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SPORT AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY THEORY¹

Stacy Warner

Introduction

Sport managers are often concerned with ways to improve the sport experience for their stakeholders. The Sport and Sense of Community Theory, like the other theories presented in this text, provides a guide for sport managers to improving one avenue of the sport experience. Specifically, the theory addresses how community can be built or enhanced within a sport setting. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the Sport and Sense of Community Theory, along with a description of individual constructs involved in the theory. Next, I highlight the boundary conditions, testing and applicability of the theory. Finally, I discuss the process of developing the theory, extensions, applications and future directions.

Overview

Martene Dixon and I define sense of community as ‘community characteristics that lead to members feeling a sense of belonging, attachment, and shared faith and interest in common goals or values’ (Warner and Dixon, 2011, p. 258; see also McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Sport stakeholders often assert that fostering a sense of community is a fundamental outcome of the sport experience. There is considerable evidence of such among sport participants (Glover and Bates, 2006; Lyons and Dionigi, 2007), fans and spectators (Chalip, 2006; Clopton, 2009; Swyers, 2010; Warner, Shapiro, Ridinger, Dixon and Harrison, 2011), volunteers (Costa *et al.*, 2006; Green and Chalip, 2004) and even sport/leisure employees (McCole *et al.*, 2012; Kellest and Warner, 2011). However, little work has been done on how and under what conditions this sense of community is cultivated. My work with Dixon resulted in a Sport and Sense of Community Theory. Our theory addresses *how* this phenomenon of fostering a sense of community occurs within a sporting environment.

We identified seven constructs and/or factors that work in concert with one another to facilitate the development of community and, thus, the ensuing sense of community. Based on extensive grounded theory data from a wide array of current and former athletes, we (Warner and Dixon, 2011, 2013) theorize that *administrative consideration, common interest, competition, equity in administrative decisions, leadership opportunities, social spaces* and *voluntary action* are the essential factors or community characteristics that are needed for a sense of community to be fostered

among athletes. Creating a sense of community is an important outcome in sport settings because doing so not only helps justify the need and demand for sport, but is associated with programme retention (Kellett and Warner, 2011; Warner, Kerwin and Walker, 2013) and numerous life-quality enhancing benefits, such as improved health (Berkman, Glass, Brissette and Seeman, 2000) and civic participation (Albanesi, Cicognani and Zani, 2007). Thus, capturing how a sense of community is fostered within sport is key to better managing sport and justifying its importance.

Constructs

Administrative consideration involves the expression of care, concern and intentionality by administrators. It has been noted that this consideration from administrators needs to extend beyond that of the athletes' sport experience and also involve a genuine concern for the athlete/person's overall well-being. An example of this would be when a coach or administrator enquires about an athlete's family or an off-the-field endeavour, such as their schooling, jobs or hobbies. *Common interest* is defined as group dynamics, social networking and friendships that result from individuals being brought together by the common interest of the sport, combined with a common goal, shared values or other unifying factors (Warner and Dixon, 2013). We further highlighted that community starts with this common interest, but in order to activate this factor, members must find additional points of attachment, values or goals that extend beyond the actual sporting experience.

Competition reflects the challenges people encounter in seeking to better their rivals. Our initial work revealed that this factor varied by gender. That is, *competition* seemingly enhanced the sense of community for males and detracted for females. Our later work (Warner and Dixon, in press) more clearly distinguished that *external* competition enhanced the sense of community experienced for both males and females; consequently, it is only the *internal* competition that negatively detracted for females. Thus, the rivalry against a common opponent outside of the team and overall competitive atmosphere contributes to the promotion of community for both male and female sport participants.

Next, *equity in administrative decisions* is also a factor that contributes to fostering a sense of community for athletes. This factor is composed of the decisions and practices by administrators that establish that all community members are treated equitably. In other words, when members feel that administrators make fair decisions, the overall sense of community is enhanced. *Leadership opportunities* include both the formal and informal roles and occasions for community members to lead and direct other community members. Thus, this entails holding formal roles, such as team captain or more informally leading a drill during practice or being in charge of a fundraising event. When such leadership roles or positions are available, the sense of community is further cultivated.

