

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) and their affiliated voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) have developed as a key delivery partner of governments in England, Australia and Canada (Bergsgard et al., 2007; Coalter, 2007). From 2013 to 2017, NGBs were awarded £715 million¹ of funding from the UK government (CEO Forum, 2014), through the responsible department for sport; the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Government funding is distributed via two non-departmental public bodies, Sport England and UK Sport, who respectively, deliver the sport policy priorities of increasing participation in sport and achieving medal success on the international stage. This article is set within the context of organizational change within NGBs, as they have implemented the policy priorities formulated by Sport England, to increase participation in sport from 2008 to 2015. Specifically, this article examines how sport development officers (SDOs) working within the community to organize activities to increase participation in sport (Houlihan, 2014; Houlihan & Green, 2011; Houlihan & White, 2002; Nesti, 2001), have responded to, and managed, these policy changes.

Since 2008, the UK government has published a plethora of strategies relating to the community sport policy field. Although, the overall measurement of increasing participation in sport has remained stable, there has, nevertheless been regular shifts in the specific definitions and funding criterion used in the formulation of policy. Consequently, it is widely accepted that the organizational environment in which NGBs operate has become increasingly dynamic (Houlihan, 2014; Robinson et al., 2012). Underpinning these strategies have been ambitions for the UK to become a global sporting nation (DCMS, 2008b; Harris & Houlihan, 2016b) by capitalizing on the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games. In translating this ambition, Sport England stated in '*Sport England Strategy 2008-2011*', that they would develop a world-class sports development system to: (i) reduce the drop-off in participation from 16 years, (ii)

develop stronger school to club links for young people and, (iii) develop talented athletes (Harris et al., 2009; Sport England, 2008). The DCMS's (2008a) legacy plan, '*Before, during and after: making the most of the London 2012 Games*', included an ambitious target of increasing participation in sport by two million, which was later reduced to one million by the Coalition government in 2010 (DCMS, 2010). NGBs were identified as the lead partner to deliver the government's targets of increasing participation in sport (DCMS, 2008b; Harris & Houlihan, 2016b; Harris et al., 2009; Sport England, 2008), with voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) equally acknowledged as being crucial to delivery (Collins, 2010), through the development of "a modern network of sports clubs" (Sport England, 2008, p.3).

Understanding how organizational change is managed by employees delivering policy at the community level within sport organizations is an under-developed research area (Lusted & O'Gorman, 2010). Whilst SDOs may not be directly responsible for deciding upon specific policy changes, they are, nevertheless, instrumental in how successfully change is implemented (Coch & French, 1948; Pident, 2000). Research into organizational change within NGBs is dominated by the transition from amateurism to professionalism (Connolly, 2016; Kikulis et al., 1989; O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Slack & Hinings 1992, 1994), the macro-analysis of government sport policies (Green, 2006, 2007; Green & Houlihan, 2004, 2006; Grix, 2009; Harris & Houlihan, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Houlihan, 2014; Houlihan & White, 2002), the organizational performance of NGBs (Bayle & Robinson, 2007) and the governance of NGB boards (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009). Only a few studies have investigated the experiences of organizational change from the perspective of those employees, typically positioned at the lower levels of organizations, who are responsible for delivering policy changes to the intended beneficiaries, such as the grassroots football workforce (Lusted & O'Gorman, 2010) and local authority SDOs (Bloyce et al., 2008;

Mackintosh, 2012). The central objective of this article is to develop new insights into understanding the views and experiences of SDOs in managing the implementation of policy at the community level. In order to place SDOs' views in the broader context within the figuration that they work, we also examine the views of other employees, including Chief Executive Officers (CEO), senior and middle managers and those responsible for policy formulation within Sport England.

The article begins by outlining a brief overview of sports development work by NGBs, the sport policy landscape, before introducing the theoretical perspective underpinning this research. The research methodology is then introduced, before the results are discussed. The article closes by drawing conclusions and research implications.

Sports development work by NGBs – a brief overview

In England, SDOs have become the prime deliverers of sports development activities, which seek “to enable and encourage people in all or any particular groups and areas to take part in sport and recreation or to improve their performances at whatsoever level they desire” (Collins, 2010, p.4). The role of SDOs has been deemed ambiguous, given significant variations in responsibilities (Houlihan & White, 2002). They have been employed within a disparate range of organizations (Hylton, 2013), including, for example, NGBs, local authorities, schools, and, youth organizations, many with the specific task of increasing participation in sport (Houlihan & White, 2002). Consequently, SDOs perform a crucial front-line role in translating national policy on the ground to their intended beneficiaries, in a similar way to the concept of street-level bureaucrats (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsy, 1980). Many NGBs started appointing SDOs in the mid to late 1980s to work with athletes, coaches, volunteers and officials from their affiliated VSCs, in order to develop and expand the activities offered to existing and new club

members and to deliver opportunities for talented athletes to progress within their respective sport (Houlihan, 2014; Houlihan & Green, 2011; Houlihan & White, 2002; Nesti, 2001). A similar approach was developed by many NGBs which involved the appointment of a national SDO, followed by outward expansion to include regional and county posts, with the scale of expansion highly variable dependent upon commercial attractiveness and resource availability (Harris & Houlihan, 2016a; Houlihan & Green, 2011), with GB Sports Council² providing small-scale grants to part fund SDO posts, in mainly local authorities but including some NGBs (Houlihan & White, 2002). Consequently, as noted by Houlihan and White (2002), only the more traditional, wealthy and larger sized NGBs, such as football, cricket, tennis, rugby union, had the resources to appoint SDOs. Although, such initiatives sought to expand the membership of their sport, at this time, the SDOs working within NGBs were still primarily interested in supporting talented performers as a “seed-corn for future elite squads” (Houlihan, 2000, p. 179).

