

Challenges in Multiple Cross-Sector Partnerships

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This research examines challenges associated with partnerships among a group of cross-sector organizations. The context for this study is a nonprofit organization in Canada's sport system and its numerous partners in public, nonprofit, and commercial sectors. The results reveal challenges in the areas of structure and strategy. Specifically, data uncover structural challenges with respect to problems with governance, roles, and responsibilities guiding the partnerships and with the complexity of partnership forms and structures. The data also uncover strategic challenges, in light of the focus on competition versus collaboration among various partners and the changes in missions and objectives through the duration of the relationship. The results and implications for nonprofit organizations involved in multiple cross-sector partnerships are discussed.

Keywords: *cross-sector partnership; sport organizations; structural and strategic challenges*

Huxham and Macdonald (1992) wrote, "There is a fine balance to be struck between gaining the benefits of collaborating and making the situation worse" (p. 50). This balance between gaining the benefits and avoiding the disadvantages of collaborating is characteristic of most types of partnerships. With the high failure rate of partnerships (Anderson & Jap, 2005; Mohr & Spekman, 1994), this tenuous balance needs to be understood and managed. A number of theorists have pointed to challenges associated with same-sector or cross-sector partnerships in the public, nonprofit, and commercial sectors (Anderson & Jap, 2005; Hodge & Greve, 2005; Parise & Casher, 2003; Suen, 2005). These challenges have been attributed to factors such as environmental constraints; diversity in organizational aims; barriers in communication; and difficulties in developing joint modes of operating, managing perceived power imbalances, building trust, and managing the logistics of working with geographically dispersed partners. Organizations need to think differently about their partnerships because there is a growing dependence on multiple partners from across sectors. As explained by Parise and Casher (2003), "Because most business strategies include more than one alliance, success often depends on how the whole collection of alliances fit together" (p. 26).

Although a great deal has been written on within-sector collaboration and a growing body of work has examined cross-sector partnerships (i.e., public-nonprofit, nonprofit-commercial, and public-commercial), much less has been written on multiple cross-sector partnerships involving the complex interchange of organizations from public, nonprofit, and commercial sectors (García-Canal, Valdéz-Llaneza, & Ariño, 2003; Hodge & Greve, 2005; Smith, Carroll, & Ashford, 1995). To this end, the purpose of this study was to examine the organizational-level challenges associated with a focal nonprofit organization's interaction with multiple partners across different sectors. More specifically, this article uncovered challenges related to structural and strategic factors involved in the multiple cross-sector partnerships of one nonprofit Canadian sport organization.

In Canada, the high-performance sport system offers a rich site to examine the challenges in managing cross-sector partnerships, for several reasons. First, the majority of organizations in this system are nonprofit entities that have experienced a shift in the level of financial and organizational support provided to them by the federal government. This shift has led to the establishment of multiple cross-sector partnerships as a strategy to offer comprehensive support and resources for Olympic-level athletes and coaches. Second, the system is comprised of organizational stakeholders from several sectors, including all levels of government (federal, provincial, and local), nonprofit national sport federations (e.g., Athletics Canada, Canada Basketball, Gymnastics Canada), and multisport organizations (e.g., Canadian Olympic Committee, Commonwealth Games Canada), as well as commercial organizations, including professional sports, sporting goods manufacturers and retailers, corporate sponsors, and the media.

Nonprofit organizations are a focal point in the delivery of sport programs and services in Canada (i.e., from the sandbox to the podium).¹ In light of the recent funding changes in Canada's sport system, executives in these nonprofit organizations have faced financial challenges, pressures for greater accountability, and increased concerns for their athletes to excel in international competitions (Mills, 1998; Priestner Allinger & Allinger, 2004; Robertson, 2005). Partnership as a strategy to deal with these pressures is relatively new for sport organizations (Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004; Noé, 1991; Thibault & Harvey, 1997; Vail, 1994), and consequently, sport leaders and managers may lack the skills to identify, establish, and manage these partnerships effectively. Canadian sport organizations have traditionally relied on one source of funding for their livelihood (i.e., the federal government), and this funding support has been reduced during the past several years (Mills, 1998; Thibault & Babiak, 2005), but the government is still a strong force in the decision making and strategy development of organizations in the sport system. As a result, sport organizations face increasing pressures to partner with multiple organizations across different sectors (public, nonprofit, and commercial). Thus, this context provides us with an opportunity to contribute to the literature by examining organizational-level challenges associated with developing and maintaining multiple cross-sector partnerships and how these challenges are interpreted and managed by those involved.

Given the confusing nature of different forms of interorganizational relationships, for the purpose of this study, we are using Oppen, Sack, and Wegener's (2005) interpretation of partnerships. According to those authors, cross-sector partnerships have specific characteristics.

First, formal autonomous actors, each with his, her, or its own objectives and resources, decide whether they wish to provide certain services in exchange with other actors. Second, interactions between the participants are framed by specific forms of organization—whether contractual or rather informal—and are coupled by virtue of the resources. Complementary resources are combined to serve jointly defined functions. Third, what sets intersectorial cooperation apart is that the participating actors are tied into different institutional arrangements roughly described by the generic terms 'government', 'market', and 'society'. The actions of the cooperating actors are thus determined and guided by different rules and differing basic convictions. (p. 270)

Oppen et al. (2005) explain that intersectorial partnerships are different from intrasectorial partnerships, and given this definition, we feel it is suitable as a point of reference for the types of relationships we explore in this study. Oppen et al. have explained that cooperating with organizations from different sectors can lead to "relatively unstable joint coordination and coupling of resources" (p. 270) relative to partnerships between same-sector organizations. In this article, we are using the generic term *partnership* to include different forms of relationships (e.g., joint ventures, collaborations, sponsorships, cooperation, and alliances), although we recognize that different forms of relationships exist and influence partnership dynamics.