Social spaces, or a common area or facility where individuals could interact with one another, is also a key component to fostering a sense of community. This often includes locker rooms, designated cafeteria tables, or lounge areas in or near practice fields or arenas. *Voluntary action* entails the actions related to being in a community when little external pressure exists. That is, when community members join on their own free will without tangible external incentive or peer pressure, a greater sense of community is fostered. In sum, our work found that the seven aforementioned constructs are the fundamental components to the Sport and Sense of Community Theory.

Boundary conditions

Bacharach (1989) stated, 'A theory is a statement of relations among concepts with a set of boundary assumptions and constraints' (p. 496). Consequently, it is important to note the constraints surrounding any theory. The Sport and Sense of Community Theory is based on eighty current and former athletes' sport experiences. While the theory could likely be applied to other stakeholder groups in sport, the data used to construct the theory was specific to the athletes' experience; it was developed and grounded in solely the athletes' words and reflection on their personal experiences.

Our work (Warner, Dixon and Chalip, 2012) noted that while all of the seven identified factors contribute to the creation of a sense of community, the salience of some factors were context specific. This specific work compared US athletes in formal (i.e., varsity athletics) and more informal (i.e., club sports) settings and revealed that all of the factors influenced sense of community, despite not being prominent or readily observable in initial interviews. Thus, when all seven factors were probed in an interview setting, it became evident that they are indeed underlying and influential to the experience. In many cases, the Sport and Sense of Community factors were found to be taken for granted, because they were expected or assumed by the sport participants to be present.

Scholars have defined such factors that are assumed or expected to be present as *must-be* components; they are expected to be present and are only noted when they are not present and consequently often detrimental or dissatisfying to the experience (e.g., Kano *et al.*, 1984; Warner, Newland and Green, 2011). The Sport and Sense of Community factors all fell into this category of being *must-be* components. For example, our early work suggested that *voluntary action* was salient to athletes in informal club sport settings (Warner and Dixon, 2013). This factor emerged from interviews of the informal club sport athletes, but not initially from varsity athletes in more formal (i.e., professionalised) sport systems (Warner, 2010). When prompted about this in the subsequent study (Warner *et al.*, 2012), the athletes in the more formal setting agreed *voluntary action* is indeed important to their sense of community. These athletes noted that the *voluntary action* is essential and expected, and that its absence led to dissatisfaction and a decreased sense of community. Thus, *voluntary action's* presence and absence impacts the sense of community experienced. We argue that the same holds true for all seven of the identified Sport and Sense of Community Theory factors. That is, all seven factors are essential or 'must-be' factors to fostering a sense of community for athletes.

Testing and application of theory

All theory must be refutable and testable (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Platt, 1964), while also providing utility (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2013; Fink, 2013; Van de Ven, 1989) and answering the 'so what?' question (e.g., Davis, 1971; Whetton, 1989). Although the community psychology, education and sport management literature provide support for the factors that emerged from data to formulate the Sport and Sense of Community Theory, my work with Shannon Kerwin and Matt Walker (Warner, Kerwin and Walker, 2013) further tested and refined the theory. This study empirically assessed and validated the theory (and its factors) through the development of a quantitative scale. It also provided and demonstrated the much-needed utility of the theory.

Using a youth sport population and following the steps outlined by DeVellis (2003), we (Warner, Kerwin and Walker, 2013) put forth a valid and reliable twenty-one-item instrument with six sub-scales (i.e., *administrative consideration, common interest, competition, equity in administrative decisions, leadership, and social spaces*) to measure sense of community in sport. The resulting

Sense of Community in Sport scale (SCS) provided empirical support for six of our original seven factors. *Voluntary action* was not supported by the quantitative findings, which we attributed to the age and dependence of the participants on others (i.e., youth participants are heavily dependent on adults for transport, support and resources necessary for their sport participation; consequently, we concluded that *voluntary action* was not relevant to them.). We removed this factor to create a more parsimonious scale that could be applicable across sport settings. That is, *voluntary action* was removed so that the scale would be applicable to both youth and adult sport participants.

