

# **Great Expectations: A Critical Review of Interorganizational Relationships in Amateur Sport**

## **Abstract**

The study of interorganizational relationships (IORs) in amateur sport has developed significantly over the past 30 years alongside rising expectations for multi-sector integration between sport organizations and other partners. This stems from sport organizations seeking innovative ways to achieve their mission and neoliberal government policies adding institutional pressure for interorganizational cooperation. This review paper discusses the wider cultural and political forces which shape the drive for legitimacy through partnerships across sector boundaries and outlines the theoretical influences on IOR research in amateur sport between economic and behavioral paradigms. In addition to considering how prevailing frameworks and findings inform the current body of knowledge in sport management, we critically reflect on implicit assumptions underpinning this work given that partnerships now saturate the discourse of sport management policy and practice. Our review questions whether reality lines up with our 'great expectations', and explores what limitations and opportunities remain for future IOR research in amateur sport.

**Keywords:** partnerships; amateur sport; cooperation;

## Introduction

The study of interorganizational relationships (IORs) in sport has developed significantly over the past thirty years, whereby IORs represent the array of forms of interaction between organizations<sup>1</sup> (Babiak, et al., 2018). During this time, there have been many environmental, cultural, and political forces that have impacted the aims, strategies, and structures of amateur sport organizations around the world (e.g., Green, 2005; Lindsey et al., 2020). As a result, the discourse related to IORs in this context has also evolved and heightened in practice as well as in research and policy. Leaders of amateur sport organizations have been encouraged to shift their thinking towards a more systems-integrated and networked view of IORs instead of the once closed, siloed, and mechanistic perspective of organizational interaction (Babiak & Willem, 2016; Cousens, et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2018). Given the growth of IORs in practice (Babiak & Yang, 2020), the increase of policy imperatives touting partnerships as a solution to many social and organizational problems, and the growing focus on IORs in sport scholarship, it is timely to critically review the literature on IORs in amateur sport and offer guidance and direction for research in this area.

Sport management scholars have highlighted the rising expectations for multi-sector integration between sport organizations and other partners stemming from numerous pressures including the need to seek innovative ways of mission delivery as well as neoliberal government policies providing incentives and adding institutional pressures for interorganizational cooperation (Ibsen & Levinsen, 2019; Misener & Misener, 2017). As Babiak et al. (2018) noted, scholarship examining IORs in sport has amplified with researchers exploring partnerships in

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<sup>1</sup> Terms such as partnership, collaboration, alliance, and network have been used interchangeably in the literature. For the purposes of this paper, we consider all of these forms to be included within the broader IOR term (cf. Babiak et al., 2018).

various contexts, the organizational precursors to IORs, the distinct phases of IOR development, management and evaluation, and the capabilities and dynamics required for IOR sustainability. In addition to considering how prevailing frameworks and findings inform the current body of knowledge in sport management, it is important to critically reflect on the contemporary pressures and implicit assumptions underpinning partnership dynamics given that the need to form and work in partnership now saturates the discourse of sport management research, policy, and practice. Indeed, Mackintosh (2011) noted how "...the partnership imperative has moved from being a desirable tactic for the advancement of sport and recreation development to its current status of necessity for prosperity and survival" (p.47).

Understanding IORs requires different lenses based on the unique context or sub-sector of sport under study. Given the evolution of specific sport domains over time into their own uniquely managed systems (Chalip, 2006), we have intentionally focused this review on the amateur sport context. This allows us to delimit and distinguish the theory and application of IOR practices to a subset of organizations associated with the sport development system outside of professional sport. This distinction is not a 'hard line' and recognizes that sector boundaries in sport are sometimes blurred (Misener & Misener, 2017; Svensson, 2017), however, it is useful to distinguish this sub-sector given the policy imperatives touting partnerships as a managerial solution, the changing societal views on the value and accessibility of sport, and the structural and capacity-based constraints that create pressures to collaborate. As such, we draw on the notion of amateur sport as a framing for the motivation and legitimation of the vast network of voluntary and public organizations that provide sport services for the improvement of individuals and society.

Allison (2001) noted that human activities are amateur when they are designed to enrich experiences rather than being coerced through economic or social forces. We can also conceive of the amateur sector as one in which production and consumption of sport participation are highly connected (Allison, 2001). Amateur sport can therefore be experienced in schools, universities and colleges, and sport clubs and governing systems. For the purpose of this review, we also include sport-for-development contexts based on their accessibility and benefit to citizens, even though they do not always adhere to or apply recognized standards and rules of competition. While IORs are fundamental to the state and market's increased involvement in amateur sport, the distinction between amateur and professional sport is important to the discussion of IORs given that sport organizations operate within specific systems of eligibility or qualification requirements, rules, and governance structures. All of these influence the interconnectedness of sport organizations in this context.

Amateur sport organizations are responsible for delivering and supporting sport participation from playground to podium. These organizations operate in complex systems (community/local, provincial/state, national and international) and in these contexts, they face unique challenges ranging from shifting societal views on the value and accessibility of sport, to structural and capacity-based constraints (e.g., Allison, 2001; Jones et al., 2017; Misener & Doherty, 2013). Research has indicated that IORs can offer amateur sport organizations a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to address the complexity of environmental issues, while also affording them a strategic competitive advantage (e.g., Babiak, 2007; Jones et al., 2017; Misener & Doherty, 2012; Parent & Harvey, 2009). While it is clear that partnerships have been growing as a significant component of practice and policy for amateur sport organizations,

Lindsey (2013) noted that partnerships can also serve as a key response to many organizational capacity related issues by offering a potential source of shared value in the face of austerity. Despite this rhetoric, many partnerships remain unworkable and do not achieve their objectives. Thus, significant gaps remain in our conceptualization of the role IORs play in amateur sport, and in translating the knowledge and insights gleaned from research into effective practice.

