

Contributing factors toward an understanding of local sport club partnerships: A study of partnership forming behaviour in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

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Abstract

Due to complex and dynamic economic, social and community pressures, there is increasing merit in local sports clubs pursuing partnerships. The purpose of this research is to examine the dynamics of sport partnerships among a cross section of local sports clubs in three Commonwealth countries. Factors known to be linked with clubs in the rhetoric used to support this approach, have been explored. The results revealed that clubs were prepared to ignore perceived increases in some costs of partnership: compliance and coaching, to be able to gain benefits such as increased access to Government grants and sponsorship; while other factors, administration and asset costs, and difficulty of retaining expertise and volunteers appeared to have no significant effect. This paper also examined social connections theory providing tentative support for a perception that the social capital of these clubs markedly increased as a product of partnership and may have been a key driver. Resource dependencies, particularly as they relate to access to playing space are indicators for sports clubs to develop new partnerships even if this increases club costs. Further, results confirm the key role played by local government in shaping clubs' general environment and influencing their perceptions of resource scarcity.

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Introduction

Defining Partnerships in Sport

In common language there are a myriad of terms to describe sport clubs that form relationships with each other. Many of these terms are part of the natural discourse in business and management and they have been borrowed for use in studying this phenomenon as it relates to sporting organisations. The most commonly used terms are alliances, networks and partnerships (for a review of alliances and networks, see Gulati, 1998, and for partnerships see Unlik, (1995) and Simmonds, (2000). Unlik (1993, p 14) defines partnership as “*an on-going arrangement between two parties, based upon satisfying specifically identified, mutual needs*”, whereas definitions of strategic alliances clearly determine a greater legal distance between the parties (Dussauge and Garrette, 1992:2), Yoshino and Rangan (1995:5), with no loss of autonomy for either partner. A definition of merger or amalgamation and the role they play in management is proposed within the management literature Mizruchi and Schwartz (1987). Habeck, Kroger and Tram (2000) state, “*A merger is when two or more organisations cease to exist in their own right and their resources, assets and roles are consolidated into a ‘new’ (takeover read existing) entity which satisfies the needs of stakeholders*” (Sport South Australia June 2003). Clustering is also found in the literature and is defined by David Shilbury (2001), “*as geographic concentrations of interconnecting companies in a particular field*”. This definition is useful in considering more than two sporting organisations that make a network.

Partnership can be described as a simple arrangement of two parties in some form of dyadic exchange, (Gulati, 1998:293). Important in the study of relationships between sporting organisations is an understanding of the legal nature of the resulting entity that may be formed. Legal entity status can be used to differentiate the terminology along a continuum that has at one end: complete loss of identity and sovereignty (mergers and amalgamations); in the middle loosely defined partnerships (strategic alliances, networks); at the other end (alliances) between clearly autonomous organisations. The generic term used in this study for convenience is *partnership*.

The General Environment of Sport

Sport club partnerships can be viewed in the context of an organisation’s interaction with its external environment. Organisational theory shows how sporting organisations fit carefully into the general environment or what the Canadians call the sport delivery system (Thibault & Harvey, 1997). Hatch (1977) noted the importance of a range of external factors that control the organisation and that it is possible to view partnerships in the context of an organisation’s interaction with its environment. Local sporting clubs consider

the vulnerability of their position within the general sporting environment. This environment contains a complexity of factors and realities that impact upon the sporting clubs' ability to grow and flourish. Collins and Downey (2000) point out that the "terrain" is changing quickly and local sporting clubs must live in inconsistent environments where experience is devalued and where sport is commercialised. New Zealand culture has diversifications where the local sporting club has just become a business. Any approach that mitigates against this complexity, reaffirms a clubs' position, provides insurance against future change and/or provides opportunities for growth would be welcomed. Collins and Downey (2000) also highlight the need for local sporting organisations to be innovative and enterprising to ensure survival within a dynamic and changing sporting landscape and identified five key reasons for this focus: consumerism, technology, culture, economy and accessibility. They suggest that the external environment of sport, as well as internal challenges within sporting organisations, are important factors in influencing the likelihood of strategic partnerships. A simple taxonomy of these factors includes political, cultural and economic forces.

Robson (2001) points to a more demanding external environment in the United Kingdom born out of reforms for sport in the 1970's such as the 'Sport for all programme' where it became apparent reasonably quickly that government bodies were not able to affect change directly but needed to work through other agencies and networks such as those of the nonprofit sport sector. As indicated 'a large number of highly organized and heavily subscribed voluntary groups rendered that sector important to successive governments (Robson, 2001:106). New Zealand followed a similar pattern with its 'have a go campaign' and reforms developed via the 'sport on the move' review of the mid 1970's heralding a decentralized model of sport delivery. Much of what happened in sport in the 1970's in Britain also happened in New Zealand and in Canada (Thibault and Harvey, 1997), where a mood of economic realism combined with resource constraints, declining memberships, local authority constraints on spending and more demanding funding regimes made sport organisations more accountable. In New Zealand initial work was also completed on a partnership model programme called "Sportville" by the Hillary Commission in 2000. This approach was initially designed to further support the local sport club infrastructure in this country and to buffer it as sport entered a new and complex business environment. As many of the countries in this study were faced with this situation, Robson contends that in the new millennium, 'this pressurized resource demands greater innovation in order to achieve organisational objectives', (Robson, 2001:106). One key response to this pressure was the idea that sports could improve their chances of survival by banding together to share limited resources.

