Understanding the Structures, Processes, and Outcomes of Inter-Organizational Sport-for-Development Partnerships in the At-Risk Youth Development Field

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Many sport-for-development (SFD) nonprofits have used sport-based interventions as a vehicle through which to develop young people, especially from low-income and ethnic minority communities (Hambrick, Svensson, & Kang, 2018). Previous literature highlights the importance of inter-organizational partnerships (IOPs) in SFD nonprofits’ resource acquisitions and capacity building for program delivery and social outcomes in disadvantaged regions (Welty Peachey, Cohen, Shin, & Fusaro, 2018). However, fewer studies have been conducted to examine SFD partnership dynamics from a process-based approach, although partnership outcomes depend on how collaborations are structured and implemented (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was first to identify SFD partnership network structures and then examine the processes of managing the challenges and outcomes of these partnership networks.

The antecedent-process-outcome (APO) model developed from a literature review on collaborative alliances (Wood & Gray, 1991) was drawn from to undergird this study. Traditional organizational studies have adopted resource-dependence theory (RDT) (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) to explain the determinants of IOPs. More importantly, several scholars highlight the importance of the process elements of IOPs under which to manage tensions and conflicts among partners from different sectors and domains: including governance, administration, mutuality, norms of trust, and organizational autonomy (e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2013). According to Thomson and Perry (2006), managing these dimensions is crucial to achieving positive IOP outcomes, such as the distribution of costs in achieving goals (Pasquero, 1991), building of capacity to mobilize resources (Sagawa & Segal, 2000), and facilitating social change (Logsdon, 1991).

To gain a richer insight of SFD partnership structures and dynamics, this study used a multiple case study approach based on two SFD partnership networks that operate in a large Midwestern city in the U.S. Both organizations seek to develop young people from disadvantaged areas. Data were collected via in-person and phone interviews. A semi-structured interview guideline, based on the APO model (Wood & Gray, 1991) and the partnership literature (e.g., Welty Peachey et al., 2018), was used to interview representatives of focal SFD nonprofits and their partners who were knowledgeable and experienced with their IOPs (n=12). A priori, thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), followed by open coding (Cordin & Strauss, 2008), was utilized to code all transcripts. To ensure trustworthiness, regular debriefing and membership checks were used (Creswell, 2012).

The findings indicated that SFD organization 1 formed a local, community-oriented network and used structural (e.g., administration) and social capital (e.g., informal communication) approaches to mitigate the operational issues of IOPs in a way that facilitated resources and knowledge for program delivery. SFD organization 2 was found to establish a city-wide network and utilize planning and process capacity (e.g., formalized documents) to address the strategic issues of IOPs so that the corporate and public sectors would allocate more resources to the SFD field. This study advances the “gray or clear box evaluation” in the nonprofit partnership literature and can guide SFD practitioners for aligning specific strategies to specific partnership challenges.