Review of Literature

For nonprofit organizations, multiple cross-sector partnerships are becoming more important than ever. As noted by Linden (2002), "growing numbers of nonprofit agencies are learning to collaborate with corporations . . . by offering some of their social assets for the training, technology, and funds that companies are willing to spend in exchange for those assets" (pp. 5-6). Many researchers who have explored partnerships in the nonprofit sector have suggested that the nature of these partnerships is complex because of the environmental challenges and the diversity of partners that are available within and across sectors (Guo & Acar, 2005; Parker & Selsky, 2004; Provan, Isett, & Milward, 2004; Sanyal, 2006). The complexity evident in these types of partnerships is often observable in performance measures that are unclear, in empirical measurement of goals, in the need to comply with government regulations, and in the nature of funding, which is often fragmented, with financial capital coming from several different sources (Alexander, 1998). These factors make the management of multiple cross-sector partnerships challenging. In addition, the location of the organization within competing sectors (e.g., public,

commercial, and other nonprofit) often pulls nonprofit organizations between institutional spheres, with the realm of responsibility for societal concerns becoming more ambiguous (Alexander, 1998). As partners, organizations in these different sectors often have specific managerial values, beliefs, and expectations that may end up pulling a nonprofit organization in potentially incompatible directions.

As a result of their perceived benefits, partnerships are evident in practice and reflected in the academic literature as a means of reducing uncertainty, acquiring resources, and solving organizational problems. It is often assumed that stakeholders collaborate voluntarily, sharing common goals and equal power (Hardy & Phillips, 1998). In their study of cross-sector partnerships within the U.K. refugee system, Hardy and Phillips (1998), however, maintained that several issues might impair partnerships, including exploitation, repression, questionable management practices, unfairness, and asymmetrical power relations. Although organizations enter into partnerships to capitalize on opportunity and reduce uncertainty, factors such as the loss of autonomy in decision making, power, conflict, and control may create challenges and raise additional uncertainties. Ironically, these issues are often neglected in the literature on multiple partnerships and cross-sector partnerships (Child & Faulkner, 1998; Gray, 1989; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Linden, 2002; Oliver, 1990; Park, 1996). In the context of cross-sector partnerships, Andreasen (1996) identified further consequences associated with the ineffective management of these partnerships, including wasted resources (invested time and effort, which may compromise other activities), loss of organizational flexibility (partners may impose restrictions and limitations), and structural atrophy (a heavy reliance on one partner or investments of time and energy in maintaining one relationship instead of dedicating energies to exploring the potential of alternative partners). Along similar lines, Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) suggested that partnerships may prevent managers from taking an initiative in developing essential organizational skills and capabilities because their partners already have them, thereby lulling the managers into a state of complacency. Further compounding these challenges, the issues of self-interest and competition play a role in contributing to tensions in the coordination of multiple cross-sector partnerships.

In addressing the purpose of this study, we relied on the work of several researchers to address challenges in multiple cross-sector partnerships involving a nonprofit sport organization as the entity that coordinates the actions of its partners. We now turn our attention to a review of this relevant literature. Although an important segment of the literature on dyadic, multiple, or cross-sector partnerships emphasizes the merits and benefits of organizations' collaborating (Child & Faulkner, 1998; Doz & Hamel, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Linden, 2002), an increasing number of studies warn leaders and managers about the complexities and difficulties of these types of organizational partnerships (Frisby et al., 2004; Hodge & Greve, 2005; Huxham, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 2000a; Provan et al., 2004; Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000).

In their empirical study of partnerships in natural resources and conservation nonprofit organizations, Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) argued that it is important

to understand the difficulties facing the development of multiple and cross-sector partnerships and to provide insight into how these challenges have been overcome in practice by leaders and managers. By doing so, “better bridges can be built that are grounded in the hard work and experiences of others” (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000, p. 47). The authors discussed the existence of barriers or obstacles in effective multiple cross-sector partnerships. These barriers included conflicting goals and missions, lack of opportunity or incentive to collaborate, inflexible policies and procedures that do not support the partnership, constrained resources, mistrust, group attitudes about each other that may not be accurate, different organizational norms and culture, and lack of support or commitment to the partnership.

Frisby et al.’s (2004) study of cross-sector partnerships between Canadian local governments in sport and recreation departments and nonprofit and commercial organizations revealed that the management function of partnerships was often neglected by organizational leaders. The authors found that cross-sector partnerships were generally undermanaged and that as a result these partnerships were plagued with problems of inadequate managerial structures and inadequate managerial processes. Inadequate managerial structures included lack of clear planning and policy guidelines, unclear roles and reporting channels, and insufficient human resources. Inadequate managerial processes included insufficient training, insufficient time devoted to partnerships, difficulties negotiating competing values, lack of communication, poor coordination, insufficient supervision, lack of evaluation, and a lack of partnership retention and termination strategies.