The Rationale for Sport Club Partnership.

Two theories stand out in the limited literature on sport club responses to pressurized conditions in the general environment of sport. The first of these, resource dependence theory was developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), as cited in Pugh and Hickson (1996), Robson (2001), Proven et al (1980) and Thibault and Harvey, (1997). It was noted that inter-organisational dependencies were created because of 'the need of all organisations to acquire scarce resources', Proven et al, (1980:200). The assumption inferred is that most sporting bodies must interact with other organisations and their environment to insure resource availability. Conversely, a rich resource supply is likely to reduce the need of that same interaction. A second theory suggests partnerships are made possible not simply by the 'needs' a club might have but by the social connections it can bring into play. Rather than dependence, a club may form partnerships simply as a result of opportunity. Opportunity occurs because the club engages directly (via contacts) within the sport delivery system. The social approach allows a dyadic relationship to be maintained with other organisations and the external world. It allows for reference to the greater complexity of inter-dependency which occurs between various individuals, interest groups and political processes. As a sociological approach it allows us to consider that partnerships might evolve from social discourse alone, or from some pluralistic social interaction between individuals.

There is considerable evidence for a sociological perspective on alliances as stated by (White 1981; Burt 1982; Baker 1984) where: "*sociologists have convincingly demonstrated that the distinct social structural patterns in exchange relations within markets share the flow of information*". If this is true for firms it may have some value as a way of understanding local sport club behaviour. In the study it would be useful to look for evidence of (i) social networks of prior ties, Gulati (1998: ?) says '*the social networks of prior ties not only influence the creation of new ties but also affected their design, their evolutionary path and ultimately their success*' and (ii) evidence that social connections guide an organisation interested in new alliances. Gulati (others) are interested in the notion that a firm's social connection provides it with opportunities to realize an interest in alliances. What then are the networks of social relations and how well are they embedded in the organisations studied.

One understanding of social connections is linked to the use of management and organisation theory of 'boundary spanning'. For an understanding of boundary spanning in the context of sport see Robson (2001). People within a sport club can, and often do, have a duality to their role resulting from what they bring as an individual club member, and in the form of other hats they wear as members of other groups, collectives and

organisations of use to their club. Such roles and connections into the external environment contribute to the counter-dependency the organisation wishes to achieve by being able to influence the decision-making of other organisations/partners. It is not enough to assert a link can be made by spanning boundaries between sporting organisations without considering the power interplay that occurs as a result of partnerships brought about this way. There is inevitably a power or relationship imbalance at this point. Linkages at the local level may in part be caused by an appropriate level of social cohesion between the parties, but this does not mean that there is equality in this relationship (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978). Even between clubs of the same code there may be few examples of relationships that are equally reciprocal. This is despite Robson's (2001) view that power distribution is likely to be evenly distributed in partnerships in Sport (Robson p102). Recognition of inequality in terms of resources, knowledge, club size, quality of administration, depth of commitment were key factors in understanding how to proceed with a partnership or whether a partnership was appropriate at all. Thibault and Harvey (1997) point out that generally relationships between the partners are likely to be asymmetrical and the organisations involved in the relationship may have differing levels of commitment or different motives for wanting to initiate links. The author proposes a relationship between 'relationship imbalance' and formalization of partnerships. As a starting point the extent to which relationships are formalized is an interesting issue. The issue of formalization is inter-connected with that of autonomy and how precious that autonomy is to an organisation. Structured legal relationships tend to bind organisations, whereas 'loose arrangements' tend to limit formalization and protect autonomy of each organisation. Autonomy can be protected by agreement and in some cases particularly in 'cluster' relationships this happens. Organisations which depend on others for resources, or which enter dependency relationships as a result of forming inter-organisational partnerships, usually start from a place of resource imbalance.