In the amateur sport system, organizations face intense pressures to partner often without necessarily having adequate capability, shared purpose, or a clear understanding of how (or why) IORs should be formed (Legg, et al., 2018). Given these factors, there has been greater focus in the sport management literature on cross-sector partnerships. Research in this area is recognizing the neo-institutional roots and rationalization for partnerships based in the wider cultural and political forces shaping the drive for legitimacy which can be achieved by crossing sector boundaries (Greenwood et al., 2017). There has been a fundamental assumption that partnerships should be a core strategy to realize organizational goals, yet sport management scholars have rarely taken a step back to critically analyze this belief and understand how it informs partnership configuration, exchange, and outcomes (cf. Lindsey et al., 2020). It is therefore important to review the theoretical roots and policy influences described in the partnership literature, critically question whether reality lines up with our ‘great expectations’, and discuss what limitations and opportunities remain for future research.

As such, this paper takes a critical social science perspective (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011; Frisby, 2005) to facilitate a holistic review that encourages questioning taken-for-granted knowledge about this phenomena and exploring “alternative structures and arrangements” (Frisby, 2005, p. 8) that might better or at least additionally explain a context and relationships of interest. This approach will enable us to push those boundaries by challenging assumptions and

remaining critical of idealistic conceptions of IORs. This perspective will also compel us to examine whose voices are dominant or missing from the partnership literature and draw attention to how power relations have influenced this area of sport management.

This review paper is guided by the following objectives: (1) To consider the role IORs play within amateur sport and how their unique contexts (political, cultural, structural) might influence collaborative dynamics; (2) To review the theoretical foundations and knowledge generated by the IOR literature in amateur sport; (3) To challenge implicit assumptions regarding the value of IORs to amateur sport organizations and propose directions for future research and possibilities for partnership practice.

As scholars who have contributed to this body of research, we recognize the need to better understand the complex pressures and influences on partnerships in this sport context in order to lead to continuous improvement in coordinated settings. Further, as reflexive scholars, we recognize that we must also be critical of our own research in this area as we embrace the opportunity to identify different conceptualizations of partnerships and opportunities for theory development. We hope that our differing perspectives based in management, organization theory, and policy will provide a holistic perspective on the state of the field of IORs in this context.

### **Policy Influence and Pressures on IORs in Amateur Sport**

The IOR literature has offered a wider contextualization and description of varied national sport systems and policies evident in amateur sport. However, only a few notable exceptions (e.g. Grix & Phillpots, 2011; Phillpots et al., 2011) have directly researched or sufficiently differentiated the extent to which wider political, policy or sport system pressures may provide specific impetus for IORs in amateur sport, and the particular forms that these collaborations may take. Conceptually, such influences are suggested by Lindsey, et al., (2020)

who, across the fields of sport and development, theorize that the types of relationships between state (or public) bodies and those from non-profit or private sectors are likely to be influenced by the political context of a country, especially its overall welfare regime and extent of political decentralization. The potential relevance of these contextual differences are borne out in the conclusion of Nicholson et al. (2011) who comparatively reflect on the ‘structures’ in place for sport participation in different countries. They recognize that not only do the specific roles and motivations of different types of sport organizations differ across countries, but that this also represents more fundamental differences in the overall balance of inputs and provision between public, private and non-profit sectors into amateur sport. Moreover, variation in the extent of state centralization or decentralization in different countries is a further, related factor that may be mirrored to varying extents in the structure of individual countries’ sport systems, thus influencing expectations around IOR formation (Nicholson et al, 2011).

Considering even a small selection of countries enables some identification of the ways various policy influences and pressures on IORs differ across amateur sport contexts. We focus here on England, Flanders, Canada, and the United States of America due to variation in their wider governmental and sport policy systems and the availability of previous research on amateur sport IORs (Babiak et al., 2018), although further differences are evident across the range of global sport policy contexts. England’s sport system, for example, is characterized by the extent of centralized policy making and influence by national governmental agencies (Goodwin & Grix, 2011; Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013). Articles published by Grix and Phillpots (2011; Phillpots, et al., 2011) empirically examined the influence of national governmental agencies (primarily Sport England, officially a non-departmental public body) on county-level

sport development partnerships, and concluded that the latter “exist in a tightly regulated policy context in which the work of local stakeholders is regulated and indeed appears to be micro-managed by a range of government-imposed funding mechanisms” (Phillpots, et al., 2011, p. 277). In this respect, the majority of relevant studies in England also concern specific IOR structures and institutions that were initiated through the period of Labour government in the early 2000s and were funded to improve coordination across networks of public, non-profit and, in some cases, private organizations involved in the provision of sport in local areas (e.g. Harris & Houlihan, 2014, 2016; Mackintosh, 2011). These studies and others commonly identify that amateur sport partnership structures in England are linked to wider changes in which the national promotion of more networked approaches to governance emerged in response to the ‘hollowing-out’ of government capacities that came with the advancement of neo-liberalism from the 1980s onward (Goodwin & Grix, 2011; Harris & Houlihan, 2014).

