

Global Governance Practice: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Sport Governance Process and Practice

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Historically, the governance of professional sport has received little empirical attention, and has been regarded in relatively simple terms (Fortser, 2006; Hassan & Hamil, 2010). Moreover, Hassan and Hamil (2010) contend that professional sport has “mostly operated within systems of governance that have presented sports as something of a deviation from normal business practices ...” (p. 343). Interest in international governance models for professional sport is attracting growing attention (Hamil, Walters, & Watson, 2010; Szymanski & Ross, 2007) recognising the range of critical issues that many sports confront. The transition of many international sport organisations from volunteer administered entities anchored in an amateur ethos, to professionally managed bodies in an increasingly commercialised global marketplace accounts for these deviations from normal business practice. Gradually, however, these deviations appear to be less tolerated (Shilbury & Kellett, 2011).

This study provides a snapshot of history that offers insight into the inter-play between sport governance practice and established theory. In so doing, the intention is to advance our knowledge of sport governance, and to raise questions about the future of sport governance research and practice. Governance involves concepts of direction, control and regulation. In essence, organisation governance is the responsibility for the functioning and overall direction of the organisation and is a necessary and institutionalised component of all sporting codes from club level to national bodies, government agencies, sport service organisations and professional teams around the world (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2005).

The aim of this research is to explore global governance practice from the lived experience of one informant spanning a 30 year period of involvement in the governance of two sport organisations (basketball and cricket). The breadth of this experience spans boardroom practice at club, state, national and international level and in so doing provides a viewpoint from multiple levels of governance. To date, there has been no research that has explored the lived experience of a sport governance practitioner. To do so adds meaning to the processes and practices of this critical aspect of sport management.

The methodological framework used for this study is “hermeneutic phenomenology”. Hermeneutics is about life experience and seeks to grasp the everyday, “inter-subjective world of the respondents and how that life-world is constituted” (Schmidt & Little, 2007, p. 227). It recognises that history determines the background of our values and cognitions, and may even determine our critical judgements (Grondin, 1994). In this study the lived experience of one informant coincides with the transition from an amateur to commercial culture in the governance of global sport organisations. The methods used to collect data were a series of interviews (totalling six hours) with one research participant, whose experience of sport governance spans three decades. Document analysis was also used, involving publicly available documents such as annual reports and website information to support interview content.

The exploration of this life experience has been integrated with key theoretical concepts derived from the literature in relation to sport governance. This integration and analysis took place through the viewpoint of the researchers. Gadamer (2004) urged that pre-understandings are the very conditions by which we understand. “The challenge is not to set them aside but rather to work with them in the quest towards understanding” (Smythe, 2007, p. 20). The researchers’ understanding of sport governance arises from their own practical and educational journey in sport management, and as members of numerous sport boards. From this, the researchers drew on two major governance concepts that, for them, inform the theoretical foundations of governance practice, “performance” and “conformance” (Davis & Schoorman, 1997; Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2005). Performance is understood to be the forward-looking, strategic role of the board, while conformance is about the monitoring role of the board.

“So there is was ... things had changed and the role of the directors had changed from what they’d always known it to be to, to being more of a strategic role but we hadn’t quite defined what the strategic role was” (Interviewee, 11 May, 2010). This quote is a representation of how directors of an international sport governing body appeared to be grappling with the transition from amateur practice to a more professionalised approach and what that might mean for the evolving role of a sport board. In addition to the above, major themes and sub-themes to emerge from the interviews included: international governance structures; stakeholder relationships; board dynamics; shared leadership; chair/CEO relationships; and board involvement in strategy.

In drawing on the philosophy of hermeneutics, “which recognises that one can only understand the experience of others through the lens of one’s own historical being in the world” (Smyth, 2007, p. 20), the researchers will engage the interpretative

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lens to present interview findings in relation to current theory. In their quest for a deeper understanding of international sport governance theory and practice, the researchers will also raise questions about the future of sport governance research and practice.