There is substantial research on the topic of sport and recreation partnership and joint ventures. Research in Canada has tended to focus at the macro level (Thibault and Harvey, 1997) and there is a growing body of research in this field on inter-sector partnerships Shaw and Allen (2006), Leberman and Ratcliffe (2002), Crompton (1998), Bartlett, J. (1998), Thibault, Kikulis and Harvey (1997), LaPage (1994). A number of researchers point out the dearth of research and sport specific examples of partnerships at the micro level between sport clubs in the not-for-profit sector. (Leberman & Ratcliff p 78), (Thibault and Harvey p 67). The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understanding of the nature of relationship forming between sporting organisations at the local 'club' level. It is predicted that as local sporting clubs consider the vulnerability of their position within the sport delivery system, that they may form relationships based on resource dependence

If actions of sporting clubs who merge are to be clearly understood, it is necessary to identify causal factors in the general sporting environment and whether or not resource or relationship imbalance, or social connections propel clubs toward partnerships of one form or another.

The study method therefore disaggregates and analyses a range of factors known from personal experience of the researchers to make some contribution to a clubs decision to form a relationship with other clubs in order to identify those factors that make the greater contributions.

Method

We interviewed and surveyed the key architects of local club sport partnerships and gathered written evidence to provide a data stream for longitudinal comparison and analysis. It was intended that an analysis would allow comparisons between sports clubs in three similar sized cities in three Commonwealth Countries identified as *Brisbane* Australia, *Auckland* New Zealand and *Vancouver* Canada. A cross-country study was planned on the basis that it might reveal some differences in the partnership types and causes matched to differing external environmental conditions in each Country. The study cities were selected as research sites because: (i) cities were in the population range 1.4 to 2.2 million; (ii) they had similar infrastructure, wealth and sport delivery systems; and (iii) they were within Commonwealth Countries ensuring at least some limited historical similarity in social, cultural and political influences.

Data Collection

Clubs were sourced by email and telephone approaches to Sport Development Officers (S.D.O's) in regional sports trusts and/or government/local government equivalents in each of the three cities. In total 16 S.D.O's or their local government equivalents were contacted and asked to identify a list of clubs that met the eligibility criteria. The criteria were: (i) any club that *was* known to have attempted a collaboration/merger/alliance/amalgamation with at least one other sporting club of any kind; (ii) they made this attempt in the last fifteen years²; (iii) there has been a defined outcome. Participant clubs were approached randomly from completed S.D.O lists in each city until four, or in the case of Auckland five were selected. Clubs were excluded because: (i) they were out of season and therefore were not responding to phone or email; (ii) upon interview they were found to not meet the eligibility criteria; (iii) they declined to participate.

² The theoretical time period of 7 years was extended to 15 years to ensure enough clubs were eligible to study.

The primary instrument for data collection is self-completion surveys available in written, email and online versions. Each of the 13 participant club's (see list below) was asked to complete the self-completion survey. For each participant club one survey was also sought from either their partnering club or a sports club in an identifiable relationship with them from which a further 8 self completion surveys were gained. The resultant formal analysis of the survey was therefore derived from 21 sporting clubs who were asked to rate perceptions on a hierarchical scale taken from (1=High to 9=Low, Questions 6-10 or 1=Hard to 9=Easy, Questions 11 to 14). We were interested in the change in their perception before and after formation of relationship. This is measured as the difference between the "after" rating and the "before" rating to get the perceived change in response.

The secondary source of data is semi-structured interviews with thirteen participant clubs: four each from Brisbane and Vancouver; and five from Auckland.

Participant Clubs	Interviewed Partners
<i>Brisbane</i>	
Wynnum Manly Leagues Club Redlands Sports Club Shawsporz Southside Sport and Community Club Inc	The Northern Eagles / North Star Soccer Mt Gravett Bowls Club
<i>Vancouver</i>	
Pheonix Gymnastic Club Mixed Adult Recreational Slo-Pitch Metro Ford Soccer Club Vancouver Rowing Club	Mt Gravett Bowls Club Coquitlam City Soccer Association Jokers Field Hockey Club
<i>Auckland</i>	
Waitakere Bears Softball Club Inc Te Atatu Peninsula Bowling Club Millenium Institute Sharks Sports Trust Glenfield Rovers AFC and Sports Club	Ranui Swanson Association Football Club Te Atatu Women's Bowling Club Sharks Touch

A third source of data is key documentation including: annual reports, policy documents, business plans, brochures and newspaper clippings.

Analysis involved cross referencing of written summaries from information gathered from the self-completion surveys and semi-structured interviews. Where possible, further support and verification was gained from evidentiary documentation.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis of ratings presented a challenge. The rating scales were numerical and the change in perception on each measure is given by subtracting the before from the after rating. We attempted to test the null hypothesis that there was no increase or decrease (depending on the direction of the change) in the rating after formation of a relationship for each measure. Since the distribution of ratings is unknown we decided to utilize the Central Limit Theorem by assuming that we had randomly selected clubs of sample size 3 to 5 from the rating change for each measure and form the distribution of sample means, which will be normally distributed. Hence we randomly ordered each measure's rating change and blocked into samples of fixed size and calculated the mean of each block. Typically we had between 5 and 7 values meaning that we needed to use a one-tailed student t-distribution to calculate t-scores and significance levels.

