Challenges and strategies of building and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships in sport for development and peace

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ABSTRACT

While sport management scholars have explored inter-organizational partnerships and their associated challenges, they have devoted less attention to inter-organizational partnership development and sustainability in sport for development and peace (SDP), particularly across a wide range of organizations with varied missions and foci. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine challenges faced by SDP organizations when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships across contexts and partnership types, and to uncover strategies they have employed to overcome these challenges. Common challenges encountered across 29 SDP organizations included competition for resources, skepticism of sport as a development tool, unequal power relations, misaligned goals and mission drift, and implementation issues. Strategies included focusing on building relationships and networks, demonstrating benefits to partner, starting small then diversifying, keeping focused on mission and goals, involving partner, and treating the partnership as a business relationship. Theoretical extensions and practical implications are discussed, along with directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Sport for development and peace (SDP) is an intriguing direction for scholarship and practice over the last decade, largely due to its social justice focus, potential program outcomes, and opportunities to examine how management of these organizations may be different than in other sport-related organizations (Schulenkorf, 2016; Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). From its origins in the Olympic movement and programs designed to help wounded veterans after World War I (Burnett, 2001), SDP has, over the past two decades, gained popularity in academic, practitioner, and policy circles as one possible engine of development. That noted, the field is certainly not without its critics within the arenas of mainstream development and critical sociology of sport (Coalter, 2013; Darnell, 2012; Levermore, 2008; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). This criticism has largely been in response to the overly evangelical rhetoric espoused by policy makers and others about the power of sport to evince positive outcomes, without evidence to back up such claims (Schulenkorf, 2016).

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In an integrated review of literature regarding SDP research, Schluenkorf and colleagues (2016) noted the rise in publications and the wide range of methodologies (conceptual, mixed methods, qualitative, and quantitative), research sites, and researcher locations that have evolved in the field. Additionally, they pointed to seven thematic areas of SDP scholarship (disability, education, gender, health, livelihoods, peace, and social cohesion) along with recent multi-disciplinary research efforts in SDP. Some topics of scholarship in this space have included building social capital amongst marginalized populations (Burnett, 2006; Skinner et al., 2008), investigating conflict resolution and peace building programming (Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011; Sugden, 2008), and evaluating social inclusion of disadvantaged groups and individuals (Morgan & Parker, 2017; Sherry, 2010). Beyond this empirical work, others have highlighted a need for critical perspectives and evaluations of the field (Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2012). In addition, scholars have stressed the importance of factors such as organizational capacity, leadership, and assessment for an SDP initiative to achieve success (Coalter, 2010; Lyras & Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2016). Scholarship has recognized that simply focusing on sport participation will do little to ameliorate social and political inequality (Darnell, 2012). As highlighted by Darnell (2012) regarding the notion of 'the power of sport' and the need to not over-romanticize sport, the importance of critical research "is to contextualize and politicize the role and place of sport in struggles for sustainable and equitable development" (p. 23).

Some sport management research has examined the importance of partnerships and collaborations amongst organizations and governing bodies (for example, see Alexander, Thibault, & Frisby, 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak, 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Lindsey, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013). This line of research has also helped shape recent inquiry into SDP initiatives and the nature of inter-organizational partnerships (Burnett, 2008; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Schulenkorf, Sugden, & Burdsey, 2014; Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016). Partnerships are the lifeblood of SDP organizations, and are undertaken for multiple reasons, such as to secure funding, for assistance in program design, delivery, and implementation, and for monitor and evaluation (Burnett, 2008; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). In a broader sense, organizational collaborations and partnerships are common across multiple sectors of society, as it is through effective partnerships that organizations "address societal issues, accomplish tasks, and reach goals that fall outside the grasp of any individual entity working independently" (Woodland & Hutton, 2012, p. 366). Despite the many advantages of inter-organizational partnerships, they are challenging to form and sustain, and many do not succeed. For instance, Vangen and Huxham (2003) noted that "collaborations... are difficult to manage, and the likelihood of disappointing outputs is high. To create advantage, practitioners need to engage in a continuous process of nurturing the collaborative process" (p. 5).

While sport management (Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Lindsey, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013) and management scholars (see Woodland & Hutton, 2012, for a review) have explored partnerships and their associated challenges, there is limited focus on inter-organizational partnership development and sustainability in SDP, particularly across a wide range of organizations with varied missions and foci. Recognizing the importance and challenges of cross-sector partnerships, Babiak and Thibault (2009) suggested future research highlighting which structural challenges affect behaviors and partner processes along with perceptions of partnerships. Additionally, they called for efforts investigating how "power and trust played a role in both introducing and overcoming some of the competitive–collaborative efforts faced by partners" (p. 139).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine challenges faced by SDP organizations when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships across contexts and partnership types, and to uncover strategies they have employed to overcome these challenges. Our goal was to synthesize rather than compare challenges and strategies across organizational contexts, although we do offer relevant comparisons in the findings where warranted. Two research questions were developed: (a) what are the challenges and barriers SDP organizations have encountered when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships; and (b) what strategies have they employed to address and overcome these challenges and barriers? This research is significant, given that most SDP organizations rely on partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments (local and federal), and other public and private entities in order to survive and carry out their missions (Burnett, 2008; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). In addition, while Lindsey and Banda (2011) and Hayhurst and Frisby (2010) examined the characteristics and tensions of SDP partnerships by centering on one or two organizations, more partnership research is needed with a broader set of SDP organizations to examine common challenges and strategies.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

As noted by Atkinson (2005), "there is of course no "best" evaluation framework applicable to all partnerships" (p. 9). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extensive review of all partnership research, we highlight key literature that assisted with the framework of this study. Collaboration theory (Gajda, 2004; Gray, 1989) was utilized as the underlying scheme, along with Woodland and Hutton's (2012) extension of this work. In addition, we review extant literature within the sport management and SDP fields on partnership benefits, capacities, and challenges (Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Lindsey, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013).

Gray (1989) described collaborations (or partnerships; the terms are used interchangeably) as "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [or issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (p. 5). Collaboration theory incorporates general principles that

have been generated by scrutinizing the phenomenon of multiple organizations working in collaboration to develop a strategic alliance (Gajda, 2004). Gajda (2004) advanced five principles of collaboration derived from the partnership literature and observations of the development of strategic alliances. The first principle is that collaboration is an imperative. As social issues are becoming increasingly complicated, collaboration is more necessary than ever to initiate inter-agency dialogue and share scarce resources among each other. Second, collaboration is known by many names. Since collaboration has variations and complexities, many different terminologies have been used, including joint ventures, networks, partnerships, alliances, associations, and task forces. The third principle elucidates that collaboration is a journey not a destination. Gadja (2004) referred to Bailey & Koney's (2000) work showing that within the continuum of the collaboration processes, there are four stages: cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and coadunation. Fourth, with collaboration, the personal is as important as the procedural. Individuals from each side of the collaboration are important. The final principle advances that collaboration develops in stages. Gajda (2004) synthesized the stages of partnerships into four. First is to assemble and form, where organizations begin discussions about the viability of a partnership. Storm and order comes next so that partners can scrutinize strategies of the collaboration and their roles in it. The third phase, norm and perform, occurs when partnering organizations have built rapport and focus more on performing and implementing. Finally, transform and adjourn is when key stakeholders (e.g., the SDP organization and its partner) discern possible strategies to enhance the effectiveness of collaborative performance through evaluating their stages of collaboration and decide whether or not to continue the partnership.