The resulting twenty-one-item SCS (Warner, Kerwin and Walker, 2013) was an important contribution to the Sense of Community and Sport Theory, because it tested and demonstrated the utility and applicability of the theory. The SCS provides practitioners and researchers with a means to measure, evaluate and assess the sense of community experienced in sport. Of equal importance, it also demonstrates the usefulness of a theory built from data grounded in the sport realm rather than from borrowed theory. Chalip (2006) advocated that such a sport-focus aids in probing the distinctiveness of sport management and Doherty (2013) suggested that this could narrow the gap between research and practice.

Process

As a doctoral student, who had spent several years working in the sport industry, I had a specific drive to understand the distinctiveness of sport and narrow the gap between research and practice. A class-assigned consumer behaviour article initially spurred the idea that I would attempt to tackle this through exploring a sense of community within a sport setting theory. Specifically, an ethnographic fieldwork of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners and their community helped initiate the idea (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). While the article was centred on marketing, brand community and a sub-culture of consumption and was far from my (and PhD advisor, Marlene Dixon's) research interests, it resonated with me. I agreed with the first line of the article and contemplated the parallels to sport. 'The most powerful organizing forces in modern life are the activities and associated interpersonal relationships that people undertake to give their lives meaning' (p. 43). Sport is indeed a powerful organising force in modern life, and from my work in the sport industry, I understood the importance of the interpersonal relationships that develop around sport. More importantly, the development of community or collective group clearly plays an important role in individuals' lives and overall life quality, which is fundamental to both Dixon's and my individual research agendas.

Also from my previous work experience in collegiate athletics and campus recreation, I was well aware that creating community was a frequently used, and rarely rebutted, justification for having sport on university campuses. At this point, I began to notice it was not just university sports, but other sport organisations' websites, and even their mission statements, were focused on this idea that they are fostering community. It was evident that many assume and take for granted that sport serendipitously fosters some sense of collective togetherness for individuals. After many conversations with Marlene Dixon, Laurence Chalip and Chris Green and reading numerous articles and books they had suggested, I began to identify this idea of sport fostering a sense of community as an overlooked shared paradigm in the field of sport management (cf. Kuhn, 1996). That is, a shared paradigm is a discipline's specific way of answering or explaining phenomena. It was a paradigm that needed to be challenged, because while many would agree that sport *could* foster a sense of community, it was not readily apparent how or under what conditions it occurs. Chalip's (2006) work was especially influential at this point, as he put forth that community development was one of five common legitimations of sport. He pointed out

that because economic impact analyses often fail to demonstrate sport's economic benefit, governmental investments in sport are then justified based on community development in terms of the social and psychological gains. Chalip emphasised that, 'The value of sport in each case depends on the ways that sport is managed. Factors that facilitate and that inhibit optimization of sport's contribution to each [legitimation] must be identified and probed' (p. 1). It became evident that 'whether sport fosters or thwarts community depends on how it is designed and implemented' (p. 8).

Thus, a grounded theory approach seemed like an appropriate avenue, because a resulting sport and sense of community theory would likely challenge a fundamental assumption and justification of sport. In the words of Davis (1971), 'All interesting theories, at least all interesting social theories, then, constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted world of their audience' (p. 311). Chalip's (2006) work clearly pointed to the need to explore the assumption and justification that sport fosters community and heavily influenced the process of building a sport and sense of community theory.