As challenges to cross-sector partnerships, several researchers have identified differences in goals and objectives; in language; and in procedures, culture and power (Coulson, 2005; Huxham, 1996; Smith et al., 1995). According to Huxham (1996), these challenges led to organizations’ not realizing their full collaborative advantage. On the issue of differing values between partnering organizations across sectors, Carroll and Steane (2000) proposed the following explanation:

Partnerships between business, government and non-profits can be problematic when values clash. . . . [V]alues or ideology can influence motivations, beliefs, norms of behaviour, and new expectations in managing and delivering a service. In some partnerships, this may take the form of more conscious and overt consideration of the intangibles. For others, priorities regarding efficiencies and transparency may challenge non-profit partners to engage [in] management practices more aligned with the corporate world. (p. 50)

On the topic of multiple partnerships, Coulson (2005) argued that “excessive numbers of partnerships create problems of accountability and create ambiguities about who is responsible for what. Partnerships are a challenge— certainly not a panacea” (p. 155). According to García-Canal et al. (2003), managing multiple partnerships is more complex than managing dyadic relationships for two reasons: “There are fewer incentives to behave cooperatively . . . [and] the incentives for free-riding

behavior are greater when partners are more numerous” (p. 746). The authors explain that these problems can be addressed by creating formal control mechanisms and by encouraging what they call “relational investments”—relationship building involving an ongoing process of negotiation, commitment, and execution.

The issue of a competitive–collaborative dichotomy, in which an organization simultaneously experiences both facilitating and constraining interdependencies (García-Canal et al., 2003; Parise & Casher, 2003), is also a challenge that merits further discussion. Pressures to form partnerships by external agencies (e.g., government) and efforts to be more accountable, efficient, cost conscious, and professional have led organizations to engage in partnerships. At the same time, however, the competitive nature of acquiring scarce resources while seeking credibility and legitimacy can also introduce tensions when collaborating organizations must vie for these resources. Organizational-level aspects of partnership management may provide insights into how firms interact with multiple cross-sector partners and how political activities are infused within them. The competitive and collaborative nature of all partnerships—particularly within-sector alliances (e.g., between two or more nonprofit organizations or between two or more corporate firms) has been identified by authors such as Austin (2000), Kanter (1994), and Huxham and Vangen (2000b). These authors claim that dual pressures often create tensions within (because of internal struggles related to a reluctance to sacrifice autonomy) and between firms (because of a desire to gain relative power over others and to secure a prime position within their general organizational domain; Wilson, 1992). Many of these tensions are founded on the premise that partnerships are not a naturally occurring business phenomenon; that is, managers do not want to depend on others or share in decision-making activities between organizations (Spekman, Forbes, Isabella, & MacAvoy, 1998). Furthermore, scholars (Doz & Hamel, 1998; Provan et al., 2004; Roussin Isett & Provan, 2005; Winkler, 2006) have suggested that the coordination of multiple partners with the purpose of achieving common goals is difficult because individual and group interests are often pursued over organizational or broader network interests and because of the high degree of managerial complexity involved in the process.

We are proposing to contribute to the literature on multiple and cross-sector partnerships by addressing these concepts collectively and by addressing the challenges organizations face as they undertake partnerships with several organizations concurrently from different sectors. In the following section, we present the research methods we carried out to address multiple cross-sector partnerships in the case study of a nonprofit organization.

Research Method

In this study, multiple cross-sector partnerships were examined between a focal organization² and its partners in the public, nonprofit, and commercial sectors. To

uncover challenges inherent in multiple cross-sector partnerships, a qualitative research approach was selected to incorporate quality, depth, and richness in the data.

Research Context

The site for this study was a Canadian Sport Centre³ identified hereafter as CSC. There are eight other CSCs that have been created to provide centralized programs and services to Olympic-level (elite) athletes and coaches. The structure of the partnerships for all CSCs includes (a) *government partners* (that provide financial support), including Sport Canada (federal government) and the provincial government in which the CSC operates; (b) *nonprofit partners* (that provide some funding and carry out programs and services) such as the Coaching Association of Canada, the Canadian Olympic Committee, Legacy Organization (a pseudonym), a university, and national sport federations; and (c) *corporate partners* (commercial organizations operating in different businesses; e.g., energy production, pharmaceuticals, and financial services).

Data Collection

The study design incorporated two main approaches to evidence gathering: (a) document analysis and (b) semistructured interviews. In total, 110 organizational documents dating back to the inception of the CSC under examination (1994) were reviewed and analyzed.⁴ As well, 28 semistructured interviews were conducted with CSC staff and partners who were identified as the primary individuals involved in forming and managing the partnership. Data were gathered from various individuals, including members of the core management team and executive board at the CSC as well as a group of senior executives (i.e., CEOs, executive directors, vice presidents) in 14 of the partnering organizations.⁵ Participant numbers, partner type, and characteristics of the general roles and responsibilities are provided in Table 1.

Procedure

Interviews explored participants' strategies, interests, perceptions, personal experiences, and expectations regarding their partnerships. Our intent was not to assume that particular partnerships might exhibit particular challenges. Informants were encouraged to discuss the benefits, challenges, and tensions experienced in their own contexts and were probed for specific meanings and examples whenever possible. Questions covered relevant areas, such as what problems managers might expect to address at the onset of a partnership, the potential causes of conflict during the formation of this partnership (i.e., managerial ideology, uncooperativeness, lack of information, value dissonance), and ways they had overcome these conflicts. In addition, questions were posed related to informants' (and their organizations') willingness to

Table 1
Breakdown of Informant Number, Role, and Relationship Type

Role	Interviews ^a	How Relationship Is Defined or Supported
Canadian Sport Centre staff or board	7 (12)	Responsible for delivery of programs or services to eligible high-performance athletes; manage multiple cross-sector partnerships
Government partners	2 (2)	Common objectives or interests—financial
Nonprofit partners	15 (27)	Programming and service delivery; coordination of services across country or resource sharing
Corporate partners	4 (8)	Community involvement—financial or in-kind
Total number of interviews	28	

a. Numbers in parentheses reflects total number of possible informants or organizations from which to select; e.g., 15 nonprofit partners were interviewed out of 27 nonprofit partner organizations in total.

engage in partnerships and their perceptions of possible benefits of multiple cross-sector partnerships. The length of each interview ranged from 1 to 2 hours.