Results

Twenty one sporting clubs were asked to rate on a descriptive scale (taken from 1 to 10 for Q 6-10), (taken from 1 to 9 for Q 11-14) a range of factors. Table 1 indicates an overview of the questions, the categories assessed and the instrument (survey and/or interview) used to assess them.

Table 1 Self Completion Survey and Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Question Outline	Question Numbers	Question Type Resource Dependency	Question Type Social Connection
<i>Self Completion Survey</i>			
Cost of Administration, compliance, fixed assets, coaching, non-fixed assets	Q 10.1 - Q 10.5	X	
Difficulty in obtaining grants, sponsors, volunteers	Q11.1 - 2, Q 12	X	
Difficulty in completing compliance, retaining expertise	Q13, Q14	X	
Identification of type of working relationship/partnership	Q 5	X	
Dependency on other organisations	Q 9.1-9.2	X	
Club interaction with other clubs, club knowledge, geographical proximity.	Q 6.1 -6.3		X
Involvement with National and Regional sport organisations, Corporates and Sponsors, regulatory Bodies	Q 8.1- 8.3		X
Identified nature of the relationship	Q 5	X	X
<i>Semi Structured Interview Survey</i>			
What was the 'Primary Impetus' for clubs to consider collaboration?	Q 2	X	
What resources were in short-supply if any?	Q 4	X	X

A range of questions see Table 1 were designed to assess the perceived level of dependency associated with a set of factors known to affect clubs. The results listed in Table 2 identify a level of significance associated with the perceived change from the 'before' and 'after' conditions surrounding a partnership.

Table 2 Self Completion Survey results - Resource Dependency Questions

Dependency Variables	Mean Estimate	Std Error Estimate	t score (d.f.)	Signif.	Accept/reject null hypothesis at 95% confidence
<i>1.1 Dependency on costs</i>					
Cost of administration services (phone, computer, staffing, office set-up and supplies)	-0.61	0.84	0.72 (4)	0.76	accept
Cost of compliance, insurance and legal fees	-1.19	0.61	1.95 (5)	0.97	reject
Fixed assets, cost of mortgag, repayments, building maintenance, depreciation	-2.22	1.94	1.15 (5)	0.87	accept
Cost of coaching expertise	-1.44	0.69	2.1 (5)	0.98	reject
Non-fixed assets cost of equipment, vehicles, maintenance and depreciation	-1.33	0.94	1.41 (5)	0.92	accept
<i>1.2 Dependency on other organisations</i>					
Dependency on other organisations	-1.57	0.93	1.69 (6)	0.95	accept
<i>1.3 Degree of difficulty in obtaining</i>					
Government grants	1.19	0.55	-2.14 (3)	0.98	reject
Sponsorship	0.72	0.33	-2.2 (5)	0.99	reject
Volunteer help	-0.44	0.82	0.53 (4)	0.7	accept
<i>1.4 Degree of difficulty in</i>					
Completing compliance requirements	-0.56	0.97	0.58 (4)	0.72	accept
Recruiting and retaining expertise to run club	0.94	0.79	-1.19 (4)	0.88	accept

Two factors were statistically very significant in support of Resource Dependency Theory. Namely, leverage to secure sponsorship (p=0.99) and government grants (p=0.98). This is despite statistically significant disadvantages including cost of compliance, insurance and legal fees (p=0.97), cost of coaching expertise (p=0.98) and inter-organisation dependence (p=0.95). Other factors achieved marginal statistical significance (p=0.7 to 0.92). These are listed in Table 2 and include the costs of administration, fixed assets, volunteer help and difficulty in completing compliance requirements, and retaining expertise.

Table 3 Self Completion Survey results - Social Connections Questions

Social Connections Variables	Mean Estimate	Std Error Estimate	t score (d.f.)	Signif.	Accept/reject null hypothesis at 95% confidence
<i>1.5 Interaction with other clubs</i>					
Knowledge of clubs	-4.2	3.94	1.07 (4)	0.86	accept
Geographical proximity to each other	-4.55	5.06	0.90 (4)	0.82	accept
<i>1.6 Involvement with significant organisations</i>					
National sport governing bodies	-1.75	2.51	0.70 (4)	0.76	accept
Regional sport governing bodies	-1.9	2.01	0.94 (4)	0.83	accept
Corporations and sponsors	-3.7	3.23	1.15 (4)	0.87	accept
Regulatory bodies (e.g. Licensing and local government)	-3.2	1.83	1.75 (4)	0.96	reject

Table 3 indicates a potential for interaction with other clubs pre and post partnership as a way of gauging the value of social connections as an impetus to partnership forming. No statistically significant evidence was found to support Social Connections Theory. One measure only showed any statistical significance, namely, involvement with regulatory bodies (e.g. licensing and local government). The perceived frequency of interaction with other clubs in terms of ‘knowledge’ of other clubs and ‘geographical proximity’ to other clubs both increased post relationship forming but neither result was found to be significant.

