift and calls for incorporating critical social science within sport management research, there are few examples of projects where this approach has been applied (see Skille & Skirstad, 2007; Kitchin & Howe, 2014). In this presentation, we demonstrate how employing both an organizational theory (neo-institutionalism) and a social theory (practice theory) within the context of a sport management research project has helped enrich the theoretical and critical perspectives in the research process.

The project investigated the Canada Games and their sociocultural role in Canadian sport. We used an exploratory case study methodology, collecting documents and completing semi-structured interviews with sport administrators to conduct the research. Neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and Bourdieu’s practice theory were employed in the processes of data analysis and interpretation. The results indicated that there are challenges in achieving the strategic objectives of the Canada Games within the current Canadian sport system. The theoretical approaches helped highlight issues of power, resource allocation, and equity in how the Canada Games operate within the organizational field. The multi-level interpretation of the data, demonstrated through a visual representation of the analysis, showed how the Canada Games may be a tool to achieve broader political goals, as well as a space for agents within the field to compete for, and use, capital.

Both neo-institutionalism and practice theory enabled an in-depth understanding of the field of Canadian sport, agents within the field, and how they interact. Practice theory helped highlight power and pressure within a government-funded sport system in terms of capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Neo-institutionalism offered a perspective for considering how agents within the field use the resources at their disposal to exert power and influence over other agents, as well as broader institutional pressures within the system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The use of only one theory in this context would have limited the interpretation to only the individual agent specifically or the organizational field more broadly. Using both theoretical perspectives provided the opportunity to understand the role of the Canada Games within the landscape of Canadian sport in terms of agents within the field and the field itself. As such, one theoretical approach would not have provided the rich analysis that marrying both theories facilitated. This project demonstrated how social and organizational theories can be used together to help sport management researchers broaden the understanding of societal structures, begin breaking down inequity, and improve the sport systems within which we work and play.