A Scoping Review of Sport Related Institutional Research

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Institutional approaches are a prominent theoretical perspective within sport management and related literatures (e.g., sport sociology, sport history). However, the collective utility of research that have utilized institutional approaches has not thoroughly been synthesized. Taking up Weed’s (2005) call for further synthesis of knowledge within sport related studies (and particularly sport management), we feel it is an appropriate time to attempt a systematic synthesis of sport related studies that have utilized institutional theoretical approaches. Nearly ten years after Washington and Patterson’s (2011) narrative review of the utilization of institutional approaches within sport related studies, we extend their analysis by empirically examining the current state of institutional research in sport. Consequently, we aim to answer the following question, how has institutional theory been employed within sport related studies?

Methodologically, the research team took a broad and inclusive approach, based on a scoping review protocol design which employed Lavac et al.’s (2010) six stages: (1) identifying the research question; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data; (5) collating, summarising, and reporting the results; (6) consultation. To identify relevant studies the research team searched three databases (EBSCOHost SPORTDiscus, ProQuest, and Web of Science) with the broad search terms “institution*” and “sport*”. The search was limited to peer-reviewed, English language journal articles to August 2019. After duplicates were removed the initial search resulted in 1998 citations. The research team developed a range of inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g., normative vs theoretical usage of institutional terminology as derived from Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby, 2008) to identify and select relevant studies. Preliminary extraction variables for analysing the collected articles include: author(s); year of publication; journal; research setting (geography); empirical/non-empirical; empirical context; method; methodology; and theory type. At the time of writing the research team was iteratively moving between identification and selection of relevant articles.

Whilst it is too early to present preliminary findings, our initial observations of the data may be illustrative. The frequency of institutional research seems to be increasing. Although early works within sport management predominately grew out of the University of Alberta group of scholars (e.g., Slack et al.), subsequent developments have seen broad uptake of institutional concepts. The application of institutional approaches also continues to widen across a range of research contexts (e.g. national/provincial sport organizations, governing bodies/agencies, and mega-events). The amount of time between theoretical development in management literatures and adoption/translation/extension in sport related literature seems to be shortening (e.g., uptake of institutional isomorphism vs institutional work). Finally, our early observations indicate relative differences in the adoption of institutional approaches between sport related disciplines, for example sport management (logics, isomorphism, and work studies), sport sociology (field studies) and sport history (institutionalisation/legitimacy studies). Further analysis will need to be conducted to determine whether these initial observations hold. Nevertheless, as the sport management field reaches its adolescence (relative to other academic fields), synthesising one of our main theoretical perspectives will only strengthen our collective ability to engage with, and substantively add to, the institutional discourse.