Table 4 identifies the self-completion survey partnership types. Results were modified as a result of a discussion with each club (semi-structured interviews), and on the basis of the knowledge of the researcher to ensure consistency and clear application of definitions.

Table 4 Study sample club partnership types

Clubs Surveyed	Type of Relationship	Detailed Description
Co Whitlam Metro Ford Sports club	Merger	Two clubs combine to form a new club
Glenfield Rovers Soccer Club	Merger	Absorbed Northcote Soccer Club
Millennium Institute Health/Fitness	Clusters and Strategic Alliance	4 original sports, formed Mish but have autonomy, others have joined by agreement
Phoenix Gymnastic Club	Strategic Alliance (plus entity)	Clubs separate with an entity to manage building development
Redlands Sports Club	Merger	Merging/incorporating some existing clubs and creating new ones as well
Sharks Sports Trust	Merger	Initially Touch but new clubs joining into Sharks and operating under sharks constitution
ShawSportz	Cluster (plus entity)	Have identity but have transferred some/much control to entity created around gaming trust
Southside Community Sports Club	Cluster (with respect to Bowls Club)	At least three entities and the original club and its founding sports
Te Atatu Peninsula Bowling Club	Merger	Men’s and Ladies joined under one new constitution

Vancouver M.A.R. Slo-Pitch	Merger	This club is taking over Glazers and Glazers will go out of existence
Vancouver Rowing Club	Strategic Alliance	They have independence in entity but they are subject to a chief exec and scrutiny by the Board of VRC by agreement
Waitakere Bears Softball Club	Partnership (plus entity) Starling Park Sport Club	Forming a new entity that governs them
Wynnum Manly Leagues Club	Strategic Alliance	At least three sports clubs supported financially by Wynnum Manly Leagues club

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with the 'participant' clubs. These clubs were asked a number of interview questions. Semi-structured survey questions 2 and 4 were designed to provide information regarding the primary impetus for partnership and the resources that were in short supply. A summary of the results are supplied in Table 5.

Table 5 Primary Impetus for Partnership

Clubs Surveyed	Primary Impetus for partnership	Resources in short supply
Redlands Sports Club	Thought that there was power in numbers	Funding issues from the point of view of extra grounds
ShawSportz	1. Community need and need to develop women's sport in that club's area 2. Strategic and good fit for licensing trust to cluster sport administration to make it cheaper and legitimize use of gaming profits	Lack of quality facilities and administration, now solved by infrastructure and admin paid for by shawsportz
Wynnum Manly Leagues Club	1. Close by clubs needing to be saved from their crippling dept 2. Mandated to fund sport from gambling profit	Dollars in short supply as the leagues club purchased all other clubs, now loans paid
Southside Community Sports Club	Need for a location for the original club	Building to operate Bingo and a clear vision for what to do with gambling profits
Vancouver Rowing Club	1. Seasonal compatibility between codes sharing a building 2. Members playing both sports started a dialogue	A field to play on, and admin services fixed by joining Vancouver Rowing
Co Whitlam Metro Ford Sports club	1. Merger would bring about a club successful in both boys and girls 2. To gain better access to and more field allocations	Volunteers were in short supply, and good quality Board members, but it is expected that this will be fixed by joining together.
Phoenix Gymnastic Club	1. Getting land from parks board if they merged (Gymnastics) 2. Being relocated (Bowls Club)	Public land able to be allocated to building development, fixed by joining forces with Bowls
Vancouver M.A.R. Slo-Pitch	1. M.A.R.S To gain better access to and more field allocations 2. Glazers to avoid becoming incorporated society	Had numbers needed greater number of fields allocated, merger fixed this
Waitakere Bears Softball Club	1. Desire for a secure home field and a clubrooms 2. Seasonal compatibility between codes sharing a building 3. Knowledge of a successful example of this type of merger (softball/soccer)	Clubrooms and a stable long term ground needed
Sharks Sports Trust	1. Vision of growing into a multi-sport club 2. Need to be bigger to secure more field allocation	Grounds were in short supply and now we have a much greater say on ground allocation
Millennium Institute Health/Fitness	Promise of a new enhanced facility which would give them more space	Professional administration and facilities

Te Atatu Peninsula Bowling Club	1. Survival and need for greater numbers 2. Geographical proximity	New members were in short supply particularly on the men's side
Glenfield Rovers Soccer Club	1. Gave the club size to be able to employ a club manager 2. Lack of volunteer expertise in absorbed club	Management expertise and money were in short supply

Findings and Discussion

This study found fewer clubs working in partnership than expected in all three cities. An estimate from Clubs' Queensland indicated a maximum of about 25 examples known to the sport development workers (R. Edgar, pers com, Jan 30, 2007). Sport development workers in Vancouver and Auckland identified similar estimates. The result is a smaller total population of local sport club partnerships than expected. The study sample of thirteen cases across three cities is therefore more representative than anticipated.