After thorough consultation with existing community psychology literature on sense of community theories, it became evident that a sport-focused and grounded theory approach could indeed contribute to the literature. While Sarason (1974) has been credited with coining the term 'sense of community' and calling for the new discipline of community psychology to develop with this concept at its core, surprisingly this discipline offered few formal theories on a sense of community. The theory derived from McMillian and Chavis' (1986) conceptual work continues to be the most widely used and accepted sense of community theory within the community psychology discipline. This work contends that membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections are the four elements of sense of community. However, Hill (1996) and Puddifoot (1996) highlighted the context-specific nature of sense of community and, consequently, lent credence to the value of studying sense of community in different contexts such as sport. As a result, a grounded theory approach was used to explain how a sense of community is fostered in a sport setting. Such an approach is most beneficial when little is known about a topic and the goal is to develop a framework or theory that captures social processes in an effort to explain human behaviour (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The first step to building the theory involved the interviewing of twenty former collegiate varsity athletes (Warner and Dixon, 2011). While it would have been appropriate to initially study any specific stakeholder group in sport, I chose to focus on former athletes, 1–5 removed from their playing experience. This was ideal because they were able to reflect on their sport experiences and discuss factors that resonated beyond their sport experiences rather than just proximal experiences (Warner, 2010).

After using an on-going inductive and constant comparison coding process, an initial theory emerged. *Administrative consideration, leadership opportunities, equity in administrative decisions, competition* and *social spaces* were the five factors found to work in concert with one another to foster a sense of community for former varsity athletes. Using the same interview guide, a follow-up study was conducted with twenty-one former club sport athletes (Warner and Dixon, 2013). This sample was similar, yet distinct, to collegiate athletes from the first study. In the USA, the collegiate varsity athletes' experience is highly structured, regulated, more professionalised and coach-directed. However, the club sport athletes' experiences tend to be more flexible, open and athlete-directed. The results from the club sport athletes revealed that *common interest, leadership opportunities, voluntary activity* and *competition* were the most critical components to creating a sense of community for these participants.

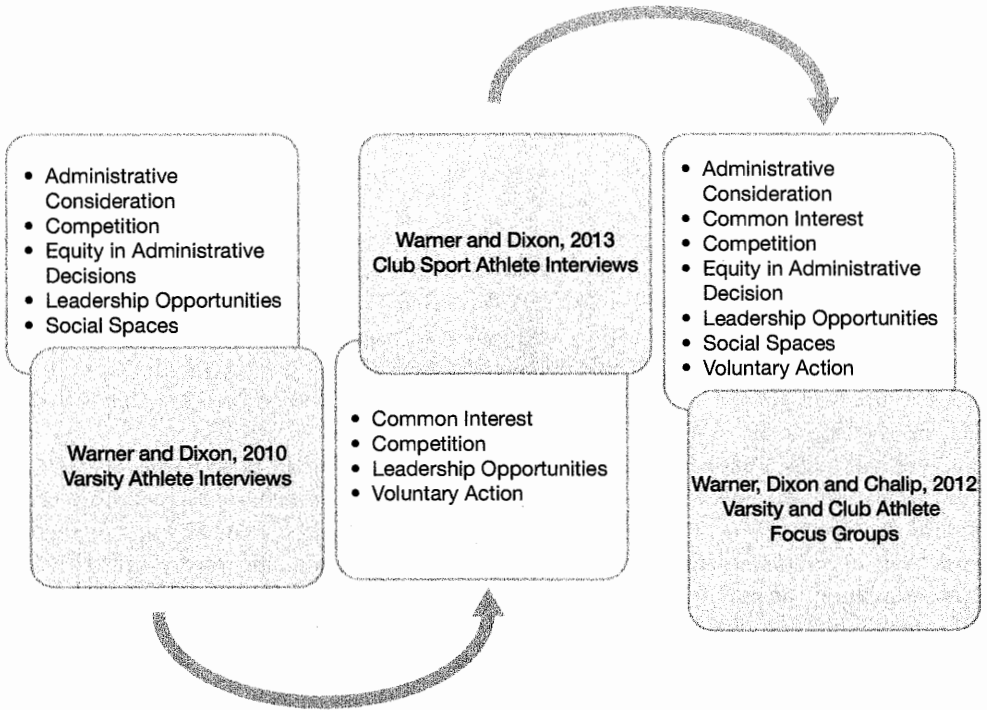


Figure 16.1 Sense of Community Theory development

Since two differing theoretical models emerged, I conducted a third study to triangulate the data (Warner, Dixon and Chalip, 2012²). Eight focus groups composed of thirty-nine current varsity and club sport athletes, none of whom were involved in the previous studies, were then conducted. The focus groups were presented with both emergent models. This allowed a new group of participants to cross-validate and then compare and contrast the previous results found in both the varsity and club settings. Ultimately, this work resulted in seven factors. I offer an illustrative summary of this process in Figure 16.1.

