Advancing Sport Event Research Through Agency Theory

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Governance/Policy - Other (Other)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Session: Governance 2

Abstract 2021-090
Mode: Synchronous
Friday June 4, 2021, 8:05 AM - 8:25 AM

Sport events are often government supported and publicly funded due to their supposed positive impacts for the host community (Burbank et al., 2001; McCloy, 2009). Due to public financing, host residents deserve to reap some benefits from hosting such events. Although the government should deliver services and resources to meet the needs of the community (Alford, 2002), the needs of host residents do not necessarily align with those of the sport event organizers (McGillivray & McPherson, 2012), leaving positive event outcomes to be realized for a select few. It has been suggested that host resident support is essential for hosting a successful sport event (Rocha, 2020). Therefore, host residents and their relationship with public authorities who are often responsible for bringing an event to the community, are an integral part of the sport event context.

Approaches that have been used to-date to explore sport event host residents include social exchange theory (e.g., Karadakis & Kaplanidou, 2012); willingness-to-pay (e.g., de Boer et al., 2019); and residents’ perceptions of event impacts (e.g., Balduck et al., 2011). Much of this work focuses on the idea of gaining host resident support in order to put on a successful event in the future. There remains little research investigating the relationship between the host community and the local government in the context of sport events, particularly in relation to event objectives and outcomes. To begin to fill this gap, we suggest employing agency theory to better understand how local governments may serve host residents in the context of a publicly funded sport event.

The purpose of this presentation is to offer a conceptual framework guided by agency theory to explore host resident/local government relationships in the sport event context.

Agency theory describes the relationship between two parties; the (1) principal, who delegates certain tasks or responsibilities to an (2) agent (Shapiro, 2005; Waterman & Meier, 1998). To date, agency theory has been used in sport management research to understand sport organizations (e.g., Mason & Slack, 2005) and in sport event governance research (e.g., Geeraert, 2016; Mason et al., 2006; Solberg, 2018). However, work outside of sport suggests that the theory has implications in public administration more broadly (Kiser, 1999), and in relation to the public/government relationship specifically (Mitnick, 1975). Therefore, agency theory may be used to investigate how the local government (the agent) works on behalf of the host residents (the principal) in the context of a publicly funded sport event.

This approach allows researchers to position the host resident experience more central within the event process by unpacking how residents’ needs may diverge from those of event supporters and understanding how those needs can be met. Agency theory allows for an enhanced understanding of accountability in the event process, whereby the local government should ultimately be responsible for whether or not host residents experience positive benefits from the event. This presentation will demonstrate how agency theory is a useful lens to understand how publicly funded sport events may better meet the needs of host residents.