Using Gajda's (2004) aforementioned principles and stages as a steppingstone, Woodland and Hutton (2012) extended collaboration theory to address the complex task of evaluating partnerships. The main steps include: "(1) operationalizing the construct of collaboration; (2) identifying and mapping communities of practices; (3) monitoring stage/stages of development; (4) assessing levels of integration; and (5) assessing cycles or inquiry" (p. 367). Woodland and Hutton suggested specific actions that must be taken within each of these five strategies. First, to operationalize collaboration, the specific attributes of the program to be evaluated must be characterized. Second, to identify and map communities of practices, drawing an accurate picture of the "essential groups at work in a strategic alliance" (p. 368) is important. Third, to monitor stages of development, all units of the collaboration need to actively participate in the navigation of predictable stages in order to enhance organizational performance. Fourth, to assess levels of integration, data about degrees of integration need to be collected and analyzed regarding the purpose of the collaboration, structures, and leadership. Lastly, assessing cycles of inquiry denotes the assessment of "team dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation" (p. 368) that helps partners improve group dynamics so that group capacity can be built to achieve collaborative goals.

Within the field of sport management, partnership studies have been undertaken in both the nonprofit and for-profit space, such as with schools, leisure and health organizations, and NGOs (Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2011; Lindsey, 2006; Parent & Harvey, 2009). Others have investigated specific SDP programs and initiatives, such as Lindsey and Banda's (2011) effort to interview stakeholders from government, national agencies, and NGOs on their partnerships working towards HIV/AIDS advocacy in Zambia. Lindsey (2013) continued this line of inquiry by interviewing individuals in Zambia to gain a community perspective on partnerships. In particular, Lindsey emphasized the importance of collaborative forums and building awareness and understanding in order to bring organizations together.

2.1. Challenges of forming and sustaining partnerships

Many inter-organizational partnerships struggle to make the most of the collaborative process (Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002). Scholars have elucidated challenges and tensions that revolved around issues of trust, philosophy and value alignment, decision-making style, relationship building, resource acquisition and flow, and power and control (Braganza, 2016; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). Typically, these challenges are not well anticipated so that they may make sustaining partnerships much more difficult. Sport management scholars have also stressed the challenges of forming and sustaining partnerships. Thibault and Harvey (1997) noted that a lack of knowledge on how to formulate an inter-organizational relationship could limit success. Frisby et al. (2004) pointed out that a lack of guidelines, insufficient training, and poor coordination were hindering the quality and sustainable management of partnerships in the leisure service sector. Babiak (2007) highlighted the pros and cons of growth in a particular field, which in turn could yield increasing competition for scarce resources along with complicating efforts to coordinate a growing number of relationships. Further, researchers have noted that social capital or interpersonal communications can be limited due to the utilitarian nature of partnerships (Doherty & Misener, 2008; Misener & Doherty, 2012). Babiak and Thibault (2009) warned that multiple and diverse partnerships across sectors could yield a complicated environment that is increasingly difficult to navigate. This challenge was supported by Lindsey and Banda (2011), who highlighted that some SDP practitioner interviewees believed their inability to integrate some partnerships was partly the result of a lack of understanding of the public policy sector with which they wished to partner. Other researchers recognized the difficulties in implementation of partnerships. In a study investigating partnerships of community sport organizations in Australia, implementation challenges were common, and the commitment of partnering organizations along with retention of employees was necessary to assist with implementation issues (Casey, Payne, Brown, & Eime, 2009).

Power issues, especially power imbalances between partners, are major challenges within the SDP field, similar to the field of general development (Abrahamsen, 2004; Darnell, 2012; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). Lie (2015) argued that the development field is often characterized by a partnership between a donor and a recipient, so that inevitably the donor's

knowledge and intention are transferred into the production of local knowledge and practice. Within the SDP landscape, a number of scholars have identified the challenge of inequitable distribution of power and control (Darnell, 2012; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). Hayhurst and Frisby (2010) articulated the nature of imbalanced partnerships between high performance sport organizations and SDP NGOs. The relationships were complicated because SDP NGOs had different goals and values from the high performance sport organizations; however, they still benefited from the partnerships. As a result, it was difficult for the SDP NGOs to function independently from the high performance sport organizations because they were dependent upon them for resources. Darnell (2012) also cautioned against the international representation of SDP as natural and apolitical, a rhetoric largely rooted in the United Nation's 2005 report on sport as a tool for achieving development and peace (United Nations, 2005).

Nicholls and Giles (2007) argued that practitioners of SDP are usually marginalized in partnerships because of the colonial legacy that dichotomizes relations between evaluator and program implementer or donors and recipients. Indeed, within the academic sphere, much SDP research does not do a good job in emphasizing participation from local partners and reflexivity, or in addressing power-relations issues inherent in these dynamics (Spaaij, Schulenkorf, Jeans, & Oxford, 2017). Neo-colonialism often emerges in SDP practices, where programs are designed, and funding is situated, in high income countries with little involvement of local communities in low to middle income countries (Coalter, 2013; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Nicholls & Giles, 2007). In the majority of cases, power imbalance in SDP involves a high versus low-to-middle income dichotomy in which local organizations from the latter largely depend on agencies in high income countries for various resources, such as financial and human capital (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). This power imbalance is a difficult challenge for SDP organizations in that it can negatively impact the development and implementation of the program. Moreover, in the case of having multiple partners, SDP organizations have difficulty building stable and consistent programs because every partner tries to push its values into the program (Reis, Vieira, & Sousa-Mast, 2016), often resulting in mission drift (Coalter, 2013).

Finally, competition for limited resources is a pronounced problem, where SDP organizations are often competing for funding and access to other resources, which can potentially hinder partnership efforts (Coalter, 2013; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011).

2.2. Strategies to form and sustain partnerships

Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas (2002) suggested several strategies to form and sustain effective inter-organizational partnerships. Partner selection is important. Potential partners should be assessed meticulously about their compatibility. It is also necessary to consider commitment and trustworthiness. In addition, both formal and informal communications need to be managed from the early stage and tailored to the landscape of each partnership, so as to reduce any costs produced by the lack of communication in the latter part of the collaboration process. A continuous effort to interact between organizations is necessary to enhance trust. Scholars have also advanced that it is necessary to integrate the concept of social capital into making partnerships more effective and strategic (Jamali, Yianni, & Abdallah, 2011). With more attention paid to the importance of partnerships across various fields, knowledge is now perceived as produced in networks and collaborations so that the salience of social capital has come to the fore (Maskell, 2001). Suggested strategies for enhancing social capital in partnerships are developing an integrated knowledge base (De Man & Duysters, 2005), trust and credibility, mutual dependence, and common objectives (Sivadas & Dwyer, 2000).

Sport management scholars have also focused on assessing the effectiveness of partnerships in an attempt to further determine their importance towards success. Babiak (2009) noted key partnership outcomes, such as stability, heightened efficiency, and increased legitimacy. Alexander et al. (2008) focused on the sustainability of sport partnerships, finding that sharing expertise and resources, establishing clear lines of responsibility and communication, and avoiding power struggles are important strategies to sustain partnerships. Babiak and Thibault (2008) approached partnering relationships from both formal and informal frames. Although formal processes were important, informal processes, such as trust, supported effective communication between organizations and ultimately allowed the objectives of the relationship to be met. Also, in an effort to assess partnerships among community sport organizations, Misener and Doherty (2013) recommended relationships defined by trust, balance, consistency, and engagement.