Notably, the GB Sports Council’s strategy, *‘Sport in the Nineties’* identified an enhanced role for NGBs in delivering government policies and, in leading the development of strategies for their respective sport, (GB Sports Council, 1993). This strategy referred to future changes to the administrative and funding arrangements for NGBs, including decisions to identify priority sports eligible for government funding (GB Sports Council, 1993), and the requirement of NGBs to produce planning documents to lever government funding (Green, 2004) which, as outlined later was in 2004, consolidated into whole sport plan (WSP) funding (Sport England, 2004). The publication of *‘Sport: Raising the Game’* (Department of National Heritage, 1995) (now DCMS), and *‘A Sporting Future for All’* (DCMS, 2001) confirmed significant, and from the perspective of NGBs welcomed, political support towards elite success and youth sport development (Green, 2004), and supported, since 1995, through substantial funding provided by the National Lottery (Bloyce et al., 2008).

‘*Game Plan*’ (DCMS, 2002) signified policy changes, which whilst, retaining a policy commitment to elite sport, also reflected Labour’s interest in ‘sport for social good’, to tackle wider welfare objectives of improving health, social inclusion and reducing crime (Bloyce et al., 2008; Coalter, 2007; Collins, 2010). Moreover, this document identified further structural changes that would oblige sport organizations, including NGBs, to deliver agreed participation targets in return for government funding. Despite government intervention into community sport in the UK has progressively grown since the mid-1960s, it has remained a turbulent policy field due to regular shifts in government policy from mass participation, ‘sport for sports sake’ to ‘sport for social good’. Regular shifts in policy priorities has caused the organizational environment that NGBs operate within to become increasingly dynamic (Houlihan, 2014; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Robinson et al., 2010). Wider discussions of the political shifts from ‘sport for sports sake’ to ‘sport for social good’ are beyond the scope of this article, for a further discussion see Collins (2010). From the mid 2000s, the government renewed their commitment to a greater involvement of NGBs in delivering increased sport participation, in both school and community settings, through the ‘*Physical Education and School Sport Club Links*’ (PESSCL) strategy (DfES/DCMS 2003), the ‘*National Framework for Community Sport in England*’ (Sport England, 2004) and, the ‘*Carter Report*’ (DCMS, 2005). Whilst, it is not possible in this article to provide a detailed overview of these developments, by now the government was adapting an increasingly interventionist approach by specifying the expected role of NGBs in the newly proposed single system of delivery for community sport (Sport England, 2004). Although, several authors have researched the macro-level analysis of policy implementation within NGBs, including for example, Harris & Houlihan, 2016a, 2016b, there has been a limited focus on understanding these changes from the perspective of SDOs, who had become central to implementing policy at the local level (Harris & Houlihan, 2016a) as investigated within this article.

With NGBs identified as the lead deliverer for community sport since 2008 (Harris & Houlihan, 2016s), this represented a rebalancing of the focus of previous Labour governments, who had considered local authorities as their preferred partner in delivering their ‘sport for social good’ objectives (Harris & Houlihan, 2014). An important policy change was the broadening of the definition of sport to encompass physical activity as highlighted by Sport England’s ambition “to be the most active nation and the most successful sporting nation in the world” (Sport England, 2004b, p. 3). This emphasis continued over the next decade, as specific targets for increasing participation in physical activity and sport were identified within the DCMS Legacy Plans produced, in response to the government’s legacy plans, following the successful bid to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London. Ambition targets were established for NGB to work with their VSCs, to “attract an extra 200,000 sporting participants per year” (DCMS, 2008b, p. 19). It has been recognized that the implementation of national policy remains challenging as it requires SDOs to effectively translate policy at the local level . By 2005, Sport England’s funding to NGBs was consolidated into a 4-year funding process, whereby eligible NGBs submitted a whole sport plan (WSP)³ detailing the strategy for the development of their sport, against which specific targets for increasing participation in sport were approved by Sport England (Rowe, 2009; Sport England, 2004, 2008). For each WSP cycle, NGBs were required to respond to any shifts in eligibility and funding criteria as Sport England were equally responsive to shifts in national policies. For example, this has included changing the age range criterion, which in the 2009-2013 WSP cycle, was 16+ year olds, whereas in the 2013-2017 WSP, Sport England adjusted this to 14-25 year olds (Sport England, 2012, p.1). While the WSP process enabled Sport England to consolidate the plethora of funding awards to NGBs, it also enabled them to reinforce a top-down approach to policy implementation by applying stringent accountability and fiscal controls, which had become typical policy instruments of the UK government (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Phillpots, Grix, &

Quarmby, 2010). Although, wider government policies emphasized the global trend of neoliberalism ideologies based upon free market, devolution and decentralization (Morgan & Battle, 2019), the WSP process was designed to enable Sport England, through the predominant task-orientated requirements, to exercise even greater centralized control over the actions of NGBs, whilst decentralizing responsibility to NGBs for identifying the needs of their sport (Houlihan & Green, 2008). However, the WSP enabled Sport England to ensure control of their progressively deliberate strategy to modernize the management and administration of NGBs (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Grix, 2009; Phillpots et al., 2010). Although, the Labour government had earlier indicated their wish for NGBs to modernize, by adopting more business-led processes, within '*Game Plan*' (DCMS, 2002) the government had expressed their increasing frustration at the lack of progress against increased participation targets by NGBs, which was only heightened by a series of high profile examples of financial mismanagement by NGBs (Grix, 2009). In restructuring the funding to NGBs, Sport England was explicit in formulating policy to micro-manage NGBs, through a robust performance management framework involving target setting, auditing, incentives and threats of withdrawal of funding, to ensure even tighter 'top-down' control (Phillpots et al., 2010).