Findings in support of Resource Dependency Theory

Firstly, difficulty in 'obtaining grants from sponsors' is identified as an area that was perceived to become easier to achieve gains in once the partnership had formed. This result is expected as an increased organisational size leads to an increase in leverage value of the sponsorship property. This benefit of partnerships in relation to the financial aspects is supported through the interview phase of the study with many clubs referring to scarcity of financial resources. A positive perception of reduced difficulty in obtaining sponsorship post-relationship forming implies a gain for clubs increasing financial resources, and reducing financial costs.

The second notable attribute that improved post-relationship forming was difficulty in 'obtaining government grants'. In this case, the distribution of change in response exhibits a skew toward a lowering of the difficulty of obtaining government grants after forming a relationship. Taken together these financial factors lend support to the notion that clubs at the local level perceive access to money to be crucial and worth taking the risk of forming a partnership. This conclusion is supported via the work of Frisby, Thibault & Kikulis (2004) who also found resource scarcity to be a factor contributing to the rise in partnerships.

Significant results were revealed for the cost of 'compliance, insurance and legal fees' and the cost of 'coaching expertise'. Results showed a perceived increase in these costs after clubs formed a relationship, indicating clubs are prepared to join forces even if there are additional associated costs (see Table 2). Other variables mentioned in the interviews were 'difficulty in finding volunteers and expertise'. Both showed no

change in pre and post-relationship forming and were not perceived to be in short supply across most of the study clubs. There was little evidence to suggest an increase in the perception of the cost of administration, cost of mortgages and other fixed assets and cost of non-fixed assets for the clubs studied after they had developed partnerships.

Club administration costs increased as a result of relationship forming. The organisation that exists 'post relationship' is by definition larger and requires increased administration economy of scale related to the cost of clubs in partnership. Further, there was no evidence for an increased perception of costs for fixed and non-fixed assets as a result of relationship forming. A number of potential explanations could account for this. Some of the clubs involved formed mergers or joint ventures with existing clubs whose assets were in a settled state (see Table 4). This is particularly true for three of the four Brisbane clubs in the study. Few clubs had much in the way of non-fixed assets such as vehicles while those that did reported little impact. Taken collectively these findings support the contention that clubs partner as a way of reducing resource dependence,

Semi formal interviews with Phoenix Gymnastic Club, Co-Whitlam Metro Ford Soccer Club, Vancouver M.A.R.S. slo-pitch, Waitakere Bears Softball Club and Sharks Sports Club partnership also support a resource dependency view of partnerships where these sports clubs all admit colluding with the express intention of gaining more favourable access to sports fields (See Table 5). They appear controlled by local government management of essential and scarce sport fields, because of their need for a share, and in some cases, a greater share of this precious resource. An historical view of park board sport field allocation would show that sports that were popular, had long histories, or association with clubs or their R.S.O's were advantaged in provision and access to fields and buildings, while recent contemporary sports found it more difficult to gain access. Representatives of Sharks Sports Club made this point in comparing the recent arrival of 'touch football' as somewhat problematic when it came to field allocations as they attempted to compete with well established sports for scarce and expensive sport field allocations. Consequently, Sharks concluded that to access sports fields they would need to work closely with other sporting organisations that already had that access. The level of inter-connectedness between these organisations developed further than expected with many clubs becoming partners within Sharks Sports.

In many examples within the study the impetus for partnership came from issues, problems and opportunities presented via the external environment. Notably, clubs faced with a scarcity showed evidence of partnership

activity as per the classical resource dependency model, particularly if the scarcity was an easily understood tangible physical resource, while in others it appeared to come from opportunity and chance meetings.

At this micro-level the basic need of the sports to function were of immediate and paramount concern and were the key reasons used to justify the partnerships. This is a point of contrast with many of the public sector sporting partnerships mentioned in the literature whose concerns were not survival focused. The logic followed by local sports clubs is circular and simple as pointed out by Thibault and Harvey (1997, 61):

“for nonprofit sport organisations, links with other partners may result in access to more resources to develop programmes/services. In turn, these resources may attract more participants which would create opportunities to better develop the domestic and high performance programmes. In turn, as the high performance programme improves, nonprofit sport organisations tend to receive greater visibility which can lead to increases in membership and increases in resources from the government and organisations in the private sector”.

