

Personal goals, group performance and 'social' networks: Participants' negotiation of virtual and embodied relationships in the 'Workplace Challenge' physical activity programme

Abstract

County Sports Partnerships (CSPs) epitomise the growing reliance upon building networks and partnerships sports delivery. This study investigated how social networks were created and contested in a CSP-led programme entitled the 'Workplace Challenge' (WPC). The WPC used a web-platform to encourage workplace-based teams to engage in physical activity by self-recording their activity over an eight-week period. Points were awarded for activity completed and a peer-challenge facility was promoted via online league tables, prizes and the opportunity to 'challenge' other users. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of seventeen participants recruited from one public and one private sector workplace and from a sample of participants registered as individuals. Two programme planners employed by the CSP also took part. A figurational framework was utilised to investigate participants' negotiation of networks of embodied and virtual relationships within the programme. Findings suggest the messages promoted in the WPC were disseminated and transformed according to the organizational structure of these networks. Embodied social relationships within workplaces reinforced peer support in professional I-we identities, whereas virtual networks sometimes highlighted participants' isolation. Moreover, emphasis upon competition within and between teams caused some to question their performance. Often, competition motivated engagement. For less active participants, constant comparison could prove discouraging, particularly if participants felt they had let their colleagues down. Planners of similar programmes must be cognizant of the uneven manner of programme dissemination. Contextual differences at the point of delivery including existing organizational structures and power hierarchies have an impact upon participants' perceptions of a programme.

Key Words

Physical Activity; sport; social networks; figurations; online intervention; employment; organisational health

Introduction

In sport and exercise, governance debates are set against deep seated, 'common-sense' policy beliefs about the potential for sport to have a positive impact upon society (Coalter, 2005). In the United Kingdom (UK), sport appears to hold a mythopoeic status as a vehicle through which cross-departmental government aims can be achieved and social capital can be developed (Coalter, 2005, Houlihan and Green, 2009). Nevertheless, the institutional landscape for sport policy remains complex (Grix and Phillpots, 2011) and involves a 'bewildering array' of agents, groups and institutions with a vested interest in providing sports services (Goodwin and Grix, 2011). Consequently, it has been argued that governance in sport is increasingly focused upon formation of links across networks (Phillpots et al., 2011, Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, Grix and Phillpots, 2011, Grix, 2010). Debate concerning how governance in sport operates still exists, however. Some approaches emphasise sports institutions and structures (Rhodes, 1997, Phillpots et al., 2011, Grix and Phillpots, 2011), whilst more interpretivist, decentered approaches focus upon the beliefs and

practices of social agents (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006). Furthermore, a modified decentered approach has also been outlined which integrates elements of both previous frameworks (Grix, 2010). All three approaches, however, have faced criticism for their lack of attention to power dynamics and potential conflict in sports delivery networks (Marinetto, 2003, Davies, 2005). For example, several authors highlight how tensions can exist due to contrasting goals and agendas between various agencies (Skelcher et al., 2011, Kjær, 2011), **which can fundamentally affect the manner in which policies are received, reproduced or resisted at different levels of an organisation, together with how decisions are made (and by whom) about how policies are translated into service provision.**

In the UK, County Sport Partnerships (CSPs) encapsulate this heterogeneous delivery structure because they rely upon the construction and ongoing coherence of networks and partnerships to deliver their objectives (Grix, 2010). Funded, by Sport England from 2003, CSPs were introduced to deliver National Governing Body and Sport England performance targets at the local level (Mackintosh, 2011). Key amongst CSP work is the pooling of resources, expertise and the creation of 'links' between organizations to develop local and regional networks and to streamline the number of agencies involved in delivering sports programmes (Phillpots et al., 2011, Robson, 2008). Moreover, CSPs often engage with groups and institutions that exist beyond the sports industry, including charitable organizations, community groups and employers (Bull et al., 2008). This approach is therefore based upon the assumption that both bridging and bonding social capital can be generated between partners by facilitating the production and maintenance of denser social networks (Tonts and Atherley, 2005, Putnam, 2001).

There are limitations to this rationale, however, because networks are constituted of a series of uneven power relationships between individuals and groups of individuals (Elias and Schröter, 1991). Consequently network development can facilitate the construction and reproduction of power inequalities (Blackshaw and Long, 2005). Concurrently, power struggles and competing agendas can occur within partnerships (Mackintosh, 2011, Hayhurst and Frisby, 2010, Frisby et al., 2004), leading to a **contentious element of partnership work** in which service delivery can become dependent upon how effectively power struggles are managed (Anderson and Jap, 2005, Coulson, 2005). In some cases the domination of one partner over another can see the subordinate partner's views lost (Rowe, 2006), or a 'them' and 'us' mentality can be adopted (Mackintosh, 2011). For example, studies have highlighted how, regardless of local context, sport partnerships can become vehicles through which pre-determined policies are delivered that are tied to government funding, targets, and key performance indicators (Grix, 2010, Phillpots et al., 2011, Mackintosh, 2011). At the same time, it has been highlighted how individuals and groups can resist or transform the manner in which sport policies and programmes are implemented and experienced by service users (Bevir and Rhodes, 2008), whilst some networks can extend beyond institutional control.

