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Capacity building in nonprofit sport organizations: Development of a process model

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing literature on organizational capacity in nonprofit and sport organizations, considerable gaps remain when the analysis shifts to building that capacity. This study proposes a comprehensive model of capacity building that recognizes the concepts and relationships involved in that process. The model was developed according to [de Groot's \(1969\)](#) interpretative-theoretical methodology, consisting of four phases that guide the collection and review of relevant literature: exploration, analysis, classification and explanation. As a comprehensive process, effective capacity building acknowledges that a capacity needs assessment occurs in response to some environmental stimulus. The subsequent identification of specific objectives for capacity building is followed by the generation and selection of a strategy(s) and consideration of multiple aspects of readiness to build capacity. The short-term impact and long-term maintenance of built capacity must be assessed following the implementation of the strategy(s) to build, with consideration of the implications for program and service delivery that address the initial stimulus. The model is described in the context of community sport organizations, however it is intended for broad application. Concepts and relationships presented in the model are relevant to the nonprofit voluntary organizational setting in general, while allowing for contextualization based on the unique factors and influences that may be involved in the process of building capacity. The paper concludes with consideration of how the model may be used in practice and directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Organizational capacity has emerged in the nonprofit literature as an important theoretical framework that provides the basis for a holistic analysis of the factors involved in goal attainment and, more broadly, organizational effectiveness ([Austin, Regan, Samples, Schwartz, & Carnochan, 2011](#)). It is generally regarded as a multidimensional concept, comprising a range of organizational attributes that are considered critical to an organization's ability to achieve its goals and satisfy its stakeholders' expectations ([Horton et al., 2003](#)). [Hall et al. \(2003\)](#) define organizational capacity as a function of an organization's ability to draw on or deploy a variety of types of organizational capital, and specifically human resources,

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financial aspects, networks and relationships, infrastructure and process, and planning and development. Within the community sport context specifically, organizational capacity has recently received an increasing amount of attention, both as an overall theoretical framework (e.g., Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Wicker & Hallman, 2013) and to guide the analysis of individual capacity dimensions (e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2013; Nichols, Padmore, Taylor, & Barrett, 2012; Wicker, Breuer, & Hennigs, 2012).

Capacity building is a natural extension of this line of inquiry, as a presumed process of addressing weaknesses, challenges or limitations in one or more aspects of organizational capacity. Yet, there has been limited scholarly consideration of that process, particularly in the sport setting. Community sport organizations (CSOs) face many challenges, including volunteer recruitment (Breuer, Wicker, & Von Hanau, 2012), limited revenue diversification (Wicker & Breuer, 2013), strategic planning (Misener & Doherty, 2009), and pressure for increasing professionalization (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye, & Darcy, 2006). These challenges represent gaps in organizational capacity, and the purpose of capacity building is to alleviate these and other challenges within CSOs. Capacity building aims to improve an organization's ability to formulate and achieve objectives (Aref, 2011) by improving the mobilization of various dimensions of capacity (Cairns, Harris, & Young, 2005). It is intended to help organizations respond effectively to new or changing situations through a structured series of decision-making and implementation (Bryson, 2011). As such, it may be seen as a strategic process that involves defining the direction of and making decisions on allocating resources to pursue a specific plan.

However, the capacity building literature focuses predominantly on its conceptualization, and on the assessment of particular strategies, such as workforce development and partnership enhancement (Cairns et al., 2005; Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2009b; Crisp, Swerissen, & Duckett, 2000; Joffres et al., 2004; Sobeck, 2008), with little reflection or examination of the factors or conditions associated with the process of effective capacity building (cf. Joffres et al., 2004; Sobeck & Agius, 2007). These investigations generally neglect to account for the fuller context of capacity building as a decision-making and implementation process; one that may be presumed to be prompted by certain organizational needs, where success likely depends on critical organizational and environmental factors, and the outcome of which should be viewed from multiple perspectives. With a few exceptions adopting an organizational change perspective (Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2012), and acknowledging capacity building as a strategic approach (Chaskin, 2001; Sobeck & Agius, 2007), the literature has yet to illustrate and hypothesize about effective capacity building as a comprehensive strategic process.

The limited set of frameworks of nonprofit capacity building (Blumenthal, 2003; Nu'Man, King, Bhalakia, & Criss, 2007; Sobeck & Agius, 2007) that do exist are essentially static lists of several of the critical factors presumed to be involved, rather than depicting capacity building as a dynamic process. Doherty (2013) differentiates between a conceptual framework and a theoretical model as the structural representation of concepts and the structural representation of the relationships among the concepts, respectively. This differentiation provides insight into the focus of existing capacity building models and the resulting oversights. These models represent conceptual frameworks that overlook the relationships between the concepts, resulting in an overly simplistic, and arguably incomplete, understanding of capacity building.

Notably, Casey et al. (2012) introduced a framework for organizational change that incorporated capacity building and was used to investigate the implementation of a health promotion programming initiative within sport organizations. The authors examined the organizations' readiness for change and how the changes were implemented through capacity building strategies. However, they did not specifically illustrate the capacity building aspect of their model and, instead, assumed that new program implementation requires capacity building. Casey et al.'s model was a data analysis framework that traced the implementation of a single initiative, restricting its generalizability and application in different contexts.

Understanding of capacity building remains incomplete and largely fragmented, focusing on individual components of capacity building while neglecting to capture the process in its entirety. Nu'Man et al. (2007) call for "a comprehensive organizational capacity building framework with complementary indicators [in order to] shed some light on how these factors impede or facilitate capacity building efforts" (p. 32). The purpose of this paper is to develop a model of capacity building that addresses this call and extends the existing line of inquiry by identifying factors that impact the capacity building process and the relationships among them. Theory-building research in the field of sport management is needed in order to expand the body of knowledge within the field (Doherty, 2013). Doherty argues that "as scholars, we must... invest in theory-building research... [that] involves extending existing theory or generating new theory that is particularly relevant to sport management, with potentially broader application as well" (p. 7). Responding to this call, the proposed model presents a strategic approach to capacity building as an organizational process, informed by the nonprofit and management literature regarding the key components of capacity building. The model is bounded by a focus on capacity building within the nonprofit, and specifically community sport, context. It provides both a practical and theoretical tool that sport leaders and researchers alike can utilize to measure, predict and explain (in)effective capacity building. A review of the organizational capacity in CSOs literature provides a background on the nature of capacity that may be built in this context. This is followed by a description of the approach used to develop the process model of capacity building, and presentation of the model itself. The paper concludes with consideration of how the model may be used in practice and directions for future research.

2. Organizational capacity in community sport organizations

Organizational capacity as a framework for the study of critical organizational attributes has been used extensively within the nonprofit and voluntary literature. Several conceptual frameworks have been advanced that purport a variety of

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