In the SDP partnership landscape, the main focus has been on strategies to address and confront the power imbalance. Nicholls, Giles, and Sethna (2011) suggested partners build a mutually respectful partnership atmosphere so that it can motivate individuals to actively and genuinely engage in the relationships. Practitioners in SDP organizations may hold influential positions which they can leverage to tackle the negative effects of dichotomization and an imbalanced partnership (Mannell, 2014). Practitioners have unique knowledge systems centered around local spaces, which enable them to be powerful implementers who play a central role in their local context (Lindsey & Banda, 2011). How to obtain and distribute resources is also a crucial element for the sustainability of SDP partnerships (MacIntosh et al., 2016). Available resources within partnerships are important because they influence the operation of programs and sometimes even the creation and sustainability of the partnership efforts (Kidd, 2008). Other strategies within SDP to address myriad challenges of partnerships include developing consistent operating norms and procedures (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Whitley, Forneris, & Barker, 2015); emphasizing common goals and objectives (Whitley et al., 2015); developing trust with partners by building relationships (Coalter, 2013; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010); and actively involving partners in the design and implementation of the program (Burnett, 2009).

Table 1
Names (Pseudonyms) of Study Participants, Job Role, Region, Mission of Organization, and Partnerships Established.

Pseudonym	Job Role	Region	Mission of Organization	Partnerships Established
Andrea	International Program Manager	Colombia, South America	Offering comprehensive programs in basic education, sports training, football, music and rehabilitation for displaced children, affected by violence and extreme poverty	C, N
Andrew	Director of Cross Cultures	Balkan region	Promoting peaceful coexistence and social cohesion between people of different cultures and backgrounds	C, N
Annie	Vice President, Quality & Evaluation	North America	Inspire girls to be joyful, healthy and confident using a fun, experience-based curriculum which creatively integrates running	C, N
Chris	Founder	UK	Fuses the sport of football, psychodynamic thinking and theory to create a space to encourage thought and act as a catalyst to promote emotional and behavioral change	C
Cindy	Associate Director	North America	Fuse sport and therapy to heal and strengthen at-risk youth	C, N
David	International Director	South Africa	Utilize sport as a catalyst for holistic community transformation and to intentionally equip young leaders with essential life skills	C
Derrick	Executive Director	Kenya	Community development organization that uses sports to engender broad socio-economic development, while also effecting positive social change	C, N, I
Jesus	Regional Coordinator	Colombia, South America	Offering comprehensive programs in basic education, sports training, football, music and rehabilitation for displaced children, affected by violence and extreme poverty	C, N
Jill	Executive Director	International	Integrated educational curriculum focuses on health, social, and soccer/ football skills	I
Jim	Co-Founder	Thailand	Through football, help these disadvantaged children build essential life skills and better futures, while building community cohesion among the different refugee communities	C, N
Jorge	Coach	South Korea	Be the resource center for an internationalized youth football development in Korea for both expats and Korean alike both in Korea and abroad	C, N, I
Karen	Program Manager	UK	Aims to create a legacy from the 2014 Commonwealth Games for young people by increasing levels of physical activity and building skills through volunteering	C
Larry	President	International	We want to see young people improve their basketball skills as well as discover that they are significant in this world	C, I
Linda	Institutional Relations Manager	International	Use boxing and martial arts combined with education and personal development to realize the potential of young people in communities affected by crime and violence	C, I
Maribel	Director	Colombia	We are an organization committed to the social transformation for the construction of peace in the region. Sport, science and art are our best allies	C, N
Marilyn	Program Officer	Zambia, Africa	To empower underserved communities through their active participation in sport. To have a happy, healthy and sustainable community	C, N
Mark	Managing Director	Asia, Europe	Use the power of soccer to help save the lives of children living at daily risk from landmines and explosive remnants of war in some of the most dangerous places in the world	C, I
Nate	Director & Co-Founder	South America, Africa, Thailand	Helping disadvantaged communities reach their full potential in sport, education and health	C, I
Nina	Executive Director	Kenya	The project uses football to develop essential life skills – confidence, leadership, self-esteem – of vulnerable young women	C, N
Paul	Executive Director	Asia	We aim to leverage the power of and the passion for football in the region to tackle the poor nutritional practices and access that have been holding back Asia	C, N, I
Prima	Regional Director – East	India	Developing local community mentors who take children living in poverty on the journey from childhood to livelihood. Work with children and parents through a weekly curriculum of sporting activities	C, N
Randy	Executive Director	US	We develop youth and the community through programs that change the negative norms present in our neighborhood and replace them with a positive culture	C
Sally	Director	China, India, Jordan, Nigeria, Zambia	Equip adolescent girls to exercise their rights through sport	C, I
Sam	Director of Operations	Sudan	Through an all-refugee soccer club and a children and youth soccer academy, a movement to bring hope, inspiration, and joy to the displaced people of Darfur.	C, N
Sandra	Operations Manager	Asia	We work with severely disadvantaged and marginalized children to promote global equal opportunity and advocate every child's equal right to play	C
Sergio	Founder	Africa, South America, Caribbean	Using the power of sport and physical activity to educate youth and unite communities in developing countries through broad-based educational programs and by constructing or renovating community sports facilities	C, I
Steph	Deputy Department Director	Israel	Developing and implementing innovative and cutting-edge peacebuilding programs	C, N, I
Sven	Founder & Executive Director	Liberia		C

3. Method

To examine the challenges to inter-organizational partnership formation and sustainability in SDP, as well as associated strategies for addressing these challenges, we conducted a qualitative study with practitioners in 29 SDP organizations from around the world. This method of inquiry is aligned with work that advocates for qualitative research efforts to assess partnerships (see Gajda, 2004; Woodland & Hutton, 2012), and allowed us to explore how managing partnerships in the SDP space may be different than in other aspects of the sport industry (Schulenkorf, 2016).

3.1. Participants and procedures

The selection of study participants was conducted through a purposive manner (Creswell, 2012). Our selection process was guided by the databases on the International Platform on Sport and Development and the Beyond Sport network website pages. Overall we targeted 60 organizations, and these programs were chosen due to fitting three criteria: (a) currently active and viable, (b) diverse locations across all six continents, and (c) diverse programming regarding both their sport of focus and their mission. Specifically, we aimed to speak with organizations that had developed partnerships on the financial side (local and federal grants and donors) and/or on the program implementation side (program design and participant recruitment). Each of these organizations was sent an initial email inviting them to take part in a study regarding partnerships, and we also asked to speak with someone in the organization who had oversight for partnership development or was in charge of the actual administration of these partnerships. Follow-up emails were sent two weeks later to non-responders. Overall, 30 people from 29 organizations volunteered to take part in a semi-structured interview over phone or Skype. After written consent was received, each participant spoke with Jon Welty Peachey or Adam Cohen for 30–90 min. Two individuals came from the same organization, as we had initially invited one individual from that organization who did not respond, so we invited another. However, both individuals then responded and agreed to be interviewed.

