Analyzing Sport Participation Policy from a Gendered and Spatial Perspective: Identifying Issues and Analyzing Contexts

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Governance/Policy - Policy (Community Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Live Q&A for Governance/Policy (Asynchronous)

Canadian Sport Policy sets the direction for all organizations involved in sport development in Canada. Within the federal system, community sport organizations are understood as policy implementers (Harris & Houlihan 2014; Skille 2008) who are responsible for delivering both mass participation and elite development pathways. However, the institutional logics of these organizations vary (Fahlén, 2017; Stenling 2014). Despite the 'sport for all' rhetoric of federal sport systems, elite development is often prioritized (Sam, 2009) and sport development initiatives may be focused in urban centres with large populations (Rich, et al., 2019). Since the adoption of Canadian Sport Policy in 2002, no work (to our knowledge) has examined how geography affects the implementation of sport policy, and in turn sport participation in Canada.

The purpose of this project was to apply spatial analysis to sport development in order to understand trends in sport participation in diverse contexts. Specifically, we sought to analyze longitudinal sport participation data from one Provincial Sport Organization in Ontario with regards to age, gender, rural/urban status, and region of the province as a platform for policy analysis and future policy making.

The project employed an action research approach (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009) which involved working closely with members of the organization in processes of co-learning in all phases of the research project. Here, we specifically discuss the issue identification and context analysis phases.

Data were collected from existing participant databases at Row Ontario. We collected data from six seasons (2014 to 2019) including participant age, gender, and postal code. In total, this resulted in 41,054 data points. Data were geocoded, allowing us to map participants’ home and club locations. Subsequently, we identified eight functional regions which aligned with pre-established Census Subdivisions. Next, ArcGIS was utilized to plot club and home location of participants in each region followed by the mapping of participant data by gender (male/female) for each region and season, resulting in a total of 96 maps. Subsequently, we substantiated the visualizations with descriptive analyses of participation trends in each region.

The analysis provided several insights that effectively established the context of participation for Row Ontario. Notably, although the proportion and mean age of female participants were higher across all regions, there were large regional variances in participant demographics. For example, mean ages for regions varied from 20.9 to 37.5 years of age, seven of eight regions reported an increase in mean age over the six seasons examined, and one region reported a fluctuation where the total number of participants nearly doubled over two years (2014-2016) and then quickly receded.

Our analysis lays the foundation for future work examining sport participation and policy implementation. Although the support provided from Row Ontario (and the Canadian Sport Policy context) was the same across the province, there are clear regional differences in participant demographics and dispersions. This analysis supports previous calls for considering local context in sport development initiatives and provides methodological and practical insights into sport policy implementation in diverse communities.