

Virtual Sports Governance: A figurational analysis of social network development and transformation during the 'Workplace Challenge' online programme

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1. Introduction:

County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) are said to epitomise the change from a government to governance approach in UK sports provision (4). Studies suggest, however, that CSPs often conform to the central government nature of programme delivery, and are in fact delivering pre-determined government policy (6;5).

Understanding how policy is disseminated through social networks and partnership relations is therefore paramount in order to examine what currently occurs in terms of partnership and social relations within sports programmes and how this influences programme delivery.

The 'Workplace Challenge' (WPC) is a CSP led physical activity programme which utilises a website designed to engage people from workplaces in physical activity. Employees self record their physical activity over an eight week period, with points awarded on the website for activity completed. The programme seeks to promote a peer-challenge culture with the provision of online leader boards and an interactive virtual platform.

2. Research Aim:

The research analysed a WPC programme delivered by a CSP in the East of England. The primary aim was to establish if the networks of relationships that operated between organisations and individuals engaged in the WPC, as well as how the WPC was delivered by the CSP, influenced programme uptake, perceptions and participant engagement. A figurational approach was taken to explore and explain the social networks and social relationships formed using concepts from figurational sociology and the works of Norbert Elias.



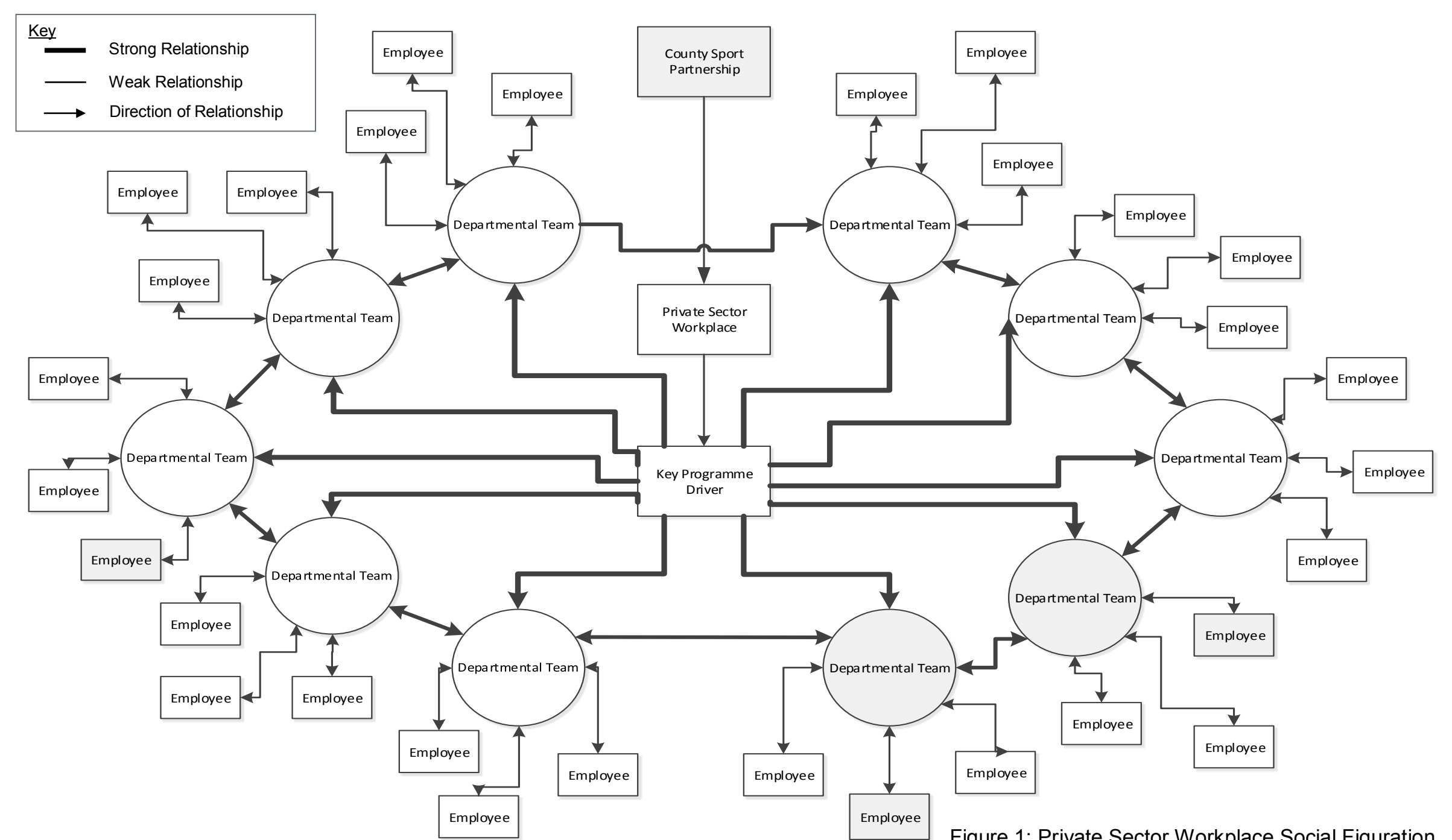
3. Research Design:

The research adopted an interpretivist approach to understand the subjective experiences of participants of the WPC (1).

A comparative case study was completed with 2 employers; 1 public sector employer and 1 private sector employer, and a further sample of individuals who participated in the WPC with no employer influence.

Employers were selected via purposive sampling. Employees from the case study workplaces were initially chosen via purposive sampling methods, and then using snowball sampling. Individual participants not attached to an employer were also selected via purposive sampling.

15 participants completed semi structured interviews which were transcribed verbatim. Inductive thematic analysis was completed at a latent level to identify common themes within the data, with results compared across the three case studies and related to concepts from figurational sociology.



4. Results and Discussion:

Findings indicate that embodied social relationships in the case-study workplaces enabled the creation of strong engagement in the WPC and a competitive, motivational atmosphere to be developed. Conversely, where participants relied upon virtual relationships feelings of mistrust and doubt over the reported activity levels of 'others' prevailed.

Competition created power balances within the WPC that were manifested in the embodied and virtual relationships formed (2). An unintended outcome of the development of power relationships within the WPC were the subtle, indirect changes in attitude caused by the activity patterns of others. By connecting highly active individuals with those who were less active the WPC facilitated comparative social relationships to be constructed. This produced negative, demotivating feelings for some individuals, who felt that their physical activity habits did not measure up to those of more active individuals.

The promotion of team competition strengthened social networks within workplaces with nucleated workforces. On the other hand, isolation was apparent amongst participants who lacked embodied relationships with colleagues. This resulted in the development of established and outsider groups within workplaces that were based upon the prevalence of embodied relationships as opposed to purely virtual relationships (3).

Results affirm that the most effective form of programme delivery was through a gatekeeper who could drive adoption of the WPC within a workplace. This individual ensured the WPC was prioritised and helped facilitate improved social connectivity, as seen in the private sector case study workplace (see Figure 1). Moreover, this individual had a key impact upon programme delivery and uptake by deciding how the WPC would be disseminated and what information other employees would receive. Where delivery of the WPC relied solely on the formation of a partnership between the CSP and a workplace, as seen in the public sector case study workplace, the network focused governance approach to programme delivery was apparent and its effectiveness in connecting people through physical activity was weaker.

5. Recommendations:

Results imply the important role a programme gatekeeper has in advocating and motivating others to become involved in a physical activity programme such as the WPC. A social figuration can be constructed but unless there is someone disseminating information and making individuals aware of the connections that exist, the power and extent of this network remains unknown and feelings such as isolation can occur.

Findings secondly indicated the strength of embodied social relationships in motivating physical activity changes as opposed to virtual relationships, implying the importance of peer support and the power of peer observation on physical activity choices. The negative feelings produced from competitive social relationships formed within the WPC lastly suggests that physical activity programmes in which comparative social dynamics are created may not be motivating for individuals who are currently inactive.

6. References: (1) Baur, N. and Ernst, S. (2011) Towards a process orientated methodology: modern social science research methods and Norbert Elias' figurational sociology, *The Sociological Review*, 59, pp. 117-139 (2) Elias, N. (1978) *What is sociology?* London: Hutchison (3) Elias, N. and Scotson, J. (1994) *The established and the outsiders*, London: Sage (4) Grix, J. (2010) The 'governance debate' and the study of sport policy, *International Journal of Sport Policy*, 2, pp. 159-171 (5) Mackintosh, C. (2011) An analysis of County Sports Partnerships in England: the fragility, challenges and complexity of partnership working in sports development, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 3, pp. 45-64 (6) Phillpots, L., Grix, J. and Quarby, T. (2010) Centralised grassroots sport policy and 'new governance': a case study of County Sport Partnerships in the UK – unpacking the paradox, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 46, pp. 262-281