Research that has emerged more recently on community sport and IORs in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium) enables recognition of subtle yet notable variations from the English context. In contrast to England, decentralization is mandated both in the Flemish state’s overall system of governance and in their sport for all policies (Vos et al., 2011). Vos and Scheerder (2014) indicate that the ‘logical’ consequence of this decentralization is that Local Sports Authorities do undertake significant roles in coordinating local organizations responsible for amateur sport provision. Decision making for local sport policies is also recognized to be traditionally undertaken through networks or advisory boards of representatives from local sport organizations and other experts (van Poppel, et al., 2018). These approaches to cross-sector partnership and collective decision making may be taken as being resonant of



corporatist modes of governance that have been traditionally identified in countries of continental Europe (Siaroff, 1999), although research does also indicate that reductions in available resources have provided impetus for further IOR coordination in amateur sport provision (Theeboom, et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the extent of self-determination and autonomy that is recognizable from the available research on local amateur sport IORs in Flanders may certainly be taken as a point of comparison with the top-down mandates and influences that have shaped local IORs in England.

Most research on amateur sport IORs in Canada has focused on IOR integration and management in grassroots community sport systems (e.g., Cousens, et al., 2012; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013; 2014) or in the broader Canadian sport system and its national leadership (e.g., Babiak, 2009; Barnes, et al., 2007; Thibault & Harvey, 1997). Research in this context describes the growth trajectory of cross-sector IORs as immense given that sport organizations depend on resource sharing for critical capacity elements such as infrastructure and facilities and cannot achieve their mission without adequate partnership support (Babiak, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012; Thibault & Harvey, 1997). Notably however, the school sport system in Canada often lacks strong ties and coordination with the broader sport development strategy and system, particularly in sports that are more well-established in the club/association level (Camiré, 2014). Private organizations are also increasingly forming with their own networks rather than through established governing hierarchies. These commercially driven enterprises often claim elite development and corporate models that do not demand extensive partnership alignment.

The United States of America represents a different case again, given the lack of any universal national sport policy and the limited extent of governmental control and direction for

amateur sport in the country (Jones et al., 2018). Indeed, research findings on amateur sport IORs in the United States are representative of the extent to which market-based practices and a competitive orientation spans public, private and non-profit bodies and organizations. Reduced public budgets, and a concomitant expansion in private and non-profit organizations and provision, especially in youth sport (Legg, et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018), are recognized as key aspects of the context from which amateur sport IORs emerge. IORs are thus presented in relevant literature as being underpinned by a transactional logic (e.g. Kihl, et al., 2014), through which organizations seek to work with others to overcome ‘scarcity of resources and capacity’ (Svensson, et al., 2017, p. 2075). Dyadic IORs are therefore represented as strategic relationships to access particular resources that organizations would not otherwise have access to.

Exemplifying the influence of these contextual drivers, Jones et al. (2018) found that non-profit sport organizations commonly had IORs with local public parks and recreation departments in order to benefit from affordable facilities, but otherwise did not work cooperatively with other non-profits providing amateur sport opportunities, amongst whom a ‘competitive atmosphere’ was more prevalent. The absence of any literature that identifies IORs or networks orientated to the overall coordination of local sport development in the United States does, therefore, stand in contrast to England, Flanders, and other countries where such approaches have been identified as being led by national or local government and public bodies respectively. It is clear, therefore, from this selected set of country examples that there is substantial variation in the nuanced contextual drivers that influence IORs in different national settings. As such, care has to be taken in drawing cross-country learning about IORs and offering “one size fits all” recommendations for policy and practices.

### **Theoretical Influences and Perspectives in the IOR Literature**

The body of IOR research focused on amateur sport organizations has drawn on a multitude of theoretical perspectives. These studies have explored a range of issues such as formation, structure, management/process, scope of interaction, function, and outcomes between single sector and cross-sector partnerships (e.g., Jones, et al, 2019; Marlier, et al, 2015; Misener & Doherty, 2012; 2013; Parent & Harvey, 2009; Shaw & Allen, 2006). We draw on Barringer and Harrison's (2000) *Theoretical Foundations of Interorganizational Relationships* to frame our review of theoretical influences on the IOR literature focused on amateur sport. The framework is organized on a continuum of foundational theories ranging from perspectives rooted in economic (i.e., transaction cost economics, resource dependence) to behavioral (i.e., stakeholder theory, institutional theory) rationales (see Figure 1). The sections below outline how each theoretical perspective has informed research on IORs in the amateur sport context.

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

#### **Transaction Cost Economics**

Transaction cost economics (TCE) is rooted in economic theory that, despite receiving scant attention from sport management scholars, has indirectly influenced research focused on IORs in amateur sport. TCE places production costs at the center of collaborative logics (Williamson, 1991). For service-oriented organizations such as amateur sport organizations, costs represent all components needed to translate resources into services and can include facility rental payments, employee compensation, equipment purchases, administrative and legal services, and the time required to plan and deliver activities. Organizations that engage in IORs can reduce costs in one or more of these areas and, in some cases, expand production to either increase their service footprint or collectively deliver services that might otherwise be

unavailable if operating in isolation (Robertson & Choi, 2012). Scholars drawing on TCE often juxtapose the potential benefits of IORs with the risks of market inefficiencies or failures that occur when organizations engage in opportunistic and self-interested action(s) that increase service costs within a market and, in the case of market failure, prohibit service production altogether (Williamson, 1991).

Interestingly, few studies focused on IORs within sport management have explicitly engaged with TCE as a guiding theoretical framework (Babiak & Willem, 2016). Jones and colleagues (2018) drew on TCE as a complementary framework to guide their study of IORs involving youth sport nonprofit organizations. They found evidence of market inefficiencies created by a lack of collaboration that they linked with resource deficiencies which may have inhibited awareness of prospective partners. Nowy et al. (2015) similarly drew on TCE to analyze differences in organizational performance between nonprofit and for-profit sport organizations. Although the authors hypothesized that for-profits would be less likely to offer diversified sport programs than nonprofits due to the higher transaction costs associated with service production, results indicated no statistically significant difference between the two organizational forms and actually suggested for-profits had “invaded typical domains of nonprofits such as the provision of social programs and targeting population groups that were previously the focus of nonprofits” (p. 172).