This group consisted of SDP practitioners from six continents, whose organizations represented a plethora of sports and implementation strategies. While many of the organizations employed soccer as the sport of choice, this focus is representative of SDP organizations around the world (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Most study participants were currently serving as executive directors or managers responsible for partnership development. We assured study participants that their names and organizations would be masked to protect their identity. Table 1 provides details on the individuals and organizations in the sample, including pseudonyms used for study participants, organizational missions, and partnership types (community, regional, international). The SDP organizations were engaged in a variety of inter-organizational partnerships, partnering with NGOs, local and federal governments, corporations, professional sport teams, community-based organizations, and schools (elementary and secondary). Nearly all organizations in the sample had a funding partner, and most also had program implementation and participant recruitment partners.

Once common themes and topics continuously repeated themselves and interviews failed to yield additional information, data saturation occurred (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) and our sample size was deemed sufficient. We recognize that SDP organizations and their ensuing partnerships involve myriad factors and a high degree of variance; thus, the aim of this research effort was to capture the common overarching themes which would be applicable for most organizations in the SDP field. Patton (2015) has stressed the advantages of studying a broad range of subjects (maximum variation sampling) to highlight key features of a phenomenon from diverse individual perspectives.

Our interview guide was derived from the partnership literature (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013) and collaboration theory (Gajda, 2004; Gray, 1989; Woodland & Hutton, 2012). We utilized a semi-structured format (Patton, 2015) that permitted a free-flowing discussion and allowed the authors to follow up on key points with additional questioning. In particular, interviewees were asked to focus on challenges and strategies regarding the formation and retention of partnerships they experienced in their current job. Sample questions included: "What types of inter-organizational partnerships have you formed to achieve your organizational mission?"; "How do you go about forming partnerships?"; "What challenges have you

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Pseudonym	Job Role	Region	Mission of Organization	Partnerships Established
			We work to create a sustainable, replicable model of community development using sports as a tool to reach at-risk youth and empower their local communities	
Timothy	Executive Director	Ecuador	Provide new opportunities, teach leadership, self-reliance, and a sense of community to the at-risk youth in Ecuador	C
Tom	Executive Director	International	Mobilizing the outdoor sports community to lead the charge towards positive climate action. We focus on educational initiatives, political advocacy and community-based activism	N, I

Legend: Community (C), Nationwide (N), International (I).

faced in forming and sustaining partnerships?"; and "What strategies have you employed to address and overcome these challenges?"

3.2. Data analysis

Each interview was conducted by either Jon Welty Peachey or Adam Cohen, transcribed verbatim (327 pages of data were transcribed), and coded by one of these authors. NVivo 10 was utilized to aid in coding and data analysis. Intercoder reliability was established by having each author code the same transcript and then discuss interpretations to come to agreement on the coding strategy (Creswell, 2012). Then, another transcript was coded by both authors, with the level of agreement in the coding higher than the first transcript. The remainder of the transcripts was then coded by either Welty Peachey or Cohen. A priori categories were guided by collaboration theory (Gadja, 2004; Gray, 1989; Woodland & Hutton, 2012) and additional literature on partnerships (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak, 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) highlighted the value of beginning a qualitative analysis by allowing existent literature to guide the coding. In addition, we utilized an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to allow for additional themes to emerge. Next, initial codes were folded into key themes (Creswell, 2012) within the categories of *challenges* and *strategies*. Finally, a selective coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was employed to highlight key quotations that would sufficiently represent the data and themes.

Table 2
Challenges – Key Themes, Sample Coding, and Selective Codes Generated from Data Collected.

Key themes (stage)	Sample representative codes (# of people mentioned)	Selective codes
Competition for resources (A)	Limited donors (24) Multiple NGOs with similar goals (23) Limited grants (20) NGOs competing for similar volunteers or participants (18) Potential partners are potential competitors (18) Economic downswings limiting resources (14)	"Relationships between NGOs are kind of funny sometimes because you're often working towards the same causes … but then, from another point of view, we're also competitors because we're just sometimes competing for the same funds."(Nate) "… it's just a sense of competition over resources and I think that prohibits a lot of people from seeking partnerships … for whatever reason I think the competition over resources can become a big hindrance to partnerships." (David)
Skepticism of sport as a development tool (A)	Lack of awareness (23) Limited knowledge of sport for development outcomes (22) Belief that other priorities transcend sport initiatives (20) Pre-existing awareness of sport (20) Introduction of a new sport/activity into a community (15)	"For partnerships, it's hard. It's always the hardest, to be honest. There's always this distrust, as if sport wasn't an adequate tool." (Linda) "Sometimes when it comes to sport, they do not have the perception that sport is a tool to educate. They just see it as a game … how to fill your free time." (Jim)
Unequal power relations (A,O,P,T)	Power imbalance (25) Ego display from partners (22) Uneven distribution of effort/commitment (20) Donations yielding contempt (14) Donations and allocated resources yielding imbalance (13)	"We feel that on the one hand we want to partner up and be equal, but on the other hand, the relationships are not equal. I think you're asking about the most challenging issue inside partnerships." (Steve) "One of the greatest challenges to keeping alliances is the egos that exist in partner institutions." (Maribel)
Misaligned or changing goals (A,O,P,T)	Evolving goals (23) Miscommunication of goals/objectives (20) Corporate versus non-profit goals (18) Common ground shifting from original goals (14) Shifting away from core values (mission drift) (12)	"We might have conflicting agendas or outcomes we want to get to with our partners." (Karen) "Social responsibility lines may change. We've seen that happen a lot in the last year. They stop doing things that they were doing … and they just cut you off." (Andrea)
Implementation and development (O,P,T)	Limited resources (27) Lack of fulfilment/execution of promises (20) Over-promising and under-delivering (18) Partnership requiring maintenance (14) Large time commitment (13) Spread too thin to maintain partnership (13)	"We know that people have the best intentions and over promise and get pulled off to do other things, and as a result under deliver. That is a challenge." (Karen) "The challenges that we face in forming and sustaining partnerships is the fluidity of life … everything changes [people leave]. So, that's one of the major things in trying to form the partnerships." (Larry)

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate all themes that emerged from the data, representative sample codes per theme, the number of study participants that mentioned each code, and selective codes (representative quotes).

To ensure the dependability of the findings, Welty Peachey and Cohen conferred on their interpretations after they completed the coding process. Specifically, multiple conversations occurred to draw forth interpretations. When discrepancies emerged, these two authors debated their interpretations until an agreement was reached. To ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) member checks were conducted with study participants to allow them to review their transcripts and the authors' interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015), and interpretations were tested with an external auditor not involved in the study (Creswell, 2012). The external auditor was a sport management faculty member very familiar and experienced in SDP scholarship as well as with the inter-organizational partnership literature. None of our interviewees recommended changes or identified omissions in their transcripts, and they as well as the auditor generally agreed with study interpretations.

4. Findings and discussion

SDP organizations in our study experienced a wide variety of challenges in different stages of partnership development across partnership types and contexts (Gadja, 2004; Woodland & Hutton, 2012Woodland and Hutton, 2012Gadja, 2004;

Table 3
Strategies – Key Themes, Sample Coding, and Selective Codes Generated from Data Collected.