In 2012, the government's new strategies, '*Creating a Sporting Habit for Life*' (DCMS, 2012) and Sport England's (2012) response, '*Sport England 2012-17 Youth and Community Strategy*' reinvigorated the commitment towards focusing more strongly on increasing participation among those people largely deemed inactive. Newly defined targets were set focused on achieving a "year-on-year increase in the proportion of people who play sport once a week for at least 30 minutes" (Sport England, 2012, p.1), which were integrated into the contractual obligations of NGBs receiving funding in the WSP 2013-2017 cycle. The traditional ethos of many NGBs and VSCs meant that many NGB employees and club officials found the new focus

on inactivity an anathema to their internalized beliefs about the traditional conceptualization of sports development, which assumed that individuals would continue to participate in sport within the traditional club environment promoted by many NGBs (Mackintosh et al., 2014). Previously, NGBs had been heavily focused on working with traditional partners, such as VSCs, County Sport Partnerships (CSPs), (latterly rebranded as Active Partnerships in 2019), local authorities and schools, to develop stronger school links for young people to participate in, particularly, competitive sport, and progress from school, or other settings into the local VSCs (Harris & Houlihan, 2016a). Sport England were explicit in directing NGBs to work with those partners committed to offering more casual and less competitive activities to attract typically inactive people into sport and physical activity (Mackintosh et al., 2014). The central concern of this article is to better understand the views and experiences of SDOs employed within NGBs, in particular, as they respond and attempt to manage the implementation of these policy changes at the community level. As such, it has only been necessary, and possible in terms of space to provide a brief overview of some of the key developments in recent years that have impacted on the landscape of sport policy related to NGBs in England. For further details on sport policy development across government, see Coalter (2007) and Houlihan and Lindsay (2013). We now turn to providing an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning this research.

Theoretical framework

It has been argued within the organizational change literature that there has been an overemphasis on structure (Collins, 1998). Norbert Elias developed his ‘figurational sociology’ approach in response to similar criticisms of the wider sociological discipline (Van Krieken, 1998). As such, we use a figurational lens within this article to develop a more nuanced understanding of organizational change within NGBs. The conventional approach to studying organizational change has been to treat organizations as rational and static objects, which can

be moved through neat, sequential stages of transformation. The adoption of such rational approaches contributed towards the dominance of planned models of change (Burnes, 2014; McGraw et al., 2011) and the proliferation of practical models which promote a one-best way for organizations to change (Burnes, 2014; Collins, 1998). Research into sport organizations is also dominated by examination of the structural dimensions of organizational change, including, for example, the extensive volume of research conducted on Canadian national sport organizations (see Thibault & Babiak, 2005 for a summary) and by institutional theories, for example O'Brien and Slack (1999, 2003, 2004) in their examination of the organizational changes within the Rugby Football Union (RFU), which arose as a result of a conformity to the institutional pressures from within their external environment. The problem with such simplistic and reductionist approaches is that they reify organizations as if they have a life of their own, and in doing so, isolate the organization from the people that inhabit them (Dopson, 2001; Elias, 1978). By reinforcing a lineation change in structure, these approaches offer limited value to those practitioners who are responsible for managing change, and as relevant to this research, by the front-line staff responsible for implementing policy on the ground. Where research has focused on employees, it has predominantly examined the role of managers in controlling the behaviour of employees, through either identifying why people resist change and in reducing and managing the impact of any resistance (Dent et al., 1999; Gilley et al., 2009; Thomas & Hardy, 2011) or, in examining how managers foster employee support to the change proposed (Heydon et al., 2017). As Gilley et al. (2009, p. 38) argue "organizational change does not occur unless member groups and individuals change", which concurs with research conducted by Bloyce et al. (2008), who found variations in the behaviour and actions amongst SDOs based within local authorities, as they responded to changes in national sport policies. Applying a figurational approach provides an alternative conceptualization which recognizes that people do not exist within a vacuum and instead form networks of dynamic

social relationships (Elias, 1978). Importantly, Van Krieken (1998, p.45) argues “societies are networks of human beings in the round, not a medley of disembodied actions”.

Figurational sociology has grown into an influential framework within the field of sociology of sport (Malcolm & Mansfield, 2013) and increasingly, the study of organizational analysis by offering a more adequate understanding of the dynamic and processual nature of organizational change (Dopson, 2001; 2005; Van Krieken, 2019). There are numerous accounts of figurational sociology and, thus, this article will only provide a brief overview. For a more detailed overview, see Van Krieken (1998), Mennell (1998) and Dunning and Hughes (2013). Four inter-related concepts have been embedded within this research to offer an alternative approach to examining organizational change by allowing the inherent dynamic and processual nature of human relationships to be more adequately analyzed. The first concept is the building block of figurational sociology, the figuration, which develops as people connect together to form relationships, or as Elias termed them, ‘interdependencies’ between each other and as a collective network (Bloyce et al., 2008; Dopson, 2001; Dopson & Waddington, 1996; Elias 1978). For SDOs, this means that they can be situated within several figurations at multiple levels and form numerous interdependencies with internal colleagues and external partners, such as club officials, to achieve their goals. People form interdependencies based upon functional and resource dependent relationships and remain in a constant state of flux, as the actions of people continuously shift as they focus on achieving their particular goal orientation (Elias, 2001). The occurrence of unintended outcomes was also a central principle of Elias’s work, as he sought to explain how the actions of individuals may begin as deliberate and intended actions, but that the outcomes frequently end up resulting in unplanned outcomes (Dopson & Waddington, 1996; Elias, 1978; Murphy, Sheard & Waddington, 2000).