For example, the potential offered by virtual or online networks to generate interest, revenue and create a sense of community has been recognised in fields outside sport (Blanchard, 2004, McCullagh, 2009), and such networks have been utilised to create communities of participants within **physical activity** (Schneider et al., 2015, Wilcox and Stephen, 2013). Online social networks enable participants to selectively present only what they want others to see, which can improve an individual's self-esteem and lead to more positive feedback (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013, Gonzales

and Hancock, 2011). Indeed, evidence suggests that a strong link exists between physical activity and psychosocial health in the workplace, including in quality of life and emotional wellbeing (Brown et al., 2011). Online networks can also build new relationships that may otherwise not have been facilitated (Ellison et al., 2007), which in turn can create large social networks (Wellman et al., 2001). Nonetheless, evidence is mixed about whether such networks offer a supportive environment (Cavallo et al., 2012; Eysenbach et al., 2004). Analysis of such networks have tended to be quantitative social network analyses and focus upon network development (Carrington et al., 2005). Similar qualitative studies are lacking (Crossley, 2010), meaning there is a dearth of research which highlights the manner in which networks are actually experienced and contested. Furthermore, few studies have examined how the power relationships inherent in sports delivery networks, both virtual and embodied, can lead to contestation, transformation or resistance towards sports policies and programmes. Concurrently, there is a need to examine how networks of power-relationships within sports programmes influence their delivery and reception by participants.

The Workplace Challenge (WPC) programme

The current study focused upon one such policy-driven physical activity programme delivered by a County Sports Partnership (CSP) via an online web-platform (www.workplacechallenge.org.uk). The WPC programme was a local component of a national initiative targeting people in full-time employment via their employers, initially in several key postcode areas and subsequently across the county. The CSP which delivered the programme sought to create networks between themselves, local sports organizations and regional employers with a view to promoting active lifestyles. CSP employees promoted the programme by providing publically available information about local sports services through the local mass and social media and subsequently by providing updates and information on the WPC website. In turn, the CSP largely relied on employers to disseminate information to their employees prior to the programme. In order to participate, employees had to register on the WPC website either as an individual or as part of a workplace team, where they had the option to record their participation in sport and physical activity over an eight week period, as well as receive information about local sports events. No emphasis upon specific sporting activities was made, either inside or outside of the workplace. A minimum of three participants had to be registered from any one workplace team in order to obtain a 'team-registration.' 'Points' were awarded for activity recorded during this period, and two leader boards were produced; one for all registered individuals across the county, and a second according to performance within and between workplace teams. Participants were therefore able to virtually compete to accrue the most activity points with others, and prizes were presented to the most active individuals and groups. In total, 998 participants enrolled for the programme (Carter et al., 2014). Table 1 demonstrates summary statistics for the WPC studied.

[Table 1 near here]

Furthermore, individuals could 'challenge' others to a direct competition via the programme website. Here, only usernames were presented so that such interaction between workplaces was largely virtual under a veneer of anonymity. Focus was therefore drawn to performance in activities which, for many, occurred outside the workplace. The present study therefore examined the manner in which

the meanings and intentions initially associated with the WPC were reproduced, reinterpreted or resisted as they became disseminated through the networks of relationships both online and in selected workplaces. We considered whether participants in the scheme demonstrated autonomy or, as previous research has indicated, the programme represented a mechanism through which pre-determined, strategic health targets were delivered (Grix, 2010). Finally, the study examined whether the configuration of social networks in the workplace influenced perceptions of the programme. A figurational theoretical framework was taken to achieve these aims. It is to a brief outline of this approach that this paper now turns.

The figurational theoretical framework

The figurational approach, which largely coheres around the work of Norbert Elias, is highly relevant to the study of social networks because the nexus between individual and society is a key focus (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994). Elias argued that divisions between agents and structures, or object and subject, represent false dichotomies in sociological thought (Elias and Schröter, 1991). Instead, the figurational approach seeks to situate individual 'I' identities within networks of 'we' and 'they' relationships that cannot be understood in isolation, but rather as webs of tensile, dynamic power balances continuously in flux. These webs, or 'figurations,' constitute an unplanned social order constituted of interdependent individual 'I' identities. The nature of this society of individuals, in which all are connected through interdependency chains, means that the short-term actions of individuals create long-term unintended consequences because they intertwine with the actions of all within the figuration (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994, Elias and Schröter, 1991). Consequently, 'society' can appear to have its own game sense that is beyond the control of any individual or group, and yet is constituted and shaped by the actions of all. Moreover, relationships within figurations are fluid and dynamic and can be both enabling and constraining, creating both established and outsider groups according to changes in the relative intensity and duration of bonds of association between I, we and they groups. Established groups tend to have stronger we-group bonds of association than outsider groups, for whom a shared identity can be more superficial or recent. Established and outsider groups are also interdependent in terms of how they define one another. For example, members of established groups have a tendency to perceive outsiders as law-breakers and status violators by characterising them in terms of the 'minority of the worst' in order to reinforce a collective myth about a group, and to view outsider groups as in some way 'unclean.' Moreover, outsider groups often accept the established group's characterisation of them (Elias and Scotson, 1994). These inter- and intra-group relationships have been shown to have a significant impact upon the experiences of being physically active, for example in terms of gendered activities (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998), class-based marginalisation (Lake, 2013) and amongst ageing populations (Evans and Crust, 2014, Evans and Sleaf, 2012).