Key themes (stage)	Sample representative codes (# of people mentioned)	Selective codes
Focus on building relationships/networks (A, O,P,T)	Build trust (27) Create bonds and positive relationships (24) Leverage connections into partnerships (20) Active and ongoing communication (19) Make efforts to network in community (12)	"The schools where we get better buy-in are the schools where we have very strong links... It all comes down to our relationships with them. If they didn't like us they wouldn't bother." (Mark) "What's allowed us to be successful is focusing on relationships with the beneficiaries and the people in the community... We've gotten great feedback from other NGOs, from the government, they love our people because we're very authentic." (David)
Demonstrate benefits to partner (A)	Emphasize positive outcomes (24) Knowledge transfer (20) Highlight successful partnership outcomes (18) Illustrate benefits tangibly (i.e., reports) (15) Communicate results (15)	"How can we provide? How can we share some skills? We can work together and everybody will have some benefits... You will have a good name for your company. Both organizations, both partnerships [getting] win-wins." (Jorge) "We also know how our partner works and their specialized areas. Then we focus on how we can help the partner, how there can be knowledge transfer from one partner to another." (Prima)
Start small then diversify (A, P)	Quality versus quantity (24) Build strong partnerships before multiple ones (24) Do not take on more partnerships then feasible (20) Eventual diversification helps minimize dependence (13)	"We usually start with something small just to get to know one another. And then slowly we go and develop things together as they believe in the partnership." (Steph) "In every community where we work, we usually start with one big partner. Once we are in the community, we try to build a relationship with other partners, so that we do not just depend on one." (Andrea)
Focus on mission and goals (A,O,P,T)	Stay focused on initial partnership goals (24) Adhere to mission (22) Do not sacrifice organization goals over partnerships (17) Do not allow partnerships to move you off mission (15)	"It's just about staying level-headed and keeping your eyes on the goal... going on with people that want to carry on. If others want to catch up later, that's fine, and if not, we'll be fine without them." (David) "Although we had become this clear program in terms of goals and outcomes, we've been able to change that and adapt to the needs [of community organizations]... Be flexible and understand how they operate." (Karen)
Involve partner in strategies and planning (A,O,P,T)	Involve partner in all stages of partnerships (26) Attempt to arrive at decisions mutually (24) Communicate often with partners over key decisions (19) Be open to learn from each other (12)	"We sit down with them... and make sure they co-design and co-produce what we are doing on the ground... That's helped us keep them over the long term." (Andrea) "We invite them to take an active role to create this whole system and it's a very big part of building our organization, to be open, to be a learning organization." (Andrew)
Treat partnership as business relationship (A,O, P,T)	Do not build friendships, build partnerships (19) Do not let partners take advantage (12) Utilize MOUs and other contracts (10)	"What I previously did was dealt with it all myself, and what I've realized is that people take advantage us, because it's too friendly a relationship... it's a business relationship." (Chris) "We do have MOUs in place to clarify what we're providing and the services provided." (Cindy)

Legend: (A) Assemble and Form, (O) Storm and Order, (P) Norm and Perform, (T) Transform and Adjorn.

Woodland & Hutton, 2012), and they employed creative strategies to mitigate and address these challenges. The present study builds on previous sport management and SDP scholarship highlighting the importance of partnerships (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak, 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013) and addresses a gap in understanding of partnership development in SDP. Previous researchers have not examined partnerships across a wide array of SDP organizations with the aim to identify common challenges and strategies, nor have these researchers examined challenges and strategies as they apply to partnership stages (see Burnett, 2008; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Schulenkorf et al., 2014; Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016). Given that most SDP organizations rely on partnerships to carry out their missions (Coalter, 2013) and build organizational capacity (Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Misener & Doherty, 2013; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016), understanding the management of these partnerships advances both theory and praxis. While our goal is to provide a synthesis of these challenges and strategies across contexts and partnership types, we do draw forth relevant comparisons that emerged as salient.

4.1. Challenges to forming and sustaining partnerships

With regards to challenges and barriers, we identified salient challenges that support previous literature on partnership challenges in sport (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak, 2007, 2009; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Frisby et al., 2004; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013) and in the SDP context (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). However, we also extend this literature and theoretical understanding in several key areas. Challenges and barriers to forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships emerged in every stage of partnership development (Gadja, 2004). These challenges are classified into five overarching themes and presented with supporting quotations, with additional representative quotations per theme depicted in Table 2.

4.1.1. Competition for resources

One of the most prominent themes mentioned by almost every interviewee, regardless of organizational context, foci, or partnership type, was that there was a perception that there were limited financial resources available, and thus, intense competition within a relatively small SDP community for these financial resources. For example, 24 participants highlighted there are "limited donors" while 23 noted the issue of "multiple NGOs with similar goals" (see Table 2 for further details). This competition for limited resources was prevalent during the assemble and form stage primarily, and aligns with Lindsey and Banda's (2011) findings within the Zambian SDP context. Specifically, David, international director for an SDP organization in South Africa, discussed his perception of how this competition made SDP organizations skeptical about working with each other in South Africa, but also in other contexts:

> Developing partnerships is a big challenge in places like South Africa where there is a big culture of NGOs and the aid mentality. People are very skeptical about working with each other... and I'm sure this is true globally as well.

According to Cindy, the associate director of an inner-city nonprofit organization in the U.S. using sport to target youth with mental health issues, this competition between SDP organizations can become quite intense. Her organization provides funding and programming through partnerships to a number of inner city initiatives using sport as a development tool. She said:

> When people are talking to you and they're in the same city, in the same sport for development world, they will tell you whatever you want to hear... but in the back room, they'll be like 'Oh my gosh, they applied for that, too'.

There was some indication that competition for limited financial resources during the assemble and form stage, while a challenge for most organizations in our study, was more intense for SDP organizations newer to the field (see Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). This makes sense, as more established organizations likely have had success building partnerships which has enabled them to be sustainable. The above point aligns with Babiak's (2007) contention that growth of a field could increase competition for limited resources. Similarly, Babiak and Thibault (2009) highlighted that limited resources are a potential struggle for partners: "For nonprofit partners, a main challenge was the tremendous growth and interest... This introduced organizational and network dynamics [including]... increased competition for scarce resources (such as money, athletes, coaches, and facilities)" (p. 134).

4.1.2. Skepticism of sport as a development tool

Across partnership context and types, many interviewees mentioned that a challenge to initiating partnerships in the assemble and form stage was the skepticism they encountered from potential partner organizations about sport as an effective tool for development. Most noteworthy is that 23 participants highlighted a potential partner's "lack of awareness," along with 22 pointing to "limited knowledge" about sport as a development engine (see Table 2). This skepticism of sport as a development tool did not just apply to organizations working in LMIC countries. Mark, managing director of a large NGO based in the U.S. using soccer to help youth in Europe and Asia, thought this challenge was applicable in any context: "I still think sport as a platform for long-term education is undervalued, or at least undervalued by more traditional development thinking, and this can hinder partnerships." Mark recalled an instance where he had a difficult time convincing a potential national NGO to come on board because the executives with the non-sport based NGO were not convinced sport was a

proven development tool. This skepticism seemed to be the result of a potential partner's lack of awareness regarding SDP programs and outcomes, and varied somewhat based on location, sport, and size of initiative. For example, a younger mountain climbing initiative in Ecuador had a much greater task of creating awareness and illustrating impact compared to more established soccer organizations in Africa or Europe.