The third concept used within this research relates to power. Elias (1978) considers power as a dynamic element of the interdependencies that people form, which means that individuals working within an organization have varying degrees of power. No-one ever has absolute power, and instead, power should be considered as relative, even for those employees occupying higher positions within organizations (Elias, 1978; Murphy et al., 2000). Of particular relevance to this article is how the power balances within the interdependencies formed by SDOs, will regularly shift through the divergence of actions, as related to the goals of the different groups of people involved in the process of policy formulation and implementation, and through which they are connected (Elias, 2001). For SDOs, this could mean that they have a face-to-face relationship with a club official who they are working with to implement the policy priorities at the community level, alongside also having a degree of dependence on Sport England officials, who they may not know, but who are responsible for allocating resources and setting targets for their NGB. Thus, Sport England officials will be in a position to exert a greater degree of power over the work priorities of SDOs, despite each person not typically knowing one another (Bloyce et al., 2008). This emphasizes the need to understand the complex network of relationships that are formed, not by some static, linear ‘model’ of organizational change’, but as a fluid network where individuals are enabled and constrained by the independent relations they develop with others, knowingly and unknowingly (Elias, 2001). Understanding the actions of front-line staff, such as SDOs, when responding to the shifting power balances, because of policy changes, enables us to better understand the process of policy implementation. The final concept we review here is the concept of habitus, which Elias (2000) argued explains how all individuals have internalized ways of behaving that begins at birth and continues throughout a person’s life. This internalization of behaviour forms a deeply engrained and “automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control” (Elias, 2000, p. 368). That is to say, through the network of interdependencies individuals develop,

sub-consciously and consciously, internalized constraints relating to behaviour. In sport, the habitus of individuals has been found to influence an individuals' choice of career (Green, 1998; Lawson, 1983) and in the way that local authority SDOs internalized their beliefs regarding their job role and purpose (Bloyce & Green, 2011; Bloyce et al., 2008).

Methodology

This article forms part of a wider study examining how NGB employees have responded and attempted to manage organizational change. This article has been underpinned by a social constructionist and interpretivist philosophy because of how we seek to understand the meanings and realities of SDOs as they respond and manage the 'top-down' policy changes being implemented within their NGB. The review of literature suggests that many existing studies into organizational change have devalued the role of people within organizations, instead of recognizing that people "are the creators of social life all the time ... [and] active agents who make social worlds" (Plummer, 2010, p. 3), which demands a stronger acceptance that human behaviours have a non-rational basis. In doing so, we also set their voices within the wider structure of relationships within the NGB figuration by examining the views of key individuals working within the figuration, sometimes alongside the SDOs, but also frequently above them within the chains of command.

A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with 18 employees from a number of NGBs in receipt of WSP funding from Sport England. Employees interviewed included 1 senior manager from Sport England, and from the sample of NGBs, 4 Chief Executives (CEOs), 7 NGB senior managers and 6 SDOs. Table 1 illustrates the background of the interviewees.

Table 1: Background of interviewees

Interviews were designed to explore the views and experiences of SDOs and those with whom they work and are influenced by within the NGB figuration, through the meanings that they constructed and re-constructed as they interpreted these changes in relation to their role at the community level. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, at a mutually convenient location, and quiet, private area to maintain privacy and a comfortable environment for the interviewees (Bryman, 2016; Jones, 2015). Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim (Bryman, 2016; Jones, 2015). The six-phase approach to thematic analysis, devised by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to ensure a systematic approach was adopted for the identification of recurring themes within the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Roulston, 2010). Ethical approval was gained from the authors' relevant university ethics committee and involved securing informed consent from the NGBs and interviewees participating in this research, with the anonymity of the specific NGBs and interviewees further protected through the use of pseudonyms (Bryman, 2016; Jones, 2015).

Results

The analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the identification of four key themes, as examined in the following section.

Power balances within top-down cyclical change

There was near universal acceptance of a top-down approach to change within NGBs, which was also revealed as being cyclical in nature as aligned to each 4-year WSP cycle. One SDO explained how s/he had become accustomed to this, "it is always going to change every 4 years" because this "is just the way it is" (NGB2, SDO 05). Similarly, a senior manager from the same NGB said, "you must know that if you go into sport, there will always be that element

of change”, when explaining how the WSP process had contributed towards a cyclical pattern of change (NGB2, Manager 07). All interviewees felt that change had become more pronounced during the transition from the 2009-2013 and 2013-2017 WSP cycles, as the government and Sport England made a more radical change to their sport policy priorities, specifically to direct NGBs to tackle inactivity levels. Interviewees, across all levels of seniority, described how the previous WSP (2009-2013) was focused on the traditional conceptualization of sport development which involved getting “kids excited about the sport, [and then] we direct them into clubs and get them good coaches” (NGB4, CEO). Similarly, another SDO explained the shift from being “very heavy around the club support that we offered, whereas more recently [2013-2017 WSP], it has been more about participation, as a big driver now with Sport England” (NGB2, SDO 03).