Extensions and application

In sum, the Sport and Sense of Community theoretical framework emerged after three unique qualitative investigations that involved eighty current and former adult athletes. The theory was grounded in the experiences of adult athletes. However, its broad application to various stakeholders in and outside of sport is likely (Warner, 2012).

To give an example of application of the theory within sport, Kellett and I (2011) utilised the theory to provide a theoretical framework for our study on umpire retention. After reviewing the data from the umpires regarding their retention, it became clear that the factors that they discussed (e.g., administrative consideration, social spaces, common interest, competition, inequity) that added and detracted from their experiences were all related to the felt sense of community, or lack thereof. Thus, the Sport and Sense of Community Theory provided the theoretical framework for the work. My work with Shannon Kerwin and Matt Walker (Warner, Kerwin and Walker, 2013) lent support to the model for its applicability within a

youth athlete population. This study used the Sport and Sense of Community Theory to produce a quantitative tool (i.e., the previously discussed SCS) to measure the felt community among youth archers and swimmers. In doing so, it extended the theory to a youth sport population. We (Kerwin, Warner, Walker and Stevens, in press) subsequently used the theory and modified version of SCS with sport event volunteers. In that study, the six-factor SCS (*voluntary action* was not tested) indicated that the initially identified Sport and Sense of Community factors, except *competition* showed a statistical fit with the event volunteer data. Consequently, this yielded further support of a refined iteration of the initial Sport and Sense of Community Theory (Warner and Dixon, 2011, 2013). More importantly, like the umpiring study, it extended the theory's application beyond just athletes. Furthermore these works suggested that more testing and refinement, with special attention regarding the *voluntary action* and *competition* factors, would likely result in a more parsimonious and broadly applicable theory.

The work done thus far has focused on individuals' experiences in communities; however, more work is also needed at the group or macro level. Comparing and contrasting sport communities versus other communities of interest and understanding the nuances and different outcomes would extend this line of research. For example, comparing the experiences of members of a participatory sport club versus members of a political support group could yield further insight on the distinctiveness (or lack thereof) of sport settings and the development of communities. We also needed to know more about the outcomes and consequences of being in a community. For the most part, scholars focus on the positive outcomes related to the improvement in life quality for those that experience a sense of community. However, it can be argued that gangs and those involved in hooliganism experience strong sense of community, but reap many negative outcomes.

Potential extension and applications of the Sport and Sense of Community Theory outside of sport are also possible. Maslow's Theory of Motivation (1943) tells us that after the basic physiological and safety needs are met, individuals have an innate desire for interpersonal interaction and to feel a sense of belonging. Thus, understanding the environmental characteristics necessary to create this atmosphere for individuals in various contexts could potentially have widespread implications. While the SCS and/or the theory have not been tested outside of sport, many of the factors may likely apply to not just athletes or those in a sport setting, but outside of sport, as all individuals have an innate desire for community.

Future directions

Data and support have been found for the Sport and Sense of Community Theory; however, the strength of a theory rests in its utility for practice. Steps to apply the theory to individuals in and outside of sport have begun. Because sense of community is theoretically and empirically linked to retention (Kellest and Warner, 2011; McCole *et al.*, 2012; Warner, Kerwin and Walker, 2013), the framework could impact various groups and individuals concerned with participant retention and, subsequently, improve life quality. Sport is highly dependent upon volunteer labour (Costa *et al.*, 2006; Doherty and Carron, 2003; Green and Chalip, 2004) and sport officials (e.g., Tingle, Warner and Sartore-Baldwin, 2014; Warner, Tingle and Kellest, 2013). Consequently, using the framework to study these key personnel and their retention provides the initial steps towards that end. That is, this work provided the groundwork for potentially using the theory to explore other groups concerned with retention and life quality. For example, work environments that are especially concerned with employee retention would likely be a suitable place to extend the applicability of this theory.