The skepticism from mainstream development and aid organizations that inhibited partnership formation (assemble and form) may be unique to the SDP context within the broader landscape of sport partnerships. While scholarship in SDP has grown remarkably over the last 20 years, and more SDP organizations have emerged around the world (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), SDP is still considered a relatively new field within the wider development platform (Levermore, 2008). Furthermore, scholars have emphasized that sport, or the power of sport, is not necessarily the automatic solution NGOs make it out to be, and call for further critical evaluation (Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2012). Partnerships between other types of sport and non-sport organizations in various sectors (e.g., government, education, community organizations) may be easier to assemble and form because they are not predicated on sport as a development tool. In addition, SDP organizations in our study that were in operation for less than five years and based in areas of the world not as mainstream with regards to sport and development (e.g., Ecuador) encountered greater skepticism and challenges with creating awareness about sport as a development tool than more established organizations working in Africa or Europe where SDP initiatives have been active for years. As such, we add to the theoretical development of SDP partnerships by identifying this salient and possibly unique challenge.

4.1.3. Unequal power relations

Unequal power relations between SDP organizations and partners emerged as a salient challenge in all stages of partnerships (Gadja, 2004) and across contexts and partnership types. Twenty-five interviewees emphasized "power imbalance" and 22 perceived "ego display from partners" (see Table 2). SDP organizations struggled with mapping communities of practice, establishing integration between partners, and overcoming cycles of inquiry where decision-making power often resided with the external partner (Woodland & Hutton, 2012). Power relation issues were more pronounced for SDP organizations in low to middle income countries (e.g., those in Africa, Asia, Middle East) than for organizations working within North America or Europe. As the power and resources often resided with the partner, many times based in a high income country, these partnership patterns reinforced a neo-colonial development agenda and resource dependency prominent within SDP and the broader development landscape (Coalter, 2013; Lindsey & Banda, 2011).

An aspect contributing to this power imbalance was the perceived egos of some partners, who were perceived as wanting to do things their way. For example, David commented on his perception that the self-serving nature of some partners contributed to this power imbalance: "You feel it is a little bit self-serving, people who would like to reap the benefits and take the glory without putting in the work." David was referring to a particular international NGO partner whom he felt was mainly looking after its own interests. Other study participants highlighted the potential issues in forming equal partnerships once money entered the equation due to expectations or feelings of "owing" a debt. Sally, U.S. director of an NGO using various sports to empower girls in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, discussed her thoughts on challenges with funding partners: "So there are times when I think we have a funding relationship, where it's hard for our funders to treat us as equals, and that doesn't come naturally." She continued to reflect upon the potential for partnerships if they were not reliant on money or support: "Sometimes I wonder what partnerships would look like if we didn't bring money to the table. Or we didn't have to receive money... how could it look different?"

Babiak (2009) also highlighted the challenges of establishing legitimacy in sport partnerships, with increased legitimacy as a valuable outcome of a partnership. Due to tensions regarding the legitimacy of the SDP field (Coalter, 2013), however, issues of power relations could be more pronounced within SDP partnerships than in other sport-related partnerships. Lack of legitimacy may give more power to partners than to the SDP organization (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010). Finally, it should be noted the potential for power struggles when the financial aspects of a partnership are considered. Elliott (1987) stressed that "the donor can do to the recipient what the recipient cannot do to the donor. There is an asymmetry of power that no amount of well-intentioned dialogue can remove" (p. 65).

4.1.4. Misaligned or changing goals and mission drift

Related to power relations, while most organizations across contexts struggled with misaligned goals and mission drift throughout all partnership stages (Gadja, 2004), this challenge was more salient for smaller and newer SDP organizations striving for credibility and legitimacy (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). This misalignment and mission drift could be precipitated by partners not adequately defining the collaboration and its scope (Woodland & Hutton, 2012). This challenge was prevalent in all four stages of partnerships, but it did manifest more for funding partnerships than for other forms of partnership. Specifically, 23 of our study participants emphasized "evolving goals" of partners as a challenge, while 20 stressed "miscommunication of goals/objectives" (see Table 2). For example, Mark spoke about this issue with regards to corporate funding partners:

> Alignment is a major one. Corporates have goals, nonprofits have goals. I think a lot of the time, people pretend those goals are the same, and they're actually not. They are aligned in certain areas, but in certain areas they're not... often this misalignment causes missed expectations on both sides and makes it difficult to sustain the partnerships.

Mark pointed to two specific cases where his organization had partnered with corporate funding partners, both of whom had some divergent goals from the SDP organization, resulting in neither the partner nor the SDP organization feeling as if

goals and benefits of the partnership were fully realized. Goals and motives of partners can also evolve over time, which can make it challenging for SDP organizations to sustain partnerships. Annie, vice president of a U.S.-based organization using running to empower girls, discussed the difficulty in disengaging from a partnership where the partner's goals evolved and then did not align with her organization's values:

> I think that can be hard to walk away from someone who is big in the field and it probably would look good for us to be involved [with them]. But there must be alignment with the direction that we're moving in.

SDP organizations also struggled with needing to change or revise their programmatic goals and objectives to satisfy partners. As the executive director of a U.S.-based nonprofit using basketball to help inner city youth, Randy thought "the bottom line is that people are designing programs to appeal to funders. And it's like we don't have the ability to change how a funder picks who they fund." Jim, co-founder of a program in Southeast Asia using soccer to work with refugees, also shared his perception: "In partnerships, there's a danger of losing focus. Just one partner overwhelming the other... They can come in and have a tendency to knock you off course." Here, Jim was referencing a specific instance where an international funding partner established conditions for program content and delivery in order to receive the funds, which necessitated Jim's organization revamping aspects of its program and outcome measurements.

From a theoretical standpoint, misaligned goals and mission drift in particular could be a greater challenge for partnerships in the SDP field than for other forms of sport partnerships, given the newness of the field and skepticism of sport as a development tool. External partners may push their own agenda and goals to a greater extent than they would with more established and mainstream sport organizations, or younger SDP programs may veer away from their initial goals and objectives in an effort to align closer with such partners. As suggested by Coalter (2010), the competition for limited resources can often cause initiatives to be developed in an effort to fit criteria to obtain funding rather than on the initial agenda of the initiative. While this is not necessarily a bad occurrence in some instances as it allows the SDP organization to be responsive to changing societal needs and priorities, there can still be a danger in being pulled too far astray from organizational core values and competencies, which could then undermine the effectiveness of the organization.

4.1.5. Implementation and development challenges

Within the storm and order, norm and perform, and transform and adjourn stages, a challenge mentioned by three-fourths of the interviewees was program implementation and development challenges with the partner. Regarding this theme, one of the most commonly mentioned issues noted by 27 study participants was "limited resources" of the partner which affected implementation, while 20 participants recognized "lack of fulfillment/execution of promises" (see Table 2).

This challenge emerged most prominently when an SDP organization was partnering with an organization to deliver its program, but that organization had more limited resources. Cindy, associate director of a U.S. nonprofit using sport to assist inner city youth, commented about needing to dissolve a partnership when the partner did not fulfill its agreement:

> There is one partnership we are just ending. We were providing professional development for them free of cost, and in return they were supposed to provide a referral. When of course they didn't provide a referral, we gracefully exited from that partnership.