Cyclical shifts in policy priorities made most SDOs feel more constrained in making strategic decisions because of how Sport England, as the more powerful player within the figuration, could exert more coercive pressure on NGB employees, and particularly SDOs, to ensure compliance with their contractual obligations. Stronger accountability by Sport England, heavily constrained the line managers of SDOs to adjust the work programmes of SDOs in order to engage much more with new partners in order “to prioritize the [contractual] obligations” (NGB2, Manager 07), as agreed with Sport England. Another senior manager explained the challenges they experienced, in balancing the requirements of Sport England with those of their VSCs, when Sport England changed the target groups to 14-25 years in the WSP 2013-2017. S/he explained:

We have to meet certain criteria that Sport England dictates and then there are certain elements that, as an organization, we have to do to help the sport develop, which isn’t on Sport England’s tick list. Anything under 14, Sport England is not interested in yet that is hugely important for us as an NGB, as a lot of the clubs have made this a priority (NGB2, Manager 04).

Notwithstanding, it was clear that the power balance was not all in favour of Sport England, as some SDOs were able to exercise their influence on the direction of the implementation of policy by maintaining other key areas of development, outside of this age group. Such a focus was not considered a priority for Sport England, but clearly it remained key for the NGB and VSCs to support the longer-term development of their sport. SDOs described how adjusting to this change was particularly challenging because of how, during the previous WSP cycle (2009-2013), Sport England policy had required them to develop relations with VSCs in order to expand their activities to cater for a younger age group⁴. This finding shows that even just a single change in age criterion still had a significant impact on the work prioritized by SDOs. Furthermore, these changes created relational constraints to the way that SDOs managed their long-standing relationships with club officials, as examined below.

Unintended outcomes: Losing sight of clubs and increasing independency chains

Nearly all interviewees felt that an unintended outcome of the generally top-down cyclical change was that they were losing sight of the needs of their VSCs, as the new policy formulated by Sport England directed them to work only with those partners who were committed to increasing participation among inactive people. In doing so, SDOs felt constrained as they were increasingly pressurized to distance themselves from working with some VSCs and working with new partners. Interviewees indicated that this was particularly pronounced at the start of the WSP 2013-2017 cycle, as the pressure intensified on both Sport England and NGBs to deliver the participation targets agreed with DCMS and thus, central government. A senior manager, who was responsible for managing the SDOs within NGB2, explained that SDOs “had an increased workload particularly around participation targets, which wasn’t within their work programme, whereas 100% of their time they used to be supporting clubs and coaches” (NGB2, Manager 07). SDOs attempted to maintain their existing relationships with club

officials, at least initially, despite growing pressure from their line managers to devote more time to work with new partners. The same manager, who had also previously worked as a SDO within the same NGB, emphasized how the rigid result-orientated approach constrained all employees, and, particularly SDOs, to change their network of relations. S/he explained that:

This new area of work came in and nothing could give. So something had to give, so, whereas we used to go down to clubs via site visits, we couldn't do that. Everything that we did had to relate to our contractual obligations (NGB2, Manager 07).

An unintended outcome of the top-down policy changes was that SDOs felt that in trying to meet the new Sport England targets they could no longer afford to spend the time as much time as they might have liked with those club officials who were not committed to providing the more casually orientated activities which Sport England believed would appeal to inactive people.

Our findings also reveal that, as related to the policy changes implemented for the start of the 2013-2017 WSP cycle, many SDOs needed time to adjust to the new policy priorities and in managing the changes that they were required to make to their network of relations. Several SDOs did resist the new policy direction because of how it distanced them from working with many VSCs, who they had developed close ties with, often via collaborations encouraged by previous Sport England policy. Another SDO spoke about their frustration at not being able to spend more time trying to encourage those club officials resistant to change, to move away from their traditional focus “it is like planting a seed, it will fester, and then waiting for them to come back to you” (NGB2, SDO 03). A senior manager from the same NGB empathized in the way that the typically ‘top-down’ cyclical changes were constraining how SDOs maintained their relations with club officials. S/he explained that s/he understood that many VSCs felt that because “we are a membership body, and you should be focusing all of your

[the NGB] resources on us [the VSCs]. But if we just focused on them, then they don't realize that we wouldn't be getting that funding from Sport England" (NGB2, Manager 03).

Another unintended outcome of the implementation of this 'new' policy was the resistance that several of the SDOs experienced from many club officials, who voiced their objections to the new policy priorities and, specifically, what they saw as a withdrawal of support from the NGB, and, by association, the SDOs. For example, one SDO felt that now the club officials "don't want to know [the 'new' policy direction of the NGB]. It is very much like that" (NGB2, SDO 05). Similarly, another SDO pointed out that "some clubs don't want anything to do with [the SDO]" anymore (NGB2, SDO 06). Such responses are related to the sporting habitus of these club officials, who in having been involved in the sport for many years, remained committed to the competitive programme traditionally offered by VSCs. They were not especially interested in appealing to inactive people, who may not be interested in competing or joining the club long term. As one SDO stated, "quite a lot of the clubs are old, have a lot of older volunteers who say "this is the way that we have always done it, and we will continue to do it this way" (NGB2, SDO 06). Although, SDOs spoke about different ways of managing these hostilities, a common theme identified how SDOs, individually, chose to modify how they worked with individual club officials.