In five of the thirteen study participant clubs including the case of Sharks Sports Club the key driver for partnership was the need to grow by sharing a park space or to secure the club's growth or future with a greater share of field allocations. The findings support the notion that access to field/play space and access to sponsors and funders are two strong motivational forces that can lead clubs into relationships at the local level. There may be other reasons for forming relationships beyond those related to physical resources alone. Robson (2001) asserts that resources are not always tangible and include knowledge, advice and management expertise as well as the traditional focus on physical facilities, money and field allocations. In the case of the Sharks Sport Trust it was evident that training given by officers of the Regional Sport Trust (R.S.O.) influenced trustees positively toward establishing a partnership approach. It is interesting that Sharks wanted to use this knowledge to increase its influence in the external environment. Robson (2001) developed a theory indicating that organisations should attempt to create 'counter dependency' by making elements of the external environment dependent on them. In this model powerful internal coalitions within sports clubs can shape environments by choosing where to operate.. Essentially Sharks did this by becoming a multi-sport club and increasing their local influence. Population ecology theory supported by Robson (2001) would argue that Sharks' position is one of being in favour with the external environment, due to its ability to adapt or vary in how it deals with a supply crisis and is therefore rewarded in a population ecology world by having evolved toward a partnership approach to solve its problems.

Findings in support of Social Connections Theory

Survey results demonstrate an increased involvement or connection into the sport delivery system for most of the clubs surveyed. This is viewed as a move away from a pure resource dependency or asocial approach (Gulati 1998). However Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) see it as an extension of resource based approach used to improve an organisations social capital. The extent to which a sport club is embedded in the sport delivery system of their region can impact on their capability to enter into partnerships. This was measured in the study by considering proximity and knowledge of other clubs and involvement between the club and other important organisations. Both factors increased post-relationship forming, but neither was significant

When considering what was significant we found an increased perception of involvement with regulatory bodies (e.g. licensing, local government) and to a lesser extent with corporates, sponsors and national and regional sporting bodies.

Evidence of social connectedness was apparent in the case of Vancouver Rowing Club with its historical decision to incorporate a field hockey club into its cluster. Their CEO commented that 'field hockey were well thought of and make a worthwhile contribution, in terms of membership benefits and addition of people into the club' (*K.Jolly,, pers com, May, 2007*).

As indicted in Table 5 many of the study organisations sought partnerships as a means to secure better relationships with local government. This further supports the view that the more relationships with other organisations e.g. funding, Local government, R.S.Os, the more powerful the organisation becomes. In the case of Sharks, Redlands, Wynnum Manly Leagues Club and Shawspartz; each club had connections with a host of organisations. Two of the best examples were Redlands Sports Club where the Mayor had set up the club and partnerships and Shaw Sports, where one of the board members of the club was also the acting Chair of "Clubs Queensland; a powerful organisation supporting the development of sporting clubs at the state level. There are other examples which support the notion of the importance of distinct social structural patterns in supplying a greater share of resources, knowledge and ultimately power and autonomy. The initial link between Vancouver Rowing Club Rugby and field hockey players prior to their inclusion was cited as a main

reason for this relationship to be formed. The link itself was *members in common* to Vancouver Rowing Club who played both sports Rugby and Field Hockey. Te Atatu Peninsula Bowling club had an unusual form of substantial 'prior ties' social connection in the sense that there was inter connection between men's and women's bowling as they operated beside each other. There were many examples of husband and wife each joining their gender specific clubs; presumably travelling to one or other club car park before exiting into their almost adjoining facilities.

These examples deal with 'prior ties' within the organisations or between the clubs and other organisations that ease or are seen to ease the process of relationship building. This is often explained as a process of 'pooling influence' where links between individuals at similar levels in partner organisations 'open doors' (Robson, 2001). There would be an expectation that this 'pooling of influence' would be clearly shown by clubs of the same code, because they share a common understanding and love of a particular sport, which result in opportunities for clubs of a similar code to interact. This was the case with M.A.R.s Slo-Pitch softball and Glazers Softball where senior club members were able to undertake a merger on the basis of the social connection they made initially. Further anecdotal evidence for this type of partnership driver was found in two other clubs studied Metro-Ford Soccer Club and Te Atatu Peninsula Bowling Club.

Social connections can take other forms and there were social relationships cited by participant clubs that lend support to the value of this type of partnership influence. Having access to important people at the organisation level (as well as at the aforementioned inter-personal level) can lead to tactical use of professional contacts.

There was evidence of several of the participant clubs engaged in processes that would enhance social connectedness or that is instrumental in helping clubs feel that they could trust each other in partnership situations. Shaw and Allen (2006) point to the significance of trust as a key variable in shaping inter-relationships. They assert that nonprofit organisations often under-manage relationships with a lack of formal documentation and process to manage partnerships in both formation and operational phases. The concept of relationship imbalance is used to understand the outcomes of this study. Results Table 4 support the notion that clubs at a significant disadvantage/imbalance in terms of resources and social capital tended to be merged into the stronger entity. Few of the clubs studied used formal documentation in the management of their partnership relationship. Most had some form of documentation governing the original condition of the relationship (except those that had merged). Trust for these clubs – post initial partnership conditions would prove to be an important ingredient in what Shaw and Allen refer to as "loose arrangements" or hands off

styles of partnership management (Frisby et al (2004) p 116 in Shaw and Allen). Loose arrangements were more likely when clubs were equal in status at the outset.