Despite receiving limited attention from sport management scholars, core theoretical tenets of TCE are arguably still evident in the literature on IORs in amateur sport. Most notably, concepts such as cost sharing (e.g., facility infrastructure, coaching salaries), expanded or improved production, and service efficiencies are frequently referenced to demonstrate the potential utility of IORs. This is particularly evident in studies examining national sport

governance structures (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Barnes, et al., 2007; Mackintosh, 2011; Thibault & Harvey, 1997) and public-private partnerships (e.g., Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Legg et al., 2018; Lindsey, 2006; 2009; Phillpotts & Grix, 2014). Indeed, trends toward increasingly decentralized amateur sport systems were in many ways prompted by the need to reduce costs in the face of austerity (Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Thibault & Harvey, 1997). IORs that engage private sector actors in the delivery of amateur sport were thus justified, at least in part, by the perceived efficiency they create in comparison to more centralized amateur sport systems. Although few studies have drawn directly on TCE theory, there is also evidence of amateur sport organizations engaging in opportunistic and/or self-interested action, such as the overbooking of space and facilities to ‘crowd out’ other competitors, which hints at market inefficiencies warranting further exploration (see Legg et al., 2018).

### **Resource Dependency Theory**

Resource dependency theory (RDT) posits that in order to operate effectively, all organizations require resources that must be obtained from external sources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The need to acquire external resources creates dependencies between organizations and suppliers, competitors, governmental agencies, and other actors that are relevant to a particular environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). RDT suggests organizations engage in IORs to gain control of critical resources with the explicit aim of either decreasing their dependence on other entities or increasing the dependence of other entities on them (Hillman, et al., 2009).

RDT has become a popular framework guiding IOR research focused on amateur sport organizations across a multitude of study contexts (Babiak et al., 2018). Scholars describe operating environments as resource scarce and highly competitive (Jones et al., 2020), with IORs framed as essential to long-term sustainability (Wicker, et al., 2013). Chronic resource

deficiencies not only exacerbate dependence, but also create asymmetrical power relations with resource providers, policymakers, governmental agencies, and other external actors that influence IOR management (Jones et al., 2020).

In addition to providing a theoretical basis for why IORs are key to organizational performance, RDT's roots in power and dependence (cf., Oliver, 1990) have afforded deeper examinations of underlying power relations. For example, Vos et al (2011) explained how the pressure to appeal to governmental entities induced institutional isomorphism among sport clubs, while Wicker et al. (2013) revealed that sport clubs were often motivated to engage in IORs by a lack of human, financial, and infrastructural resources. Jones and colleagues (2018) indicated that, due to a lack of infrastructure capacity, most youth sport nonprofit organizations have limited leverage over external providers of the facilities needed to operate (i.e., fields, courts, pools, indoor facilities).

Research guided by RDT has also uncovered intriguing relationships *between* amateur sport organizations. For example, Hayhurst and Frisby (2010) uncovered tensions stemming from competing values and perceptions of legitimacy that plagued IORs between high performance sport organizations and sport-for-development non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Incongruent resource profiles provided high performance organizations with more power, leaving sport-for-development NGOs with fewer resources and a loss of autonomy and control that resulted in shifts to their mission and values (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). More recently, Jones and colleagues (2020) found that youth sport organizations with stronger internal resource profiles primarily engaged in philanthropic and transactional partnerships that aided the delivery of services, yet did not reflect the type of collaboration commonly associated with transformative social change (cf. Austin & Seitanidi, 2012).

## Network Theory

Network theory sits at an intriguing crossroads between political, economic and behavioral paradigms of IOR research. Although some scholars have referred to network theory as a theoretical paradigm (Borgatti & Foster, 2003), it is perhaps more appropriately framed as a family of relational analyses (Emirbayer, 1997). Scholarly research drawing on network theory can be broadly classified into structuralist (i.e., focus on the structure and configuration of relations) and connectionist (i.e., focus on the value and content of ties) approaches (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). Both approaches are informed by a fundamental assumption that relations (i.e., ties) between individuals or organizations (i.e., nodes) are influenced by the broader network of relations that comprise a particular social system. This distinction is instrumental to linking analyses of dyadic relations to features of broader multiplex networks (Provan & Milward, 1995).

Concepts often ascribed to network theory (e.g., power, cohesion) are prominent in the IOR literature focused on amateur sport systems. For example, previous research has outlined how organizational clustering may facilitate innovation between amateur sport providers (Gerke, et al., 2018), the stagnation induced by social embeddedness within community sport networks (Cousens & Barnes, 2009), and the unique structural and strategic challenges of managing multiple cross-sector partnerships (Babiak & Thibault, 2009). Beyond exploring the composition of networks created through the growing number of IORs between amateur sport providers, research drawing on network theory has informed incisive commentary on how network structures influence the efficacy of amateur sport delivery systems (Lindsey, 2006, 2009). The picture painted by this literature is arguably one of organized chaos, as scholars across a range of global contexts have described amateur sport networks as loosely organized and rife with power

imbalances. Even networks formed under the pretense of rather formalized policy arrangements have proven susceptible to issues of control, monitoring, and (a lack of) coordination (cf., Phillpots, 2013; Phillpots & Grix, 2014; Phillpots, et al., 2011).