Data Coding and Analysis

The first stage of data analysis included the examination of all documents for any reference to, or statement made about, any partnership (e.g., alliance, cooperation, collaboration, network, partner, sponsor, or supporter). All passages relating to any type of interaction between or among organizations were highlighted and transcribed into a computer file, assigned to ATLAS.ti (qualitative data analysis software), and subsequently treated in the same manner as the interview transcripts. Specifically for this study, documents were assessed for commentary regarding the process of partnership formation and management, the negotiations that occurred at the outset, and any difficulties encountered in this process. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using ATLAS.ti as well. Analysis of the data enabled identification, expression, and sense making of the informants' responses and the content of documents.⁶

Results

In the following paragraphs, the results of this research are presented. From the interview transcripts and the documents analyzed, two categories of multiple cross-sector partnership challenges were evident in the results: structural and strategic. Under structural challenges, two areas of concern were identified: (a) governance, roles, and responsibilities and (b) the complexity of partnership forms. Two issues were also raised under strategic challenges: (a) focus on competition versus collaboration and (b) changing missions and objectives. A summary of the results is presented in

Table 2. The table presents sample representative quotations regarding structural and strategic challenges per sector (public, nonprofit, and commercial) and provides quantitative data to complement the qualitative results (i.e., number of times the category appears in the data and the percentage of interviewees who identified and discussed the category).

Structural Challenges

A number of structural challenges in the multiple cross-sector partnerships in this case became evident as the data were analyzed. Two structural challenges were of primary concern: challenges with governance, roles, and responsibilities and the complexity of partnership forms and structures evident in the group of collaborating organizations.

Governance, roles, and responsibilities in the partnerships were mentioned a total of 157 times in the data by 86% of the interviewees. This theme encompassed the extent to which partnerships were formalized with written rules, policies and procedures; the degree to which roles in the relationship were clearly defined (i.e., who does what); and who was responsible for overseeing major decisions in the relationship. Nonprofit partners and members of the CSC had the most concerns (i.e., number of responses) on this issue, although all government and corporate partners were represented in this category. For members of the CSC, this issue was of particular concern because they were overseeing the multiple cross-sector partnerships. CSC interviewees felt that there were often challenges in identifying who should do what in the partnership, who should have the responsibility for particular areas, and who should have the responsibility for maintaining or managing the relationships. As a result, some felt that the efficiencies sought by the partnerships in the first place might be compromised by not dealing with establishing governance, roles, and responsibilities among several partners from different sectors. Government representatives suggested that they had to deal with challenges by representing larger entities in the partnership (i.e., provincial or federal governments) and having to consult with their organization's executives, which slowed down the decision-making process on many issues involving the governance and management of the multiple cross-sector partnerships. Nonprofit partners raised concerns about a lack of efficiency resulting in unclear roles and responsibilities in the relationships. And with the growing number of relationships established by the CSC, corporate partners suggested that challenges existed because of lack of human resources to accomplish all of the duties necessary to sustain these partnerships. One of the main challenges addressed by partners in all sectors, including CSC members, was the unclear responsibilities for the partnerships, or who was accountable for managing, evaluating, and measuring outcomes (organizational and system wide).

Another structural challenge identified in the data was the complexity of multiple cross-sector partnership forms and structures. This challenge was mentioned a total

(text continues on p. 134)

Table 2
Themes Identified Regarding Challenges in Multiple Cross-Sector Partnerships

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
Structural challenges				
(a) Problems with governance, roles, or responsibilities guiding relationship Canadian Sport Centre	“There is a need for things to change to become more formalized—if I get hit by a bus, the organization will suffer.”	157	86	Challenges in identifying who does what in relationship Decision-making power questioned. Individuals who serve as ‘convenors’ shoulder burden of maintaining relationship.
Government partners	“We write down a few things and away we go. We don’t have a lot of paperwork, or rules or regulations.” “It hasn’t been fully thought through. That is one of the challenges of partnerships—how far joint decision making will go, and how far it won’t go.”	58 17	71 100	Delays in achieving objectives. Efficiency is compromised because it takes time to figure out governance, roles, and responsibilities. Oversight—who is responsible for evaluating and measuring outcomes (organizational and systemwide)—is unclear. Nonprofit and government representatives of partnership are not ultimate decision makers—need to consult with their organization’s executives and boards—thereby delaying the decision-making process.
Nonprofit partners	“There are no policies, stable arrangements, or systems to direct our interactions.” “The national marketing proposal is an example of something that should have	67	93	

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
	<p>been signed off on from all of us, but hasn't yet."</p> <p>"We have to formalize things better—eight of us are now doing things very independently, which isn't efficient, but there doesn't seem to be a lot of willingness or eagerness for us to do that."</p> <p>"No contracts. We wanted to keep things simple without a whole lot of bureaucracy."</p> <p>"It can be inefficient because the CSC doesn't have enough staff to get us information in a timely manner."</p>	15	100	
Corporate partners				
(b) Complexity of partnership forms and structures Canadian Sport Centre	<p>"There is really a wide scope of relationships in our network. Some of them can simply be passing over of a cheque, but others want to get more involved."</p> <p>"There's a complex web—in some cases, we have ten different levels of partnership that we have to work with."</p>	274	96	Managing different partner forms requires different skills and knowledge. Structures and systems need to be set up to address different forms of relationships (speak different languages, have different expectations, goals and outcomes). Geographic dispersion of partners also requires different structures and