It is evident that a complex NGB figuration has developed, with employees, such as SDOs forming interdependencies at multi-layers of the figurations. SDOs have developed a dense network of relations with club officials, as illustrated above, which has created relational constraints to the way that they have responded to, and, managed the top-down policy changes. Historically, SDOs had formed strong interdependent relationships with club officials from many VSCs. These relationships were further solidified during the previous WSP cycle (2009-

2013), as the close ties between traditional VSCs and the NGB were more central to the delivery of the sport policies priorities formulated at that time. The new policy priorities were impacting and changing the interdependencies within the network of relations by constraining NGB employees, and particularly SDOs, to distance themselves from working with VSCs, whom many considered their traditional partner. At the same time, they were increasingly developing new interdependent relationships with alternative providers, increasing the complexity of the network of relations further. SDOs spoke about the challenges of balancing the priorities of VSCs with those of central government, Sport England and NGB senior managers, who were increasingly influencing policy, not least because of the potential funding available to those NGBs that most strongly conformed to Sport England policy. Accordingly, the SDOs were simultaneously seeking to manage the dynamic interdependencies which had shifted with the implementation of the new policy changes. The responses of SDOs contributed to policy implementation becoming more elongated in the time that it has taken to be implemented, due to the resistance experienced by SDOs and club officials, as a result of their shared empathy for sport, as examined in the section below.

Sporting habitus and a shared empathy for sport

Most SDOs shared a similar sporting habitus with many of the club officials that they were working with, which was founded upon the belief that there was a hierarchical progression of an individual's participation in sport from the initial acquisition of basic sporting skills to high level performance at the elite level (Hylton, 2013). Several SDOs spoke about experiencing inner conflicts, as they started to translate the policies, outlined in the WSP 2013-2017, on the ground, because of how the new policy priorities did not match their internalized beliefs of sports development (Bloyce & Green, 2011). These conflicts can be traced back to the habitus of SDOs, as shaped by their own involvement in sport and career choices, as also observed

among physical educationalists (Green, 1998). Most SDOs felt that their primary role was to support people to enter and progress within their respective sport, as opposed to providing opportunities for inactive people, who may not even be interested in continuing to participate in the traditional club environment. As one SDO explained, some SDOs “don’t necessarily see it as sport at the entry level. Your aspiration might be very different. That has been hard for some [SDOs] to grasp” (NGB2, SDO 03). Similarly, another manager within the same NGB explained that “for some of our [SDOs], that is going to be a challenge” (NGB2, Manager 05). Another SDO from NGB2, felt that an SDO’s previous involvement in sport shaped the extent to which they, either, accepted or resisted the new policy changes being implemented. S/he said:

It has been a really difficult thing for some [SDOs] to get their heads around. For the real purists of the sport, [those SDOs] who have come in because they love the [more traditional side of the] sport. So getting your head around someone who [does not normally participate] has been really difficult. For some [SDOs] that has been a big shift, it has probably taken some a few years for them to get to that position (NGB2, SDO 03).

Elias (1978) argued that it can take a long time for an individual’s habitus to change, which is highlighted in this study by revealing how many SDOs were forced to go against their sporting habitus, as they began to adjust to the day-to-day realities of encouraging typically inactive people to participate in sport. This finding concurs with previous research by Velija and Malcolm (2009), who investigated the lower participation rates in cricket by women and found that the process of changing the attitudes and ideologies of players was especially slow, but of greater significance to increasing participation rates in the long term, than just implementing organizational reforms alone.

Where SDOs were found to be resistant to the policy changes, this caused greater delays in the time taken to implement the policy changes on the ground than was intended by Sport England.

The response of SDOs was found to be variable, as one SDO explained:

Some [SDOs] were happy to change direction and get involved in different things. But then there were other [SDOs] that said, no, this is our traditional role, we are not interested in participation numbers, and that is not what the organization is about (NGB2, SDO 01).

This elongation was particularly amplified as SDOs chose to continue to pursue their own interpretations of sports development (Bloyce et al., 2008) by maintaining contact with those club officials who were resisting, and unwilling to adjust to the policy changes. The line manager of the SDOs, who started in NGB2 as an SDO ten years ago, explained that such resistance was often only short-lived as s/he felt that, as long as SDOs in her/his team were given time to adjust “there is a willingness to learn and take it on board” (NGB2, Manager 06). It is possible that the views of this manager had been shaped by their own previous experiences of working as a SDO within NGB2. However, this research has highlighted that some SDOs found it difficult to rationalize the new policy priorities with their deeply engrained internalized beliefs of sports development, meaning that “it wasn’t right for them to stay” (CEO, NGB3).

Many SDOs felt that a shared empathy for sport also enabled them to build a good rapport with club officials, as a way of managing the relational constraints that they were experiencing. Another interviewee, who had worked as an SDO in the same NGB for eight years, explained, “I think it is just building rapport with people. It helps that I have been involved in the sport for a long time; I have got good relations with people” (NGB2, SDO 03). A senior manager, who had previously been employed as an SDO, explained how a shared empathy enabled her/him to sympathize with club officials, who were resisting the new policy priorities. S/he said:

It does help that you have been in a club environment, you have competed, you understand the finer details of the sport, and you can empathize with the work that the volunteers put in. Sometimes they feel that a broad brush approach is taken and that the empathy is not there (NGB2, Manager 07).