There were also examples of low social connectedness in the study for example, Southside Community Sports Club although it has sport partnerships in many cases these sports acted independently of the club beyond the representation on the board. They believe the arrangement gives them a financial advantage by allowing them to buy property and expand community interests.

The role of local forms of Government

Local government is becoming a key external determinant to the success of many sport club partnerships, a fact which is increasingly recognised (Leach et al., 1994; Walsh, 1995; Thibault et al., 1997). The study found that access to land and buildings were significant external drivers toward partnership, as were directives from local government park boards (Clark, 1994; Crompton 1997). This finding was evident from observations of six of the thirteen clubs studied. The involvement of local government was so pervasive that of the remaining seven partnerships three at least would have needed some local government involvement to achieve their goal. Park boards were viewed as orchestrators of the process of partnership forming by controlling the flow and direction of resources to the clubs. In the case of the Phoenix Gymnastic Club in Vancouver, Canada, the involvement of the local council parks board was critical to the success of a building project they undertook. Council determined that the partner club, (Pacific Indoor Bowls) share the cost of building and that they build on a council designated site. To achieve this goal the Parks Board evicted Pacific Indoor Bowls from a previous park in order that the 'partnership' between these two clubs become possible. These decisions which were outside the control of both clubs, were due to political processes based on perceptions about how physical facilities should be developed, as well as a growing role for government in all forms as noted by Robson (2001) in intervening in the affairs of the local sport club. It was believed that in order to achieve Council's goals it could direct local sports clubs in this manner. This was contrary to the findings of Frisby, Thibault & Kikulis (2004), who indicated that Local Authority leisure service departments³ tend to be compatible as partners for local sports clubs. Kanter, (1999); Sagawa and Segal (2000) indicate that local government sport club partnerships were based on trust and tradition as a prerequisite to relationship building. Local government was not perceived as a partner but rather as a regulatory body and resource allocator/gatekeeper. There is a growing frustration by professional staff within local government bodies at

³ Many park boards report to Local governmentLocal government leisure services departments and there is much overlap in definition between the various Departments and their functions.

the lack of progress on partnerships by sports clubs that might explain the more directive approach taken in the example of Phoenix Gymnastics Club.

There is no conclusive evidence that connections with regulatory bodies, sponsors, regional, national bodies etc were the antecedent cause of relationship forming, but it is apparent nearly all these indicators have resulted in a generally increased involvement with these organisations post relationship forming or after.

Conclusion

These findings have helped us understand what drives clubs toward partnerships and which of the many contributing factors may be the ones that will provide the strongest push. While it has been acknowledged that partnerships between sporting clubs at the local level can have significant benefits, the case for them has by no means been firmly proven here. There are many complicating factors that will inform a sporting club in making decisions to partner with other clubs. It would be important to also consider examples of relationship failure although there appear to be considerably fewer of these.

Overall, the findings suggest that a small percentage of sporting clubs at the local level will form relationships with other clubs on the basis of their need to consolidate access to sporting play space, particularly sporting fields, and to achieve greater access to sponsorship and grant dollars. By forming partnerships they report achievement of this aim. Further, they will form relationships even if they perceive that some costs will actually increase as a result. Resource dependency theory does provide useful insights into the primary drives of sports clubs and why they seek to develop linkages and partnerships, and this is clearly evident in the current study where clubs demonstrate a lack of scarce resources. However, faced with such a complex array of these dependencies and other factors (economic, political and cultural/social) both within the clubs and via dyadic relationships with other organisations, it is difficult to follow a reductive view that resource scarcity alone is enough to solve the 'why' or 'primary impetus' question for local sports clubs developing relationships with each other. We can further conclude that there is evidence that clubs who form partnerships report increases in social connection and involvement with the partnering club and influential organisations in their sport delivery system. We see clear evidence of a key role for local government in this process, where the visibility of local government is high for all local clubs and their role is instrumental. It is likely that there are many reasons for clubs to form partnerships, and we must acknowledge that even greater numbers of clubs did not consider partnerships as a solution to supply problems within a known resource pool. However as they were not subject to study it is difficult to tell if this disadvantaged them (Hatch 1997:81). This study does not consider in enough detail the role of social connections at the micro club level

as a primary impetus for relationships, nor because of the small sample size can the results of this study be generalized. Further research will be required to support or renounce claims about what drives clubs toward partnerships. A full understanding of the structural and process dynamics of relationship forming will be an important step in developing a clear understanding of the value of sport club partnerships. A number of other questions related to this topic remain un-answered and further research is needed to overcome this gap in the literature.

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