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Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
Government partners	<p>“The partnership operates slightly differently based on its form and the objectives of the relationship.”</p> <p>“Each of the founding partners has a representative on the board of the CSC to retain the interplay of the development of the board and the evolution and growth of its mandate.”</p>	37	100	<p>systems to serve partners across the country.</p> <p>Varying views on what relationships between organizations are leads to ineffective communication, misplaced expectations, and frustrations with power and decision making.</p>
Nonprofit partners	<p>“I discovered that this is a huge country and what worked in one location regarding the partnership form might not work in another.”</p> <p>“There is an unplanned, willy-nilly need to say that you have a partnership with somebody. We are trying to overpartner—in many cases, there is no common ground.”</p> <p>“We have a lot of joint ventures and strategic investments. I don’t think we have very many partnerships in the true sense of the word.”</p>	138	100	

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
	<p>“We have a very close partnership with the CSC, but others, like the Canadian Olympic Committee and Sport Canada, are more at arm’s length.”</p> <p>“The relationship between the CSC and Sport Canada [federal government] is claimed to be a partnership, but I don’t think that’s true as Sport Canada is the one with the money and the CSCs are trying to dance to their tune to max out the money they can get.”</p>	15	75	
Corporate partners	<p>“This is more of a donor type of relationship, a support program for straight philanthropy to charity.”</p> <p>“It isn’t exactly a partnership, but more of a cause I want to be involved with.”</p>	352	100	Although seemingly collaborating, many organizations involved in the system are competing on different levels for resources (money, athletes, coaches) and legitimacy.
STRATEGIC CHALLENGES		119	100	Violates perceived “true spirit” of collaboration.
(a) Focus on competition versus collaboration	<p>“We have had challenges in collaborating because we worry about protecting our own turf.”</p> <p>“The system has made us competitive because only X</p>			
Canadian Sport Centre				

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Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
	<p>number of sports can be funded. I'm forced to compete with you rather than work with you.”</p> <p>“People see the CSCs as competition for government and corporate money. This makes it difficult to collaborate.”</p>			
Government partners	<p>“Even though we're cooperating, everyone looks at their own organization and feels like they've got to protect their empire.”</p>	37	100	<p>Competition and tensions between regional interests—emphasizing sport development and participation and national interests—focused on high performance and winning.</p> <p>Confusion for corporate partners with many sport entities competing for corporate funding and support.</p>
Nonprofit partners	<p>“The CSCs across the country are all in competition with each other for the pool of athletes and sports available. It really stresses the partnership.”</p> <p>“The government wants more CSCs, but we don't because it will mean watering down the product, and a smaller resource pool available to us.”</p> <p>“There are tensions between regional interests and national interests, with national interests trying to look at the overall</p>	177	100	

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
Corporate partners	<p>importance of CSCs and their contribution to international success and regional interests who are more focused on developmental issues or what is best for their region.”</p> <p>“It is confusing to be on the business side of this when you’ve got Paralympics [Canadian Paralympic Committee—a nonprofit sport organization] doing this and the CSC doing something else. There is a lot of competition for corporate support.”</p>	19	100	
(b) Changing mission and objectives Canadian Sport Centre	<p>“We’re at a critical point in our evolution. Everyone thinks we should have more CSCs and each one should get the same amount of money. In my mind, we can’t do that—that would put us on the verge of crumbling. The only way that they can give money to other CSCs is by taking it from the existing CSCs.”</p>	37	100	<p>Some collaborations call for linking with partners who may have different objectives and goals (i.e., high performance vs. sport for all). Further, throughout the evolution of the relationship, the mission and objectives shifted to focus on different elements (i.e., concentrating services in key locations vs. expanding opportunities to service athletes in all provinces throughout country). These changes and shifts created tensions, feelings of being threatened,</p>

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Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
Government partners	<p>“Some of the government’s social values come into conflict with high-performance goals.”</p> <p>“As a founding organization in the project, we are very concerned about the change in focus to equity versus high performance because we’ve laid some groundwork that we don’t want to destroy.”</p>	20	100	and uncertainties regarding resource acquisition, as well as stability of system if more CSCs were created.
Nonprofit partners	<p>“I think there are tensions because the larger CSCs don’t believe that smaller and newer CSCs should be created. They feel it’s not in line with the original purpose of the endeavor.”</p> <p>“I don’t agree with the CSC’s definition of excellence (i.e., greater resources on fewer athletes). There are also inconsistencies that contradict their definition of excellence (e.g., funding athletes of non-Olympic sports).”</p> <p>“Many people feel that the government has a desire for</p>	92	94	

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Table 2 (continued)

Category name or theme	Sample Representative Quotations	Number of times category appears in data ^a	Percentage of Interviewees Represented in Category ^b	Consequences
Corporate partners	<p>more CSCs and has committed money to them. So there has been an unexpected growth in the number of CSCs without consensus by other partners that this growth is (a) feasible and (b) logical.”</p> <p>“We want to support Olympic athletes for the benefits it can bring to our organization, like being associated with excellence and having an athlete come to speak to our employees and their kids.”</p>	7	50	

Note: CSC = Canadian Sport Centre.

a. Number of times category/theme appears in data = number of total quotations.

b. Percentage of interviewees represented in category or theme = number of respondents per sector (e.g., in CSC there were seven respondents in total; if two individuals discussed an issue, this would indicate 29% of respondents).