Interestingly, only a relatively small collection of studies have empirically analyzed network concepts using quantitative social network analysis (SNA) (MacLean et al., 2011), yet this is starting to change. MacLean and colleagues' (2011) examination of basketball providers in one Canadian community revealed a loosely coupled network with low centralization and cohesion that ultimately perpetuated issues of power and dependence. Barnes et al. (2017) similarly explored how a network of swimming providers was inhibited by fragmentation, concentrated power, and a lack of trust between actors. The theme of fragmentation is prominent across other studies utilizing quantitative SNA to examine amateur sport networks (see Jones et al, 2017, 2018; Svensson et al., 2017).

### **Strategic Choice/Management**

Strategic choice and strategic management perspectives posit that IORs are pursued for strategic reasons tied to increasing an organization's competitiveness in a market. Most research drawing on strategic perspectives has leaned toward economic justifications such as increasing efficiency, reducing costs, or gaining entry into new markets (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). Nevertheless, the overarching commonality is that "organizational decisions to collaborate are made rationally to maximize utility in the environment" (Babiak & Willem, 2016, p. 277).

One of the main streams of IOR research drawing on strategic perspectives in the amateur sport context centers on the concept of organizational capacity (Doherty et al., 2014). Since many amateur sport providers are nonprofit organizations, the strategic impetus for IORs is less about increasing competitiveness within a market and more about achieving the organizational



mission (Misener & Doherty, 2009). Organizational capacity relates to how nonprofits obtain and deploy critical resources to achieve objectives, and ongoing research in the amateur sport context has revealed that relationship and network capacity is key to this process (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Doherty et al., 2014). IORs have not only proven essential to accessing the financial and infrastructural resources needed to deliver amateur sport programs, but are also instrumental to building human resource and strategic capacity as well (Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013). The burgeoning field of sport-for-development places particular emphasis on targeted social change objectives, with a growing body of research highlighting the strategic role of IORs in achieving objectives that often go beyond the scope of any single organization (Kay, 2012; MacIntosh, et al., 2016; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2011; Welty Peachey, et al., 2018).

Of course, managing multiple IORs across diverse sets of partners is not an easy task, and strategic management research has also examined how IORs function most effectively within different amateur sport contexts (Alexander, et al., 2008). For example, Misener and Doherty (2014) examined IORs between corporate sponsors and nonprofit community sport organizations, finding that operational competence was key to not only enhancing immediate IOR outcomes (i.e., operations, services) but also sustaining the relationship for future outcomes. Similarly, Welty Peachey and colleagues (2018) uncovered challenges including skepticism of sport, resource competition, and power imbalances that influenced IORs involving SFD organizations, and highlighted the importance of mission alignment and formalized management strategies. In general, research has emphasized the importance of avoiding the informality and lack of training that leads to under-managed IORs (Frisby, et al., 2004), while also not imposing

overly formalized structures that reduce flexibility and saturate organizations in bureaucratic IOR protocols (Shaw & Allen, 2006).

### **Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder theory disaggregates organizations into the dynamic collection of relationships that comprise them, as well as the diverse set of constituents they influence or represent (Freeman, 1994). Within the amateur sport context, research drawing on stakeholder theory has analyzed key constituents' motivations, purposes, and outcomes associated with IORs. More so than other theoretical paradigms, research informed by stakeholder perspectives is shaped by the broader policy environment, as amateur sport systems typically mirror political arrangements and thus fall on a continuum ranging from highly centralized (e.g., China) to more decentralized (e.g., United States) structures. As such, defining parameters for internal and external stakeholders, their relative influence over decision-making processes, and the expected benefits derived from IORs is highly dependent on the context under study (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016). For example, Sotiriadou (2009) highlighted the importance of IORs to shifting Australian sport policy toward collaborative, decentralized approaches that established linkages between different stakeholders and facilitated greater coordination. Similar studies have examined IORs linking national, state/regional, and local sport organizations within sport systems in the UK (Philpotts, 2011; Philpotts, et al., 2011), Canada (Misener & Doherty, 2012; 2013; Parent & Harvey, 2009), and a range of other global contexts (e.g., Lithuania: Gobikas & Cingiene, 2021; South Africa: Jacobs, et al., 2021).

From a stakeholder perspective, the analytical focus is typically on whether or not IORs support intended policy aims, serve the needs of diverse stakeholder groups, and reflect their multiple (and at times, competing) interests (Powers, et al., 2020). Indeed, Parent and Harvey's

(2009) three-phase model for examining the management of partnerships explicitly mentions the importance of considering all stakeholders involved with, or influenced by, IORs. Issues of representativeness with regards to race, socioeconomic status, gender, language, and disability have been raised extensively, as have tensions emerging from the competing demands presented by elite sport and ‘sport for all’ pathways (Hayhurst & Firsby, 2010; Sotiriadou, et al., 2006).

### **Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory is based on the notion that organizations are pressured to appear legitimate and conform to prevailing rules, requirements, and social norms in their operating environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1990). From this perspective, IORs can help organizations enhance their visibility through connections with other high-profile organizations, improve their image through partnerships with socially desirable organizations (e.g., charities), and establish strong reputations through affiliations with reputable associations (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). IORs may also spawn from the perceived need to act in accordance with other successful organizations (Oliver, 1991), which can become an embedded norm within certain industries and compel others to mimic behaviors as a means of adaptation and survival (Powell, et al., 1996). Although classic notions of institutional theory have been refined by more actor-oriented conceptualizations that recognize the embedded agency of individuals and organizations (i.e., institutional work: Lawrence, et al., 2009; institutional entrepreneurship: Hardy & Maguire, 2008), the full breadth of this literature continues to inform research on IORs (Barringer & Harrison, 2000).

