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Resource utilisation and power relations of community sport clubs in the aftermath of natural disasters

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ABSTRACT

Community sport clubs (CSCs) provide a number of benefits to local communities, while confronting challenges with finances and staffing. In Queensland, Australia, these challenges have been compounded by recent natural disasters including widespread flooding that have significantly impacted operations of CSCs. The current research explores the provision of resources to CSCs in the aftermath of flooding events in 2010 and 2011, as well as the influence on power relations between CSCs and resource providers. To address this research purpose, qualitative data were collected across nine site visits (focus groups, interviews) to affected CSCs. The data revealed three resource providers: volunteers and members, partner organisations and government. In addition, the results indicate that relations between CSCs and members and volunteers, partner organisations and government were impacted in different ways. Examples of resource providers wielding power over CSCs due to the provision of resources emerged, along with some evidence of mutual power and dependence and CSCs exerting power over resource providers. The results provide implications for CSC managers to be more proactive in relation to resourcing through developing strategies for network building and improved communication within networks.

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1. Introduction

Non-profit organisations operate in a challenging environment with increasing competition for scarce resources (Enjolras, 2009). This situation also applies to non-profit sport clubs across countries (e.g., Sport and Recreation Alliance [SRA], 2013; Wicker & Breuer, 2011), and in particular to community sport clubs (CSCs) in Australia which have been confronted by extreme weather events. Specifically, in Queensland, Australia, CSCs have been affected by significant flooding events. For instance, in late 2010 and early 2011, flooding took place in which nearly 80% of the local government areas in the state were affected (Reilly, Wright, & Hannan, 2011). The natural disasters were felt across CSCs within these regions resulting in negative outcomes such as damaged grounds and facilities, closures, and reduction in membership (Wicker, Filo, & Cuskelly, 2013). Consequently, natural disasters can compound the typical resource-based challenges faced by CSCs (e.g., need of volunteers, financial issues) that have been observed in previous research (Sport and Recreation Alliance [SRA], 2013).

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While natural disasters are often unexpected and difficult to predict with a high degree of accuracy, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2013) has suggested that heavy precipitation in Australia will increase. Hence, managing the aftermath of natural disasters, particularly flooding, will be increasingly important within Australia generally, and within CSCs in Australia in particular. The current research explores the provision of resources to CSCs in the aftermath of flooding events in 2010 and 2011, as well as the influence on power relations between CSCs and resource providers. Accordingly, the following research questions are advanced: (1) what entities provided the resources CSCs relied upon in the aftermath of flooding events in 2010 and 2011? (2) How did the use of resources impact relations between the CSCs and resource providers? and (3) What power relations were evident in the aftermath of flooding events in 2010 and 2011?

Resource dependence theory is used to examine the affected CSCs and address the research questions. The contribution of the current research is the application of a theory, which has been previously employed to examine CSCs (e.g., Horch, 1994; Wicker, Vos, Scheerder, & Breuer, 2013), to a specific context (i.e., recovery from natural disasters). Academic research in this specific context is limited (Wicker, Filo, et al., 2013), yet both timely and relevant given recent events and forecasts. The application of this theory to this specific context allows for uncovering the resources relied upon as well as the exploration of how this influenced relations between CSCs and resource providers.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

To explore the provision of resources to CSCs in the aftermath of flooding events in 2010 and 2011, as well as the influence on power relations between CSCs and resource providers, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) was used as the theoretical framework guiding this research. RDT posits that organisations are dependent upon factors within the external environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These factors, or resources, can be reflected through relationships an organisation has within a particular community, and these resources can increase the connections an organisation has, as well as the influence an organisation has, within a community (Nienhueser, 2008). Specifically, RDT advances that an organisation does not operate autonomously, and is instead reliant upon a network of other organisations, and these dependencies and interdependencies must be managed to ensure survival and success for the organisation (Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009).

Pfeffer (1987) outlined five premises providing the basis for RDT. First, organisations reflect the fundamental units for understanding inter-corporate relations and society. Second, organisations are not autonomous, but rather rely upon other organisations. Third, this interdependence in conjunction with the uncertainty inherent to relying upon the actions of other organisations, contribute to uncertainty regarding survival and continued success for an organisation. Fourth, organisations take action to manage their dependency on other organisations and the external environment, and this can produce new interdependencies. Fifth, this model of dependence can produce power within and among organisations. RDT has cultivated widespread application within research examining interorganisational relationships in the for-profit (e.g., Katila, Rosenberger, & Eisenhardt, 2008) and non-profit sector, including CSCs (e.g., Wicker, Vos, et al., 2013).

The production of power within and among organisations results from the provision of resources by one organisation to another. Specifically, when one organisation depends upon resources from another organisation, the entity providing resources holds power over the dependent organisation (Emerson, 1964). The basis for this power stems from the nature of interdependencies between the organisations, and this can result in varied power relations. Symmetric dependence between two organisations can translate to a balanced power relationship. However, when the dependence relationship between two organisations is asymmetric, the organisation that is less dependent will wield power over the other (Armstrong-Doherty, 1996).

Three categories of power, or pressures, stemming from resource dependence between organisations have been advanced: coercive, mimetic, and normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive power reflects the exertion of power by one organisation over another forcing the latter to adhere to requests. Mimetic power involves one organisation aligning with the structure and decision making of another organisation to gain legitimacy. Normative power involves the development of new rules and standards to guide structure and decision making within an organisation. As the current research is positioned within the non-profit sector, coercive power is the focus of our examination of relations between CSCs and resource providers. This focus is based upon CSC reliance on the government for funding and support. Coercive power has previously been examined within sport clubs (Vos et al., 2011), and evidence of coercion towards non-profit sport organisations has previously been found (Slack & Hinings, 1994). Notably Edwards, Mason, and Washington (2009) found that non-profit sport organisations were confronted with coercive power from resource providers (i.e., government agencies) via threats to reduce or discontinue funding. Given the importance of financial resources (e.g., government grants) in CSC recovery from natural disasters (Wicker, Filo, et al., 2013; Wicker, Vos, et al., 2013), coercive power is explored in investigating relations between CSCs and resource providers.

In a review of the framework outlined by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), Nienhueser (2008) advanced the external environment as the central source of uncertainty confronting organisations. From there, organisational actions and structures are affected by the distribution of power both within the organisation and outside of the organisation. In suggesting this, the author stated that the entity controlling resources has the power over those organisations in need of resources. In the context of the current research, the uncertainty confronted by CSCs extends beyond challenges with regard to staffing, volunteers and finances (e.g., Wicker & Breuer, 2011), to uncertainty with regard to severe weather related events and the consequent impact on CSC operations.

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