What Are We Even Talking About Here? A Critical Analysis of the Use of Institutional Theory in Sport Management Research

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In his Ziegler lecture, Chalip (2006) argued for the development of sport-based theory to position sport management as a distinct academic discipline. This may entail the development of new theory drawn from sport or the extension of established theory by demonstrating the uniqueness of sport contexts. Chalip’s (2006) thesis is particularly relevant for those studying institutional theory within sport management. Institutional theory has been an important theory in sport management with scholars invoking various tenets to understand sport phenomena (Washington & Patterson, 2011). However, Washington and Patterson (2011) questioned if institutional theory was actually being advanced by scholars in the sport management field. In fact, they offered the following scathing assessment, "A crude summary of the above research on institutional theory and sport could argue that all the research has done is demonstrate that the sport field operates under institutional pressures similar to other industries. Thus, while this might advance the scope and reach of institutional theory, it does not really extend the theory." (Washington & Patterson, 2011, pp. 8-9)

Since Washington and Patterson’s review, institutional theory has remained relevant for understanding sport and the organizations that operate in the field, but it is fair to question if sport has become relevant for developing new understandings for institutional theory.

The purpose of this presentation is to critically assess the implementation of institutional theory in sport management research. Specifically, we focus on the near decade of research following Washington and Patterson’s (2011) review of institutional theory in sport management. Whereas we highlight new trends of institutional theory in the field, such as institutional work (e.g. Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Stevens, in press; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Nite, 2017), legitimacy (e.g. Hemme & Morais, 2019; Sam & Ronglan, 2018, Stenling & Sam, 2017), and policy and governance (e.g. Heinze & Lu, 2017; Lu & Heinze, in press; Nite et al., 2018; Nite & Washington, 2017), we also offer insights into some conceptual challenges facing sport management scholars. We argue the importance of conceptual clarity for sport management scholars invoking institutional theory. That is, we suggest that many have treated the constructs of institutionalism as paradigms rather than as theoretical frameworks to be tested or predictive, which limits the advancement of institutional theory in the field of sport management.

Further, we contend that sport scholars should improve at providing evidence for institutionalization. We recognized that sport management scholars often infer the effects of institutions within sport contexts rather than showing how social processes, structures, and power structures have become engrained and taken for granted. Finally, we advocate that scholars should continue modernizing their conceptualizations. Importantly, the developing institutional work framework requires scholars to move beyond focusing on engrained structures and re-engage embedded agency, power, and interests within institutions (see Battilana, 2006; Hampel et al., 2017; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).