Sandra, operations manager for a nonprofit using soccer to facilitate better opportunities for sport and recreation for marginalized groups in Asia, provided a salient example of the logistical challenges many SDP organizations face when partnering with community-based organizations:

> The officer in charge said we'll pass out flyers for you guys. So a day later, I went back to the neighborhood, none of the flyers were hung. I went to the office, and the flyers were just sitting on the desk doing nothing. So I said, 'Hey guys, you promised you would do this five days ago, you still haven't done it, can you please hang these'? Then I had to go home for Christmas break, and when I came back, still nothing was hung.

Another challenge of developing partnerships discussed by many study participants involved the numerous roadblocks of turning these relationships into long-term collaborations. For instance, Sam, the operations director for an SDP organization in the Sudan using soccer to assist refugee youth, pointed to his perception about the challenge of sustaining partnerships due to staff transitions within the partnering organization: "The longer-term partnerships are more difficult. Maybe six months down the line that person is gone from that organization or maybe they don't remember you." This is similar to Casey et al.'s (2009) findings about partnership challenges: "In most cases, staff turnover tended to slow the implementation of planned activities" (p. 143).

Finally, many study participants did not have experience or education regarding business management, partnership cultivation, or development work. Andrea, international management director for an SDP organization in South America, illustrated this point: "We don't have a lot of expertise in business planning and that kind of thing. So it's a challenge to try and scale out this project." Instead, some participants explained that they had become involved in their current position simply due to their love of sport, passion towards philanthropy, or desire to live in a different country. For example, Karen, program manager for a U.K. nonprofit using various sports to improve the lives of youth, shared that her education was aimed towards becoming a coach and had nothing to do with the nonprofit sector: "I was studying Sports Coaching . . . I really wanted to work in sports . . . but it was much more about the impact that sport and physical activity could have."

4.2. Strategies for forming and sustaining partnerships

Our second research question focused on identifying the strategies SDP organizations utilized to overcome challenges and barriers when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships. In line with previous literature on partnership strategies within SDP and sport management (Babiak, 2007, 2009; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Nicholls et al., 2011; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Whitley et al., 2015), we found that SDP organizations employed various strategies throughout different partnership stages. To this end, interviewees identified a range of strategies and tactics they employed across contexts and partnership types (see Table 3 for further details).

4.2.1. Focus on building relationships and networks

All interviewees, regardless of context or partnership type, spoke about the importance of building relationships and networks to form and sustain partnerships across all four stages of partnership development (see Table 3). Most common representative codes were "build trust" (27 participants mentioned) and "create bonds" (24 participants mentioned). Mark summed up the thinking of many interviewees:

It involves this personal relationship, it involves trust building, it involves having a mutual respect for the program. Our hope is that this continues beyond just a one-off partnership... the trust and that relationship [are] key to having a good partnership.

Another key to building relationships and networks was a focus on honest and active communication between SDP organizations and partners. This emerged as a salient strategy to mitigate many collaboration challenges. For instance, Jim advocated for the importance of honest communication for reaching compromises:

It's important to build close relations and to be very transparent and honest with our communication with partners, to be clear on what we do and why we do it... We put it on the table and try to find a middle way, find a solution.

As such, interviewees pointed to the strategies of building relationships and involving the partner in planning (see below) as paramount for addressing most challenges across every partnership stage (Gadja, 2004). SDP organizations then leveraged these relationships to build and sustain partnerships, and to improve communities of practice, foster shared decision making and dialogue, and facilitate integration throughout the various stages (Woodland & Hutton, 2012). Strong relationships and trust between partners can form a solid foundation to mitigate skepticism about sport as a development tool, address unequal power relations and issues of neo-colonialism (Coalter, 2013; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010), and combat mission drift precipitated by misaligned goals. Additionally, a stronger focus on building long-term and meaningful partnerships versus simply aligning with as many partners as possible would alleviate concerns stressed by Babiak and Thibault (2009), who noted diverse partnerships could raise challenges. As these relationships and networks are leveraged by SDP organizations to build and sustain long-term partnerships, access to resources (human and financial) and organizational capacity will be enhanced (Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016).

4.2.2. Demonstrate benefits to partner

Many interviewees spoke about the importance of demonstrating the benefits of collaboration to a potential partner when attempting to establish partnerships in the assemble and form stage. In particular, 27 interviewees remarked about the need to "emphasize positive outcomes" while 20 suggested a need for "knowledge transfer" between partners (see Table 3). The relationships and heightened trust between partners (see above) can build win-win scenarios for both parties, but SDP organizations must demonstrate the benefits to the partner during the assemble and form stage and not simply espouse evangelical rhetoric about the power of sport in order to mitigate skepticism about sport as a development tool (Coalter, 2013). Cindy shared how her organization emphasized how it can help the potential partner:

We emphasize helping the partner. The reason for their partnerships is that they have a large mass of kids they are trying to impact but they are noticing [some of] their efforts aren't going so well. They're not seeing change in academic performance, they're not seeing change in other indicators. We can help there.

Similarly, the mutually beneficial nature of partnerships, an aspect that many interviewees discussed as vital for forming partnerships, was explained by Chris, founder of a nonprofit in the U.K. tapping soccer to help at-risk youth:

We have a strong partnership with one professional football [soccer] club... It's been beneficial to us because the professional clubs' brand is incredibly helpful with engaging adolescents. But it's also helpful to them because they're seen to be doing something very forward-thinking.

4.2.3. Start small, then diversify

A common strategy which emerged in the assemble and form and norm and perform stages was the relevance of starting small with just one or a few partnerships, and then diversifying as the SDP organization's programming grew in maturity (see Table 3). Representative codes highlighted most often within this theme were "quality versus quantity" and "build strong partnerships before multiple ones" (both mentioned by 24 participants). This strategy enabled organizations to not stretch themselves too thin and deliver on what was promised to the partner, such as number and types of programs offered. Additionally, by setting realistic objectives, organizations were able to provide services and events as promised ranging from

clinics, to events and tournaments, to equipment and resources. For a relatively young organization such as David's, he expressed his view about focusing on just a few partners to mitigate power relation issues and to assist in developing long-term collaborations: "Find a few partners that you can rely on and just stay committed to moving forward together. Don't worry about all the mess that's going on around you." In David's case, he was referring to power issues of partners pushing their own agenda onto the SDP organization (such as type of programming and populations served), and felt this was easier to navigate when only a few key partners were involved.

4.2.4. Keep focused on mission and goals

The major strategy which emerged to combat mission drift across partnership contexts, types, and stages was the imperative for the SDP organization to keep focused on its mission and goals. All interviewees commented on the salience of this strategy, including 24 who recommended to "stay focused on initial partnership goals" and 22 articulating to "adhere to mission" (see Table 3). Karen believed it was vital to understand "where we want to get to and being able to articulate that... because it is easy to be pulled off in different directions." She went on to say that an SDP organization had to understand why it was in business, and that this could enable synergies with partners:

> I think the biggest thing is to know why you are doing what you're doing... I think that really helps when you are working with different partners, because you might not do the same things. You might not do them at the same time. You might not actually have the same outcomes... but you might be doing it for the same reasons. Therefore, you find a commonality which can strengthen a partnership.