of 274 times in the interview and document data. This theme was related to issues of the constitution and organization of the partnerships across sectors. In particular, this theme encompassed aspects of the complexity of managing different types of partnerships (e.g., funding relationships, philanthropic partnerships, strategic alliances, program-oriented relationships) that existed in this group of collaborating organizations. Almost all (96%) of the interviewees suggested that this was a major challenge in these cross-sector partnerships. For CSC members, different partner forms required different skills and knowledge to be able to address each partner's needs. It also meant that structures and systems needed to be set up to address different forms of partnerships (which speak different 'business' languages and have different expectations, goals, and values). The geographic dispersion of multiple cross-sector partners also required different structures and systems to allow the CSC to collaborate with partners across the country, such as different forms of communication and different avenues for providing programs and services. For government partners, who provided more than 40% of the funding for the CSC (Canadian Sport Centre (City), 2005), there were varying perceptions of the nature of the partnership (i.e., funding/donor relationship or a sponsorship), which led to difficulties in communication, misplaced expectations, and frustrations with power and decision making. For nonprofit partners, a main challenge was the tremendous growth and interest in (primarily sport) organizations focused on forming relationships with the CSC. This introduced organizational and network dynamics, including lack of common ground for partnerships as well as increased competition for scarce resources (such as money, athletes, coaches, and facilities). Also, for corporate partners, the complexity of partnership forms was identified as an issue in that typical corporate expectations of what constituted a partnership were often not what partners from other sectors expected. For instance, corporate partners felt that their involvement with the CSC satisfied a philanthropic or charitable aspect of their business while members of the CSC expected corporate partners to play a more strategic and involved role in the CSC's efforts.

Strategic Challenges

A number of strategic challenges also faced multiple cross-sector organizations working together with the CSC. The challenge of focusing on competition versus collaboration was mentioned by 100% of the interviewees. This challenge received 352 mentions in the data (interviews and documents), more than any other theme on partnership challenges identified in the data. This was a primary concern for CSC and nonprofit respondents because although seemingly collaborating, many organizations involved in the system were competing on different levels for resources (money or other resources, such as athletes and coaches), legitimacy, or power. For many, this competition violated the perceived "true spirit" of collaboration and led to tension and frustration between partners. The competition–collaboration dichotomy manifested itself in a

number of ways. For instance, there were tensions between regional interests, some (at the provincial level) of whom were focused on sport development and participation and others with national interests who were wholly focused on high performance and winning (i.e., medal performance). This aspect of competition focused on the increase in the number of CSCs created across the country during the time our research was conducted. This tension had implications for multiple partners because, depending on which decisions were made, resources would be allocated to different interests. Another example of the tensions between a focus on competing and a focus on collaborating also had to do with resources and the confusion they caused corporate partners, who often had many sport organizations simultaneously lobbying for their funding dollars and support.

The final strategic challenge faced by organizations involved in these multiple cross-sector partnerships was the changing missions and objectives of the organizations as the relationships evolved. This challenge received 156 mentions from interviewees in the study, with all CSC and government partners identifying it as a major concern and 94% of nonprofit partners indicating that it was an issue for them. In addition, 50% of corporate partners raised it as a concern in their relationships. This theme encompassed tensions that developed in the relationship when the goals of the partnership changed over time to focus on differing interests in terms of where resources should be invested (i.e., high performance vs. sport for all). Further, throughout the evolution of the relationship, the mission and objectives shifted to focus on different elements (i.e., focus on concentrating services in key locations vs. expanding opportunities to service athletes in all provinces throughout the country). Historically, the Canadian federal government has allocated resources to sport organizations on the basis of differing priorities. For instance, in the few years before Olympic Games are held, the federal government has increased financial support to high-performance (Olympic) athletes (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). At other times, the government's focus has been on encouraging mass participation and grassroots development of sport. CSC interviewees felt their organization and its resources were threatened by shifts in this focus as exemplified in the growth of the number of CSCs across the country which would provide similar programs and services to support athletes and coaches (a more equitable distribution of the government's resources). With new centers created, this CSC's own financial base, as well as its athlete and coach base, was at risk of being reduced. These changes would have shifted the balance of power, not only within the group of partnering organizations, but in the sport system in Canada. Nonprofit partners suggested that some of these changes have taken place without consultation and input from groups who might be affected. Finally, corporate partners spoke about the confusion these shifts in emphasis caused for them because they were more interested in being involved with high-profile (Olympic) athletes who might bring positive attention to their organization and provide benefit to their employees. Overall, these changes in mission and objectives of the partnership created tensions and feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty

regarding resource acquisition, as well as concerns for stability of the sport system as more CSCs were being created.

Discussion

The study presented here has analyzed the challenges of multiple cross-sector partnerships at the organizational level of analysis. The results offer insights into barriers to the management of multiple cross-sector partnerships. As expected, an organization is more likely to achieve its goals in a dyadic partnership than in a partnership involving multiple organizations. As García-Canal et al. (2003) found, there are fewer interests to be harmonized in two-way alliances than in multiple cross-sector partnerships. The results revealed the presence of structural and strategic challenges in the management of multiple cross-sector partnerships of a focal sport organization.