Much of the IOR literature drawing on institutional theory in amateur sport has focused on institutional change, particularly with regards to institutional pressures induced by trends toward decentralization, standardization, and commercialization in sport policy systems (e.g.,

Edwards, et al., 2009; Fahlén & Stenling, 2019; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009). This is captured in recent work on the design archetypes and dynamics of change among Canadian national sport organizations (Hoye et al., 2020) and the work of Goodwin and Grix (2011), who highlighted the ‘asymmetrical network governance’ structures that ultimately reduced autonomy among local sport organizations in the UK. It is important to note that IORs are rarely the primary focus of this work, yet nevertheless characterized as key to contemporary amateur sport policy systems.

Institutional theory has been similarly applied to understand the behavior of amateur sport organizations. For example, Vos and colleagues (2011) drew on DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) concept of coercive isomorphism to examine how governmental sport subsidies influenced sport club compliance with policy rules and regulations. Zeimers et al. (2019) analyzed nonprofit IORs focused on delivering socially responsible programs and found organizational legitimacy was a key driver of collaboration. In one of the few studies drawing on the more actor-oriented conceptualization of institutional work, McSweeney and colleagues (2019) uncovered how IORs involving SFD organizations in sub-Saharan Africa maintained institutional norms of global North hegemony/global South dependence. This aligns with previous research in SFD indicating how IORs largely maintain ‘top-down’ institutional structures of policy and governance driven by actors in the global North (Lindsey, 2013).

### **Theoretical Observations and Critiques**

Based on our own observations and contributions to the literature we have identified several evident trends worth noting. First, most of the studies that explicitly focus on IORs seem to sit toward the middle of the continuum outlined in Figure 1, with little attention to TCE and only peripheral attention as we progress along the behavioral rationales (particularly institutional theory). Further, research drawing on network theory and strategic choice/management have

been very resource-oriented in that they frequently mention accessing, acquiring, or using resources as a fundamental, albeit strategic, goal of IORs. It is also perhaps interesting to note that the activation of this continuum seems somewhat related to publication in certain journals. For example, RDT, network theory, and strategic choice/management are very common in organizational/business management journals (e.g., *Journal of Sport Management*), while papers deriving their theoretical foundations in stakeholder and institutional theory are more common in policy, public administration, and international development journals (e.g., *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*).

While there is a degree of international variation, we would suggest that there is comparatively less amateur sport research published in public policy journals or that adopts public management/administration perspectives. Although the influence of governmental agencies is pervasive across the IOR literature, as is commentary on the policy-level forces shaping the need for IORs (e.g., Sam, 2009), prominent theories guiding IOR research among public management and public administration scholars, such as TCE, principal-agent theory, and public choice theory (see Wang, et al., 2018 for a review), are relatively underutilized in the sport management literature. Similarly, theories derived from community development and sociology could be widely applicable in the amateur sport context given their role in civic participation and building social capital (Misener & Doherty, 2012). We do not suggest the need to dramatically shift from current theoretical orientations of sport focused IOR scholarship, which is primarily directed toward strategic functions aligned with mainstream business (Babiak et al., 2018), but rather to consider the value of applying more diverse theoretical perspectives to inform the discourse on IORs. For example, the study of inter-organizational partnerships and collective action as it pertains to social movements benefitted tremendously from an

interdisciplinary foundation rooted primarily in sociology *and* organizational theory (Diani, 1992; Soule, 2012). From this perspective, rational choice theory, game theory, and other related perspectives may connect well with theories from political science to shed light on the sociological drivers of IORs that prioritize (or exclude) certain amateur sport organizations in the IOR mix. Similarly, critical theoretical perspectives (ex., feminist theory) may inform strategic management of IORs by exploring how ongoing communicative processes and organizational functions create and perpetuate power imbalances.

There remains an open question as to the extent to which there may also be something of a synergistic relationship between national contexts, approaches adopted, and empirical findings that result in researching amateur sport IORs in different countries. For example, the political science theorizing that commonly underpins research on amateur sport IORs in England is of particular relevance given the national policy drivers that are evident in that context. The prevalence of different theoretical approaches in research from the United States may alternatively reflect that country's decentralized approach to sport policy. Similar trends can be identified in the focus and methodologies of IOR research in different countries. The commonality of nationally mandated IORs in England may have had a bearing on a number of studies that have specifically sought to classify or categorize the institutional forms of partnership that may be evident at local levels (e.g. Harris & Houlihan, 2014; Lindsey, 2006). In contrast, exemplar studies in the United States (Jones et al., 2018) and Flanders (Vos & Scheerder, 2014) have featured quantitative analysis of networks and dyadic relationships between different local sport organizations, which may align to a greater extent with the organization-centric determination of IORs in these countries and a curiosity to explore non-mandated network structures.

Similar to the mainstream IOR literature, there is also a distinct ‘halo’ effect within the literature on IORs in amateur sport, as “the articles and theoretical paradigms that focus on the positive benefits of interorganizational relationships far outnumber the voices of caution” (Barringer & Harrison, 2000, p. 382). Perhaps the field is lacking both a wider engagement with theories along this continuum, but also a deeper (and more comprehensive) engagement with the foundational theories mentioned. For example, RDT is frequently used as a rationale for why organizations need to engage in IORs, yet RDT also presents strong theoretical reasons for *not* engaging in IORs that may unnecessarily reduce strategic autonomy. While certain power imbalances are imposed by the hierarchy inherent in many sport governance structures (see Vos et al., 2011), there are also examples of amateur sport organizations selectively engaging in IORs that yield little return on investment and, in some instances, even compromise organizational missions (e.g., Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). Recent research also suggests that the strategic intent of IORs may vary based on the size and capacity of amateur sport organizations, as larger organizations are less dependent on others for key resources and thus less likely to engage in IORs that might compromise their advantageous strategic position within the ‘market’ (Jones et al., 2020).