Similarly, another SDO explained how s/he was able to deflect resistance from the club officials away from themselves, despite only having been employed as a SDO for two years.

S/he said:

If people think you are in it for them and to help them and not your agenda they are quite respectful, even if they are hostile. I have had people in the past be hostile but they have said: “this is not aimed at you, but [headquarters’ staff]” (NGB2, SDO 4).

Some SDOs also spoke about feeling constrained in how long they could spend time trying to win round those VSCs who were resistant to the new policy priorities, before having to distance themselves (as highlighted in the section above), because of the greater influence being exerted on them by their line managers to work with new partners. By being a more powerful player within the figuration, senior managers were able to exert a greater degree of power over the SDOs, as illustrated through the changes made to SDO work programmes and specifically, in the targets that they were expected to deliver.

Power balances and moving onto easy targets

Another way that SDOs managed the policy changes being implemented was to move onto easy targets to ensure achievement of their contractual obligations, in return for access to future resources (Harris & Houlihan, 2016b). This was as opposed to continuing to work with those VSCs with whom they had long-standing relationships, because key individuals within the VSCs were not interested in changing. The pressure exerted on NGBs by their funding partners meant that if they did not shift their focus it could, as one manager highlighted, “affect our targets to grow, as linked to the Sport England grant” (NGB1, Manager 02). Furthermore, one

CEO confirmed that, “balancing the needs of government and our members is difficult at times” (NGB2, CEO). As such, many SDOs responded to and managed the intensification of the top-down policy changes by moving onto easier targets, which involved SDOs choosing to work with club officials who were the “early adopters” and the clubs that responded by saying, “great, sign me up, and let’s do it” (NGB2, SDO 03). This ensured the delivery of their contractual obligations, through acceptance of the coercive power being exerted on them by the more powerful players within the figuration. As Elias (1978) argues no-one has absolute power to influence all members within the figuration, and although, SDOs were the less powerful players, they were still able to exert some power in choosing which volunteers and club officials to work with. Virtually all of the SDOs interviewed felt that by responding in this way they could manage the relational constraints and power differentials created from the increasingly top-down approach to policy implementation. As one SDO explained “in the beginning, new clubs had to be set up and you just let them flourish, see the potential and then over time establish links with the [existing] clubs” (NGB2, SDO 05). These new clubs offered a quick response to the pressure being experienced by SDOs to deliver their contractual obligations, by providing casually orientated activities which it was hoped would appeal more to inactive people. Given that this SDO has worked as a SDO in NGB2 for eight years, s/he is illustrating how deeply rooted their sporting habitus is, by revealing their interest in linking any new clubs established back to older ones. Another SDO explained how the approach of established new clubs bypassed the resistance shown by those club officials ('old guard') who had become entrenched in the traditional conceptualization of sports development. S/he said:

One of my clubs has actually emerged from another club. One of the members that instigated it came from one of the clubs that were the old guard, negative. [One member] actually left them and came to me and said let’s develop something together. There are now people leaving that club and coming to the new club (NGB2, SDO 03).

The same SDO emphasized how important it was to influence those volunteers who were interested in developing new opportunities within their clubs. S/he explained how “often it is a few key individuals that ... I really want to go to that. I want to get involved. They come and feel a bit rebellious. They go back and report back” (NGB2, SDO 03). The SDO highlights the challenge of encouraging many VSCs to change to offer activities to appeal more to inactive people, which conflicted with their sporting habitus. However, they confirmed that this approach was only chosen once they had exhausted all efforts to convince existing club officials to change the activities organized by their club. S/he explained how one volunteer had “tried to influence change. They tried to do basic things, working with me. It wasn’t even me that was driving [the proposed changes]. It was [her/him]. But [the club committee members] didn’t want to know” (NGB2, SDO 03). The complexities of these relationships illustrate, as argued by Elias (1978), that no-one has absolute power to influence all members within a VSC. In this example, the SDO felt that they had been fortunate to find some interested volunteers, who were willing to work with them, firstly to try to exert, unsuccessfully, influence on the existing club officials, and then, in continuing to work together to set up a new club, thereby enabling the NGB to meet the contractual obligations agreed with Sport England.

It would appear that SDOs chose to move onto easy targets, in order to ensure compliance with the more stringent performance management regime and result orientated approach introduced by Sport England, through the WSP process, as opposed to addressing the developmental needs of the sport and their traditional partners, VSCs (Harris & Houlihan, 2016b).

Conclusion

By applying a figurational lens, we have been able to more adequately illustrate the increasing complexities of the interdependencies formed by SDOs, which have through this article, been

shown to progressively constrain their actions, when responding to shifting power balances as they sought to manage the top-down policy changes formulated and implemented by the UK government and Sport England. In particular, this research has added further insight to the research and illuminated the ways in which individual SDOs have experienced different constraints and unequal power relations, which have impacted on how they have been able to translate policy on the ground. This has enabled the development of a more adequate understanding of organizational change within NGBs, by focusing on the behaviour and actions of the SDOs within their network of relations, in contrast to employing a deterministic approach to examining organizational change, by reducing organizations to static and rational entities, in which the crucial role of individuals is largely ignored.