With respect to structural challenges, governance, roles, and responsibilities, as well as complexity of partnership forms, the work of Frisby et al. (2004) on under-managed partnerships in local governments' sport and leisure services provides support for our results. The authors found that the organizations involved in their study "lacked the capacity to effectively manage the numerous and complex partnerships" (p. 123). Furthermore, Frisby et al. noted "that developing partnership management plans that clearly stipulate roles, expectations, reporting mechanisms and policies are also needed to build capacity" (p. 123). In our study, extensive formalization of policies to guide the multiple cross-sector partnerships were not well developed. Although the focal organization, the CSC, is the logical choice for the development of these partnership policies and guidelines, its executives may not have had the necessary resources to accomplish this. As pointed out by García-Canal et al. (2003), the presence of a dominant partner facilitates decision making and the coordination of work. In our case, however, it was difficult to distinguish who was the dominant partner—was it the CSC, which coordinated the partners to provide programs and services, or the government, which provided the lion's share of funding and had power in resource allocation? Further, cross-sector ambiguity (Lewis, 1998; Smith et al., 1995) confused expectations among partners and created management tensions with respect to roles and responsibilities and partnership governance.

Although the complexity of partnership forms and the various interpretations of what a partnership is may not result in the demise of the relationship, recognizing the different forms and structures of relationships that exist is of particular importance for the organizations involved (Smith et al., 1995; Wood & Gray, 1991). Having a clear understanding and knowledge of how multiple cross-sector partners view their relationship does have implications for its effective operation; such an understanding allows managers to make more-informed choices about their partnering strategies (García-Canal et al., 2003). The divergence of perceptions regarding the complexity of partnership forms and structures illustrated in this case study is typical of the

partnerships nonprofit organizations experience because they must balance the expectations of multiple partners that span the spectrum of sectors (Austin, 2000; Smith et al., 1995). Potential ramifications addressed by participants in this case included mounting tensions, resource exchange issues, managerial challenges such as negotiation and communication breakdowns, and the assignment of roles and responsibilities for actionable results. The question that emerges from these different interpretations is, what are the implications of these variations in meanings and perceptions? Incongruity in perceptions and mutual expectations for the partnerships is a function of complexity and a persistent source of potential conflict among organizations (Austin, 2000). These incongruities may lead to different behaviors, structures, and processes that do not fit with the objectives of the partnership.

With respect to the strategic challenges uncovered in our study, the focus on competition rather than collaboration was discussed by Huxham and Macdonald (1992), who suggested that advantage need not be advantage over another organization but could be advantage over the situation that would follow if there were no collaboration. Organizational theorists have discussed how competitive advantage occurs between organizations when one intends to benefit more than the other (Barney, 1991a, 1991b; García-Canal et al., 2003; Oliver, 1997). In the context of multiple relationships, García-Canal et al. (2003) explained that organizations can collaborate while competing; however, they argue that more attention needs to be devoted to uncovering strategies whereby forces favoring collaboration can overcome competitive forces. In our study, however, there appeared to be concern over both levels of advantage seeking, that is, advantage over other organizations as well as over the situation that would have ensued were there no collaboration. Informants from the CSC and multiple cross-sector partners reported pressure to resist and engage in collaboration simultaneously—something that has not been addressed in the partnership literature, that is, how to resolve the balance between collaboration and competition without compromising the benefits of the partnership. In this study, tensions related to the simultaneous competitive and collaborative forces have made the formalization of a partnership approach in Canadian sport challenging and have resulted in relationships that are often strained. Because of the difficulty in controlling the perceived power imbalances among multiple cross-sector partners due to resource inequities and political backing, the challenge of building trust initially resulted in feelings of ambiguity, resentment, uncertainty, and suspicion.

The multitude of organizational partners from across sectors creates a complex competitive environment for the CSC and expands the challenges it faces to successfully acquire and maintain its valuable organizational resources. These ambiguities and tensions are elements of a complex environment that contribute to challenges to the formation and effective management of multiple cross-sector partnerships. On many levels, competition among organizations is a healthy condition because it forces organizations to focus their energies and resources on making strategic decisions, resulting in more effective and efficient functioning (Huxham & Macdonald, 1992). Similarly, collaboration among organizations is viewed as a

means to ensure effective use of resources and efficient integration of expertise, knowledge, structure, and programs.

Another strategic challenge uncovered in our study involves change in mission and objectives. Partnerships with organizations from multiple cross-sectors involve the union of different missions, goals, and values (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000). Oppen et al. (2005) and Frisby et al. (2004) have discussed the challenges of collaborating in cross-sector settings. For example, Oppen et al. (2005) noted that organizations from different sectors operate in different “institutional arrangements” and these institutional arrangements are couched in organizational values. Frisby et al. (2004) argued that in the context of leisure and sport, the values and missions of public and nonprofit organizations are often in conflict or incompatible with the values and missions of commercial organizations. In turn, when partnerships involving organizations across sectors are created, leaders need to negotiate how these values and missions will be considered during the collaboration. In addition to the potential existence of incompatible values and missions, our study has demonstrated that, during the span of the partnerships, some organizations changed their missions and objectives, which created some issues between some of the collaborating organizations. This finding has not been addressed in prior research on multiple cross-sector partnerships.

Conclusions and Implications

The phenomenon of partnerships has firmly established itself as a strategy that public, nonprofit, and commercial organizations have undertaken to create greater value and capacity by leveraging resources and competencies of individual organizations. Although much research has examined challenges and tensions between dyadic partners, very few studies have examined these issues in multiple cross-sector partnerships. The purpose of this study was to examine multiple cross-sector partnerships of a focal nonprofit Canadian sport organization. The findings revealed that leaders of organizations involved in multiple cross-sector partnerships need to understand the potential structural and strategic challenges as they negotiate with these organizations to develop partnerships in order to effectively achieve the objectives of the relationships. The results also revealed that structural and strategic challenges presented unique tensions for all organizations involved in multiple cross-sector partnerships. The pressures to collaborate were countered by the existing competitive nature of the funding system in which the sport organizations operated. The challenges inherent in the multiple cross-sector relationships in this study served to simultaneously enable and constrain the formation, development, and management of partnerships. Partnerships enabled these organizations to access scarce resources, such as financial capital, expertise, and organizational legitimacy. However, at the same time, the growth in the number of partnerships introduced constraints to the

CSC, including competition for scarce resources as well as challenges in coordinating multiple relationships.