Similarly, research promoting the utility of IORs to amateur sport organizations often touts the benefit of dense networks that promote shared norms and mutual trust, suggesting a ‘more is better’ approach to partnership formation. Yet these types of cohesive networks are best suited for organizations operating in industries with stable resource environments (Brass, et al., 2004), which rarely describes the operating context of amateur sport organizations. In fact, dense, locally redundant relations are not considered a particularly efficient network structure for organizations since they often provide access to similar information, knowledge, and resources

(Granovetter, 1985). More expansive boundary-spanning connections are required to access a wider pool of resources and take advantage of knowledge systems that offer unique and novel insight. This is especially true for organizations with limited resources to commit to IOR management, which characterizes many amateur sport organizations. Mutual trust, reciprocity, and shared values are known to underpin effective IORs, yet they are not exactly easy principles to establish with partners and require significant investments of time and resources by both parties. Therefore, research guided by network perspectives must be open to new explanations and interpretations that balance theories of embeddedness with efficiency.

### **IORs and Approaches to Research**

The scholarly approaches and methods used to examine the IOR phenomenon in amateur sport contexts are central to the acquisition of knowledge and deeper understanding. Given the complex nature of IORs, more diversity in empirical approaches and methods will offer more robust and nuanced insights into the range of issues and questions that remain unexplored in the amateur sport context. In Babiak et al.'s (2018) review, the authors reported that empirical research on IORs in sport primarily relied on qualitative methodologies and case studies. Their analysis also revealed that a much smaller number of studies used quantitative or mixed methods. While the focus of their review included the broad IOR literature across all sport management contexts, we note similar trends in the research on IORs in amateur sport and suggest more diversity of methodological approaches in future research.

Different methodological approaches have to reflect particular objectives and objects of research. For example, in-depth qualitative interviews offer a rich and relational view of the nature of IORs and their impact from the partnership manager's perspective and life experience (e.g., Babiak, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2013). Other studies of IORs in amateur sport have



taken a quantitative network approach to empirically model phenomena such as power, diffusion, and influence and offer a helpful picture of loosely coupled networks plagued with concentrated and imbalanced power (e.g., Gerke, et al., 2018; Jones et al, 2017, 2018; Svensson et al., 2017). While the body of amateur sport IOR literature demonstrates a variety of (traditional) qualitative and quantitative methods, most are aligned with post-positivism (Creswell, 2003) and generally recognize that only “...partially objective accounts of the world can be produced because all methods are flawed” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 15). Thus, we have seen increasing integration of multiple methods and triangulation of data sources in the empirical research on IORs in amateur sport (cf., Frisby & Millar, 2002; Leopkey & Parent, 2009; Toohey & Beaton, 2017). However, in seeking to discover, measure, and describe a single reality (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 2003), the amateur sport IOR literature remains typically aligned with methods such as interviews, document analyses (organizational archival reports and documentation as well as external / media based materials), and observations (cf., Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Harris & Houlihan, 2016). Scholars in this domain rely less on survey research, experimental designs, historical analyses, participatory/ community-based research, creative analytic methods, evaluation research, economic analyses, intervention approaches, or geographical information systems mapping. The narrow scope of approaches employed thus far may have limited the nuanced insights and knowledge generation in this area.

We also note that logically, the IOR literature consists primarily of studies examining exactly that, existing IORs. Our methodological approaches tend to reflect a mindset that in order to understand partnerships, we need to study partnerships, with a focus on analyzing what works and what does not in terms of formation, management, and outcomes. Yet this provides only a narrow perspective on the phenomenon. As scholars, we should challenge ourselves to deepen

our theoretical and empirical approaches to examine broader perspectives which include, for example, instances where partnerships were *not* formed and how this impacts organizational functioning, possible sanctioning, and social positioning within communities. In addition, the focus on existing partnerships tells us little about the range of ‘potential’ partners that were considered but not engaged. Such insights could be critical for optimizing IOR decisions.

### **Future Directions**

#### ***Challenging Our Assumptions***

Regardless of our methods and approaches to research, it is crucial that we challenge implicit assumptions regarding the value of IORs in sport organizations by considering the role partnerships play within sport systems and how their unique contexts (political, cultural, structural) might influence collaborative dynamics. For example, it is often assumed that partners who share common goals and equal power will achieve mutual benefits. There is a tendency for sport managers responsible for partnerships to gloss over how power relations are negotiated, how conflicts emerge, or the repercussions of loss of autonomy that are also present in partnerships, which can create unanticipated challenges (Frisby et al., 2004; Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). We have assumed that equal power is possible, when in reality, this is rarely (if ever) the case. Further, critical questions have been raised in the IOR literature regarding whether the pooling of resources, and corresponding efficiency, actually translates into effective organizations that can better achieve sport and/or development goals. While the expectation might be that sport organizations who partner encounter fewer challenges than operating independently, different tensions can still emerge and circumvent or even compete with any purported developmental outcomes (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2020). Encouraging a critical awareness of perpetuating inequities and partnership tensions will provide

sport managers with a broader and more realistic understanding of the complexities involved (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010).