In doing so, we have highlighted the importance of understanding the sporting habitus of SDOs because of how their internalized views and beliefs, as related to any national policy changes, may influence them to exert a degree of power, by sometimes struggling to implement and, by initially resisting the top-down policy changes. This contributed to the policy implementation process becoming more elongated by causing delays in the time taken to translate policy into action on the ground. It is also possible that this can be explained by these recent policy shifts of supporting inactive people to participate in sport, being more dramatic than previous policy changes and, thus, requiring a stronger temporal dimension in recognizing the shifting interdependencies and network of relations on the ground, as policy is implemented. These findings support the concerns of Harris and Houlihan (2014, 2016a, 2016b), who have identified community sport as a turbulent policy field, whilst also illuminating the ways in which the behaviour and actions of SDOs, as a crucial role in delivering policy, have become increasingly constrained and, subsequently, resulting in changes that were not planned (Bloyce et al., 2008; Dopson & Waddington, 1996).

This research has shown that SDOs have formed multi-level figurations involving an increasingly complex network of relations (Bloyce & Green, 2011; Bloyce et al., 2008), which were influenced by the top-down cyclical policy changes formulated and implemented by Sport England from 2008 to 2015. SDOs have experienced significant changes in their daily working realities, which have become increasingly complex and nuanced, as they sought to manage the dynamic relational constraints and power imbalances between officials from central government, Sport England, and VSCs (Bloyce & Green, 2011; Bloyce, et al., 2008). These changes have influenced them to make changes to their network of relations, that were not always welcomed by SDOs, through the alternative partners that Sport England increasingly directed them to work with and, the targets identified in their work programmes. This concurs with previous studies conducted into policy implementation involving health professionals (Dopson & Waddington, 1996), local authority SDOs (Bloyce et al., 2008) and NGB employees and club officials from tennis clubs (Lake, 2010). However, we have added new insight by explicitly drawing on the experiences of SDOs, which has helped develop a more adequate understand of the complexities of policy formulation and implementation, by showing how a cyclical pattern of change had developed, shaped by the 4-year WSP cycle administered by Sport England. The task and results-orientated WSP process formulated by Sport England, to ensure compliance by NGBs to enable them to meet their targets agreed with DCMS, caused a cyclical pattern of change to occur as top-down policy changes were integrated into the 4-year WSP funding process to NGBs.

Furthermore, new insight is added to highlight that SDOs were able to exert their own influence over the policy implementation, despite being a less powerful player, by moving onto what many of them perceived as easier targets. SDOs moved onto easy targets as a way of managing

the unequal power balances that they were experiencing, as more powerful players such as Sport England exerted a greater degree of influence on the actions of SDOs, through the greater centralization of power (Dopson & Waddington, 1996). As SDOs moved onto easier targets, they increasingly distanced themselves from supporting those VSCs who were apathetic towards the new policy priorities, instead of continuing to work with them to convince them to change their activities to appeal to inactive people (Mackintosh et al., 2014). The actions taken by SDOs may suggest that they have adequately managed the competing conflicts that they are experiencing, by moving onto easier targets to appease their funding partner, Sport England. However, this has wider policy implications for all sport organizations (Smith & Leech, 2012) as, although this approach may have enabled Sport England to achieve their explicit, yet also possibly over-simplified participation target (Houlihan & Green, 2008). It may also have, unintentionally, constrained NGBs to narrow their focus on the priorities identified by Sport England and reduced their relations with their VSCs. Such priorities may only offer short-term and partial solutions to NGBs in supporting them to increase participation in their sports, as opposed to focusing on those priorities that may help both the NGBs, and equally VSCs, to develop the longer term sustainability of their sport.

We argue that sport policy-makers, but especially NGB CEOs, should be more aware of how policy changes can create relational constraints and conflicting tensions for employees working at the lower level, such as SDOs during the formulation and implementation of policy changes. In this respect, it was the complex combination of top-down and cyclical changes, the implementation of a stringent performance management framework and results orientated approach, which, collectively, contributed to exacerbating the constraints that SDOs felt in how they could translate policy on the ground, as they responded to, and managed the top-down policy changes. The policy landscape, and the complexity of the figuration in which NGB

operates, remains extremely dynamic as the UK government continues with its modernization agenda of NGB, which will unquestionably influence further organizational change within NGBs. Since the completion of this research, NGBs have been subjected to further policy changes, initiated from the UK government (DCMS, 2015) and Sport England (2016b), alongside the publication of tightly focused strategies for coaching (Sport England, 2016a) and volunteering (Sport England, 2016c). The continued dominance of a top-down approach to policy implementation by the UK government and Sport England ignores the sheer complexities of the dynamic relationships formed by employees and the reality of seeking to control policy formulation and implementation (Hill & Hupe, 2009), where unintended outcomes will inevitable occur as a natural occurrence of long-term social processes (Dopson & Waddington, 1996; Dopson, 2005). This suggests that it will be even more important, in the future, for sport policy-makers to consider a more longer-term and rounded view of the wider and dynamic NGB figuration and network of relations that employees form, which can both enable and constraint the actions of people when formulating and implementing policy changes (Dopson, 2005), especially at the lower levels.

Notes

1. NGBs received the following levels of funding from the government: 46 NGBs received funding of £368m from Sport England for the WSP 2013-2017 cycle and £347m from UK Sport across the 2013-2017 Rio cycle (CEO Forum, 2014).
2. The Great Britain Sport Council was reorganised and split into UK Sport and Sport England in 1997.
3. There has been 3 WSP cycles since their introduction in 2005: 2005-2008, 2009-2013 and 2013-2017. However, the terminology changed, from WSP, for the 2017-2021 funding cycle, to, instead 'NGB Investment Guidance'
4. It is noted that since the completion of this research, Sport England has changed the eligible age range in receipt of funding to 5+ years (2017-2021).

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