In addition to studying employees, hedonic rewards and opportunities for social interaction (and the ensuing sense of community experienced) are two overlooked, yet primary, benefits sought by participants in physical activity programmes (Berg, Warner and Das, 2015). This indicates that extending and testing the Sport and Sense of Community theory in programmatic settings may lead to better-designed programmes, which may provide a meaningful public health impact. That is, if we can use the Sport and Sense of Community Theory as a guide to better designing physical activity programmes, it is possible that more participants can be retained in these programmes such that greater health results are achieved. Considering physical activity, participants explicitly noted in Berg and colleagues' (2015) recent work that they are looking for opportunities for social interaction, so creating an environment that fosters a greater sense of community would help in retaining more participants in these programmes.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, the author reflects on the development of the Sport and Sense of Community Theory (Warner and Dixon, 2011, 2013).
- 2 This study was conducted following the varsity athlete (Warner and Dixon, 2011) and club athlete (Warner and Dixon, 2013) work, but was published in 2012.

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Applying Sport and Sense of Community Theory

Emily Sparvero¹

I was first introduced to Warner's ideas about sport and sense of community while she was still a doctoral student and we were engaging in a favourite pastime of academics: discussing the big ideas in the field over cheap burgers. In my own work, I was primarily focused on the potential economic benefits attributable to sport. However, the idea of exploring the associated sense of community was intriguing and seemed to constitute an important missing piece in discussions about the value of sport. The economic arguments for sport have consistently been disproved (c.f. Siegfried and Zimbalist, 2000) and, as a result, there has been increasing emphasis on non-economic benefits, including those benefits associated with community. Although there are frequent references in the academic literature to the community benefits associated with both participant and spectator sport (Crompton, 2004; Eckstein and Delaney, 2002; Misener and Mason, 2006; Schulenkorf and Edwards, 2012), there had not been coherent efforts to define community benefits specific to the sport context. Thus, Warner's attempts to contextualise sense of community within sport were especially appealing when considered in concert with efforts in the field to establish sport management as a distinctive discipline.

I have used Warner's work (Warner and Dixon, 2011; Warner and Dixon, 2013; Warner, Dixon and Chalip (2012) in a variety of sport management classes and have found it to be especially relevant to courses with a managerial focus (e.g., strategic management, organisational behaviour, sport policy). When teaching these courses, I emphasise the importance of alignment between an organisation's mission/vision and its structure, systems and processes. Warner's work allows for measurement of sense of community, but perhaps more importantly, it identifies specific organisational factors that either enable or inhibit sense of community in sport settings. Thus, students are encouraged to consider the following: (a) the importance of sense of community to a sport organisation; (b) the extent to which its pursuit is consistent with broader strategic goals, and (c) how sport organisations can implement processes and functions to promote sense of community. In management-oriented courses, I challenge students to consider whether sport is more or less efficient in creating a sense of community than other alternatives (e.g., does participation in high school athletics create greater/superior sense of community as compared with high school theatre? For whom is the sense of community created?) Additionally, from a policy perspective, students are encouraged to consider sense of community as not only an end unto itself, but as a means to achieving other desirable policy goals.

To date, Warner has focused on athletes, officials and volunteers and their sense of community. I believe that a natural extension of this work is the examination of the sense of community among sport fans and spectators. Additionally, a comparative approach could be used to determine the most efficient ways to build sense of community through sport. There are varied sport systems, even within the same institutions (e.g., varsity, club and intramural sport at the university level). A better understanding of the full range and scale of benefits delivered through these systems could have significant impacts on the way sport is delivered and funded.

Note

- 1 Emily Sparvero is with the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education and the University of Texas at Austin.

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