Challenging our assumptions and remaining critical of idealistic conceptions of partnerships also pushes us to examine whose voices are dominant or missing from the partnership literature and draw attention to how power relations have influenced this area of sport management. For example, the vast majority of IOR research in amateur sport has been conducted with organizations based in the global North who are often governed by democratic ideals. With the exception of some sport-for-development organizations who draw in a broader range of relationships between state and non-state actors in various international contexts (e.g., Lindsey et al., 2020), much of the research has been limited to national level boundaries where advocacy for partnerships and sport development goals may be more widely shared and similar terminology may be used. The voices of those who offer amateur sport provision in other contexts is important for understanding the diversity of partnership configurations.

Ironically, despite our focus in the global North, another voice that is generally missing in the IOR research is that of our researcher ‘selves’. Research papers rarely include an explicit discussion of our own positionalities in our research and how our social location impacts how we approach the research and participants, the questions we ask, and our interpretations of data (cf. Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). As a field, we need to be more reflexive and responsible in acknowledging and challenging our own assumptions (cf. Frisby, 2005).

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Given the review presented above and the ever-changing landscape of amateur sport, there are many fruitful directions for future research related to IORs. Similar to the broader field of sport management and much of our training as scholars, we more often apply a singular

theoretical lens rather than multiple, complementary, or competing lenses. This is certainly easier and more direct, not to mention more acceptable to journal reviewers. However, our ways of thinking about phenomena may be limited by our thinking ‘tools’. As Berbary (2020) notes, using a pluralism of critical and deconstructive social theories may offer new ways to think differently about social inquiries that positively transform social policy and practice. By embracing our entanglements, we can “reject the perceived usefulness of disciplinary boundaries, siloed theory, or singularities of model and design” (Berbary, 2020, p. 3). An openness to new and diverse theoretical approaches can serve as a reaction to Barringer and Harrison’s (2000) critique in regard to the theories used in IORs, which are; (1) the theories are not holistic and only explain the formation of IORs from what they state as relatively narrow perspectives; (2) the theories are not sufficient in explaining the motivations that may be behind the formation of IORs (i.e. the underlying costs/benefit analysis in the theories are limited); (3) the theories are not exhaustive enough in their treatment.

A possible avenue for future research in amateur sport is to adapt theory and community-based research methods from fields such as community development, particularly when looking at sport-for-development and other community sport contexts that serve local citizens and claim to draw on their IORs to build community networks and reduce barriers to participation in sport for those who face systemic marginalization (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Marlier et al., 2015; Misener & Mason, 2006). Indeed, we have much to learn from community development in how we approach IORs, shifting our lens from a utilitarian view to a knowledge sharing orientation that draws together social, psychological, political, and managerial perspectives. This is one example of the many possibilities for further interdisciplinary work that could benefit the study of IORs in sport. Further, for the literature to move forward and avoid being redundant, different

levels of analysis (macro-meso-micro) and approaches are needed. Here it is important that future research recognizes the embedded agency of individual actors in IORs so that we can critically assess how phenomena such as social capital, power, and diversity are linked to creating positive change through IORs.

Future research should also consider how organizations set targets and create magnetic fields that bring organizations together without unnecessary duplication. Research on IOR brokers has begun to emerge whereby new actors serve to reduce inefficiency and connect key stakeholders who share values and mission in order to build a cohesive network that enables change (Jones et al., 2018). We anticipate that more examples will emerge to change the landscape of IORs and corresponding expectations and actions. It is essential that these changes are evaluated given that previous research has generally lacked an evaluation focus (Babiak, 2009; Babiak et al., 2018).

Finally, the almost complete absence of comparative research on amateur sport partnerships, particularly cross-cultural comparisons, limits the potential to understand the differential influences of national political and sport systems. This is an important gap in the existing literature on IORs in amateur sport, as conceptual and comparative contributions in the wider sport literature demonstrate a number of dimensions across which national sport systems vary and link to wider political systems across the world (Dowling & Harris, 2021). There could be significant benefit in developing shared and aligned theoretical and methodological approaches to comparing IORs in amateur sport across different countries, which would enable deeper understanding of contextual influences and drivers to emerge.

### **Bridging the Research-Practice Gap**

From an applied researcher's point of view, the utilization of IOR frameworks is about focusing on specific attributes of effective IORs, linking them to real outcomes, and creating a feedback loop with key stakeholders including practitioners, policy advocates, and citizens/participants. However, the discourse around IORs has often been idealistic and prescriptive, neglecting the difficult or critical questions (e.g., are benefits flowing in both directions? Is there a power imbalance in a given relationship? Who has voice and autonomy for decision-making?). Unmet expectations are exacerbated when busy practitioners fail to dedicate appropriate time and effort to the relationship, have different ideas and values about the relationship, and do not foster effective communication, yet there is a general absence of engagement with these factors which may hinder the success of IORs (e.g., Babiak, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2013, 2014). Nevertheless, the practice application of knowledge generated by IOR research in sport is limited. This lack of effective knowledge mobilization represents a call for action within the academic community to deepen our own commitment to bridging the research-practice divide. For example, we can take action by working closely with those in decision-making roles in sport organizations to advocate for their needs or develop desired tools to assist in selecting or evaluating partnerships. We can also participate in mutual learning within our own networks in order to enhance our feedback loops and reflexive processes.

As the body of literature on IORs continues to grow, and as the phenomenon evolves in practice, it is a shared obligation among all of us in the sport management academy to challenge one another and our students to become more deeply engaged in transformative, rigorous, relational research. This will ensure that future policy and IOR practice discussions are evidence-based, sustainable, and grounded in the realities of IORs in their unique political and social contexts.

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