While staying focused on organizational goals and mission was paramount, interviewees also stressed the importance of maintaining flexibility and being willing to compromise (see Table 3). Babiak (2007) and Parent and Harvey (2009) discussed the importance of reciprocity in partnerships, noting that every NGO or initiative has its own goals or aims, thus in turn all parties should understand what each hopes to gain. Babiak and Thibault (2009) explicated the difficulty in partnering organizations having similar goals because of multiple factors such as different missions or ideologies. They suggested an organization will have higher odds of achieving goals in a dyadic partnership versus a partnership that may involve several organizations at once.

4.2.5. Involve partner in strategies and planning

An important strategy to increase partner buy-in and reduce skepticism about sport as a development tool, mentioned by all interviewees, was to involve the partner in strategies and planning throughout all stages of the partnership (see Table 3). Two of the most common representative codes within the theme were "involving partner in all stages of partnerships" (26 participants), while 24 stressed to "attempt to arrive at decisions mutually." This strategy held true for all contexts and partnership types. Sam's thoughts are illustrative of many of the interviewee's comments:

> If you come to somebody and have the whole project worked out, they aren't going to be interested because their voice isn't being heard... From the nonprofit world we think it has to be cut and dry, it has to be black and white and we have all the answers.

Karen also mentioned: "We assess what we want to achieve, and how everyone is going to be involved in the process." Along these lines of formulating a plan with a partner, Glover (1999) suggested: "Ideally, a partnership should involve partners that build upon or complement each other's strengths" (p. 82).

4.2.6. Treat partnership as a business relationship

Finally, many interviewees felt it was crucial to approach partnerships as a business relationship, regardless of context or type, in every stage of partnership development. While important to help mitigate power relations and mission drift issues across partnership types, this strategy was mentioned more often by executives working for newer and smaller SDP organizations when forming collaborations with large funding partners. Specifically, 19 interviewees emphasized "do not build friendships, build partnerships" and 12 individuals advocated "not letting partners take advantage" (see Table 3). Most interviewees also mentioned the importance of having memorandums of understanding (MOUs) in place, to outline the partnership agreement. Sven, the founder of an SDP organization in Liberia using various sports to reach at-risk youth, noted the value of utilizing an MOU to hold partners accountable:

> We have a memorandum of understanding with the leadership of the community, this is your participation, this is our participation. If either one of us does not live up to the standards of this MOU, either one of us has the right to discontinue this partnership.

These types of MOUs and policies were very important to protect the SDP organization's programs and combat mission drift, especially when working with government partners, as explained by Maribel, director of an SDP organization in South America utilizing various sports to work at peace building with youth: "We talk with them about policies... how can we protect the projects... This provides the balance to get the project going."

However, there was also a tension between building relationships and trust and needing to treat the partnership as a business relationship. All study participants spoke about the importance of relationships, and many then also talked about the need to be firm with partners and outline goals, objectives, expectations, and responsibilities through MOUs and other policies. Several participants illustrated this awareness by discussing failed informal or friendly partnerships and how they

learned from these previous mistakes to approach future collaborations more professionally. From a theoretical perspective, this tension could manifest itself more in the SDP partnership sphere than in other types of sport partnerships, due to the newness of the field and its ongoing struggle for legitimacy and credibility (Coalter, 2013; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). There was also a tension for the SDP organization between needing to stay focused on its mission and goals to combat mission drift, and maintaining an attitude of flexibility and compromise with the partner. Again, this tension may be more pronounced for SDP partnerships than for other forms of sport partnerships, as mission drift may not be as much of a concern in the mainstream sport partnership sphere.

5. Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical standpoint, we demonstrated that inter-organizational partnerships are imperative to the success and sustainability of SDP organizations (Gray, 1989). We are the first to position challenges and strategies of SDP organizations into the four stages of collaboration theory (Gadja, 2004) and examine partnerships in relation to Woodland and Hutton's (2012) tactics for evaluating such relationships. In addition, we advanced several challenges and strategies which may be unique to the SDP partnership context in comparison to partnerships within more mainstream sport, most notably skepticism about sport as a development tool, unequal power relation issues, misaligned goals, and the tension between building relationships and treating the partnership as a business.

Practically, to mitigate skepticism about sport as a development tool and to foster long-term partnerships, SDP organizations need to do better at selling the value and impact of sport to potential partners, moving beyond an evangelical rhetoric (Coalter, 2013; Spaaij et al., 2017) to justify their programs through evidence. This could be facilitated by establishing partnerships with academics to provide more rigorous and valid evaluations and metrics (Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). Lack of business acumen of practitioners could also negatively affect an SDP organization's ability to astutely navigate the challenges inherent in partnerships and prevent itself from being taken advantage of by larger and more established partners. Thus, we recommend that SDP managers acquire the necessarily business skill set (e.g., financial and strategic planning, human resource management) that would be helpful in cultivating and sustaining partnerships. These skills could be gained through experience, mentorship from a person who has worked in the field, networking, and further education. Finally, SDP organizations should not ignore local partners in favor of just developing partnerships with larger, international NGOs, professional teams, and corporations to receive funding, where the possibility of mission drift is high. While the allure of a large international grant or donation from a big corporation has its obvious appeal, gaining the resources and support from the local community is often crucial towards providing access to additional human and financial resources (Svennson & Hambrick, 2016).

6. Limitations and future directions

As with most studies, the present study does have limitations which must be acknowledged, and which can serve as a stimulus for future research. This study may have been prone to both researcher and social desirability bias (Creswell, 2012). We have been engaged in the SDP field for some time as both practitioners and academics, and this integral knowledge of the field may have influenced interpretation of the results. In addition, study participants may have simply expressed views on partnerships they thought we, as researchers, wished to hear. To mitigate bias, we conducted member checks of transcripts and study interpretations with the interviewees, and tested interpretations with an external auditor not involved in the study (Creswell, 2012). While the spread of organizations in this study represented six continents and a wide array of foci, target populations, and sports, we acknowledge that this was a broad exploratory effort in which there were small sample sizes from each region, making it more difficult to engage in comparisons across regions and partnership types. The goal of this research was to provide a synthesis of challenges and strategies across partnership contexts and types; however, stemming from the present work, future research is now needed to compare and contrast challenges and strategies between regions, types of partnerships, and foci of organizations. We only focused on the perspectives of individuals working in SDP organizations; future studies may endeavor to include a broader array of respondents. For instance, from a neo-colonial frame, research should ascertain how partnerships benefit, if at all, participants in the SDP programs. Are outcomes for participants enhanced in some way from these partnerships? To this end, more participatory forms of research can be engaged in by researchers that allow for local voices to be heard and which address inherent power relations issues between researchers and participants (Spaaij et al., 2017). In addition, future researchers can investigate whether there are differences in approaches to partnerships, and associated challenges and strategies, between development organizations using sport for development purposes, and sport organizations attempting to do development work through sport. We did not notice differences in our data, but again, the sample may have been too small to enable concrete comparisons. Research focusing on more indigenous voices is also needed, as the practitioners in this study were mostly from high income countries, although they may have been residing in a low or middle income country to carry out their programming. It is our hope that scholars can build upon the work we have begun here and investigate myriad aspects of partnerships within the SDP context, with the aim towards building theory and informing practice to assist in further development of the field.

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