

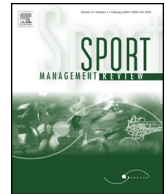


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# Leveraging community sport organizations to promote community capacity: Strategic outcomes, challenges, and theoretical considerations

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### ABSTRACT

Community sport organizations (CSOs) provide valuable contexts for promoting community development. These initiatives are most effective when they involve local stakeholders in the process of development. A key first step to achieving this objective is building community capacity, defined as local stakeholders' skills, knowledge, and resources that may be leveraged for change. Interestingly, despite this conceptual importance, few researchers have focused on capacity building in the sport context. This has limited the theoretical advancement of community capacity theory as it relates to CSOs and community development. Using a qualitative case study approach, the authors analyze the outcomes and challenges of implementing community capacity building strategies in an American CSO, and draw on the empirical data to contribute to this theoretical conversation. Interviews, participant observation, and document analysis were used to generate data, and deductive techniques were used for thematic analysis. The results highlight the outcomes of the capacity building strategies and challenges associated with implementation. In addition, the conclusion focuses on theoretical contributions to community capacity theory, namely the role of sport in facilitating inter-community relations across social groups and the link with process models of organizational capacity. © 2017 Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Community sport organizations (CSOs) are potentially useful agents for promoting community development in underserved areas (Schulenkorf, 2012). Due to the wide range of objectives which fall under the umbrella of community development, definitions of the term are often tailored to specific goals, circumstances, and people (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012). Despite these differences, a fundamental element of all variations is the empowerment of local communities

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(Vail, 2007). Rather than focusing solely on targeted outcomes, communities must be engaged in the process of development (Midgley, 1986). This entails building the resources, skills, and knowledge of local stakeholders to promote sustainable community development (Warburton, 2013).

However, this process is often overlooked in both research and practice. In the sport context, some scholars have critiqued CSO's for focusing narrowly on the individual manifestations of social problems (e.g., Coalter, 2010). Under this approach, sport events and activities are leveraged as the primary agents of change, and the efficacy of programs hinges on the presumed micro-level benefits of sport participation, characterized by the physical, social, and psychological traits of individuals (Coakley, 2011). While they provide important resources that might otherwise be missing in underserved areas, critics suggest this individualized focus promotes "narrow empowerment" that falls short of addressing the systemic social issues which create and perpetuate disadvantages in the first place (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Coalter, 2012, p. 479).

Recently, researchers have worked to develop more holistic approaches to sport-based community development. These approaches emphasize bottom-up conceptualizations that engage community stakeholders in the planning, development, and implementation of CSOs (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). A key first step in this process is building community capacity, which Chaskin (2001) defined as "the intersection of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community" (p. 295). Strong community capacity ensures that a community possesses the human, physical, and financial resources necessary to lead self-directed initiatives (Lawson, 2005). As discussed by Vail (2007), "the idea of community development as a process is closely aligned with capacity building, which implies building on the strengths of a community and developing the skills, knowledge, and leadership such that the community is capable of recognizing and solving local problems" (p. 574).

Despite this conceptual relevance, capacity building is rarely the focus of empirical research focused on CSOs. Although previous scholars have provided anecdotal evidence of capacity building, or linked CSOs with specific dimensions of community capacity (e.g., social capital, leadership), Edwards (2015) indicates "there is still a need for empirical evidence of the suggested outcomes of [capacity building] strategies" (p. 15). This work is needed to not only examine the efficacy of capacity building strategies in CSOs, but also refine and develop the application of community capacity theory. Using a qualitative case study approach, we contribute to those objectives by empirically analyzing the outcomes and challenges associated with capacity building strategies in an American CSO, and provide empirically-based contributions to community capacity theory.

## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Community capacity

The theoretical groundwork for community capacity begins with Toennies (1957) classical ideas of *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society), a conceptualization that has subsequently received important contributions from other notable sociologists. According to Toennies (1957), *gemeinschaft* refers to the bonds of kinship and tradition typically held among members of closely-knit communities, while *gesellschaft* describes less personal, and often exchange-based, institutionalized relationships (Toennies, 1957). Together, these terms informed early conceptualizations of community, comprised of social interactions among individuals bound within prevailing institutional structures (Wellman & Leighton, 1979). Although initially presented as mutually exclusive definitions for social groups, the concept of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* has been revisited by Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and other notable scholars who have disaggregated the terms to provide more clarity and specificity (Brint, 2001). While institutional structures undoubtedly shape the social dynamics of individuals, the social dynamics of individuals are equally capable of influencing institutional structures. This highlights the importance of analyzing how *gemeinschaft*-like social relations affect the arrangement and composition of *gesellschaft*-like structures (Brint, 2001). Community capacity draws on these prevailing conceptualizations by deconstructing static institutional structures into the dynamic arrangement of human, material, and social capacities which collectively build and sustain them (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). These include the individual and collective knowledge of community members, resources and infrastructure, associational and social patterns, and environmental circumstances that are leveraged for change (Jackson et al., 2003).

Communities possessing capacity are more likely to mobilize resources, leverage social connections, and build supportive institutional structures on their own volition (Wendel et al., 2009). Conversely, communities lacking capacity often struggle to achieve these objectives due to a lack of human capital, inadequate infrastructure, limited political influence, and/or fragmented social ties (Wendel et al., 2009). This leads to gaps in key areas of investment which often become the target of external development initiatives (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Although organizations filling these gaps provide important services that might otherwise be missing in communities, many do not rely on the local capacity of residents to do so, thus unwittingly create chronic dependencies. As Bhattacharyya (2004) asserts, "they are service providers . . . set up for the clients not with them" (p. 13).

Community capacity addresses these limitations by focusing on the process of development as much as the product. From this perspective, sustainable development depends on the composition of institutional structures, not just their presence or absence within a community (Labonte & Laverack, 2001). While capacity initiatives have similar long-term goals as community development, they serve the dual purpose of cultivating key capacities through the strategic integration of

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