It is our contention that by examining these challenges, both theorists and practitioners are provided with a more complete perspective of the dynamics of multiple cross-sector partner interactions. Based on our experience investigating this important topic, we provide below a number of implications for further study and for consideration by leaders managing multiple cross-sector partnerships.

Theorists

As partnerships become increasingly prominent among nonprofit organizations, it is important for theorists to extend the examination of multiple cross-sector partnerships and to uncover strategies for how nonprofit organizations can thrive in this context of collaboration. As called for by García-Canal et al. (2003), we feel that the circumstances in which collaboration can overcome competition (or vice versa), as was described in this case, should be an area for future theoretical investigation. This may require longitudinal studies to examine the ways in which relationships between organizations evolve over time and how a balance between collaboration and competition can be achieved to the benefit of all the organizations involved.

An underexplored area in the partnership literature is the extent to which challenges in structure affect partner processes or behaviors and influence partnership management and individual relations. Longitudinal empirical research that directly explores how processes unfold and relate to structural and strategic challenges is another area that might prove fruitful for researchers examining multiple cross-sector partnerships. This broader conceptualization of partnerships between multiple organizations from different sectors demonstrates that we still have much to learn about partnerships. A number of questions emerge from this examination which may be pursued in future studies, including the connection between antecedents (i.e., reasons for forming the relationship) and the link to attitudes and perceptions of managers regarding the partnership. Furthermore, it appears that power and trust played a role in both introducing and overcoming some of the competitive–collaborative efforts faced by partners in our study. Future research in this area may be able to uncover the extent to which these factors played a role in introducing tensions, challenges, and opportunities for multiple cross-sector partnerships.

Practitioners

Vulnerability of nonprofit organizations to their funding environment is an ongoing source of tension and concern. Partnerships offer a means to reduce reliance on government and diversify nonprofit organizations' funding base, but partnerships also introduce other challenges. Managers would benefit by considering partnerships as a web of

alliances rather than several discrete relationships. A focal organization is more than a broker or organizer of dyadic interorganizational activities. In addition to developing important tools such as a vision in which partners play a critical role, a strong image, effective systems and support, and an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity, the focal organization must also play the role of leading and orchestrating these systems, perceiving the full business idea, and understanding the role of all parties involved in multiple cross-sector partnerships. Managers of relationships must ensure that appropriate core skills, competencies, and capabilities are developed with focus on complementing other partners in the group to make them more effective and competitive as a whole. Thus, hiring staff who have experience with multiple cross-sector relationships would be a wise course of action. Assumptions, perceptions, and priorities involved in partnerships are different in that organizations must consider themselves to be working for the good of the whole and not for the benefit of their own organization. Despite these hurdles, the advantage of this form of structure still holds much promise. As leaders and managers of nonprofit organizations struggle to design and manage their partnerships, it behooves them to consider and plan for potential roadblocks, challenges, and conflicts that can arise.

Notes

1. The expression “from the sandbox to the podium” highlights the fact that Canada’s sport system is concerned with both grassroots developmental sport programs and helping athletes excel in high-performance sport.

2. For the purposes of this study, the term *focal organization* refers to an organization that is considered to be central to a web of partnerships. The focal organization serves as the point of communication and the catalyst to a number of organizations that work in partnership to achieve a common objective. In our study, the focal organization and its partners collectively work toward enhancing Canadian athletes’ success in international sport competitions.

3. At the time of study, the CSC was involved in some 30 cross-sector partnerships. Currently, the focal CSC is involved in more than 140 cross-sector partnerships: 3 with public organizations, 120 with nonprofit organizations, and 21 with commercial organizations.

4. Documents included mission, vision, and goal statements; strategic and marketing plans; research and annual reports; contracts; policy documents; press releases; promotional documents; memoranda of understanding between the CSC and its partners; and notes or minutes from meetings and interviews. In addition, where possible, similar relevant documentation from each of the partner organizations was collected and analyzed.

5. Participants were selected on the basis of their degree of familiarity and expert knowledge of the organization’s partnerships and their ability to report accurately and comprehensively. These managers were most able to recognize and assess the relative importance of organizational dynamics and also were the most qualified to report specific information on partnerships.

6. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that researchers start with some general themes derived from reading the literature and add more themes and subthemes as they progress through their analysis. From our review of the literature, we were aware of some of the challenges experienced by organizations forming partnerships. Thus, the process of theme building began with the emphasis the interviews and documents placed on those challenges. Once all interviews and document passages were coded, they were organized into themes and patterns. These categories were then further scrutinized for relationships and

linkages between them. With ATLAS.ti, families are devices used to cluster codes for easier handling of an especially large number of interpretative objects or primary documents (Scientific Software Development, 1997). One important objective of organizing the information into families is to manage large amounts of objects by classifying them into subsets (e.g., all theoretical codes, groups of informants, or particular primary documents). For instance, when categorizing the factors leading to challenges in partnership formation, we were able to isolate comments made by, and thematic categories associated with, particular groups, such as only the founding partners or only the corporate partners. In this way, the clustering of codes and quotations was facilitated and allowed for easy comparison and theme identification within and between groups.

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