Moreover, Elias outlines in 'The Civilizing Process' how networks of interdependence, or interdependency chains, have become longer over time due to processes including rationalisation, industrialisation and the monopolisation of violence and taxation within states (Elias, 1982). Moreover, Elias and other authors (e.g. Maguire, 2008) have highlighted how technological advances accompanying the development of industry, science and rationalisation have led to time-space compression. Concurrently, advances in communication and the internet, for example, have

lengthened interdependency chains such that relationships can be created between people who might never physically meet. Outlining the configuration of such relationships is to illustrate the manner in which power operates within figurations. This is because examination of the density, duration and power-balance in bonds of association between 'I,' 'we' and 'they' identities (Elias and Scotson, 1994) enables analysis of the impact of individual actions upon the rest of a figuration (Baur and Ernst, 2011).

In such an analysis, the figurational approach is not limited to conceptualisation of disembodied networks. Indeed, the body plays a significant part in the figurational theoretical framework as a spatial and temporal fulcrum around which social processes act (Evans and Crust, 2014). The body, as a bearer of identity, is both acted upon by social, or sociogenetic processes, at the same time as social processes are constituted by the actions of individual bodies enacted through psychogenetic processes (Elias and Schröter, 1991). The emphasis upon interdependence between sociogenetic and psychogenetic processes in the figurational approach also highlights how bodies have physiological, psychological, social and historical components that intersect at 'the hinge' (Elias and Dunning, 1986). The 'hinge' therefore represents the point at which social processes and individual dispositions meet and blend to create the habitus (Elias and Dunning 1986), as social processes that regulate bodies meet at the juncture between conscious and unconscious behaviour to develop a habitus. This habitus influences but does not determine behaviour by contouring what is considered socially acceptable, and what remains above the 'threshold of repugnance' (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994). Moreover, maintenance of health through activities such as exercise and physical activity places the regulation of the body at the centre of participants' experiences (Shilling, 2003, Maguire and Mansfield, 1998). Indeed, sport and physical activity are oriented around the production, reproduction and maintenance of the 'civilised,' healthy and aesthetically beautiful body through a rationalised command of the techniques, practices and rituals of exercise and dietary regimes (Shilling, 2003, Maguire and Mansfield, 1998). Such practices serve to valorise regulatory, 'civilizing' practices and goals through the often uncritical promotion of physical activity as a social and personal 'good.' The WPC, as an exercise-based programme, was situated within this context of sports promotion and although its goals were more modest, including the promotion of active commuting and generating support networks oriented around physical activity in the workplace, as will be outlined below, many participants perceived the programme in a more competitive or disciplinary manner. **The current study aimed to investigate how power relationships within both virtual and embodied, face-to-face networks of interdependent participants influenced the manner in which the WPC programme was perceived and experienced. The methods employed in this investigation are now presented.**

Methods

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from a departmental ethics board of a higher education institution in the UK. Participant recruitment followed several incremental phases according to the development of the WPC. First, interviews were conducted with two key members of the CSP responsible for initial implementation. These individuals provided details concerning their goals for the programme, as well as outlining their planned methods of advertising and disseminating details about the programme to the wider public. Following these interviews and during WPC delivery, a comparative case study (Berg, 2004) was completed with two employers selected according to several

criteria which were set prior to WPC implementation. These included; 1) a minimum of thirty employees registered on the programme website in order to ensure that workplace the networks studied were at least moderately extensive, 2) that the employer's principal place of business was located within the primary WPC location, and 3) the employer would permit access to their workforce. In the event, two employers matched these criteria. **One employer was from the public sector (with around 1000 employees, largely office-based) and one from the private sector (with around 4000 employees, largely office based). Both employers were based in the service industry and were based largely in an urban area.**

An initial purposive sample of participants was selected by the research team from each employer to complete semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as it reflected the need to gain data from key individuals in disseminating programme information to others in their organizations (Bryman and Teevan, 2004). Following data collection with this initial purposive sample, snowball sampling was then adopted in each workplace in order to expand the research and ensure that individuals situated within WPC networks were consulted. Furthermore, it became apparent that an unintended consequence of the programme was to enable a number of individual participants to take part in the programme. Therefore, a sample of these individuals was obtained via the web platform. All **fifteen** participants who registered in this manner were approached through the website, and all those who responded took part in an interview. In total, 15 participants were interviewed; 7 from the private sector (5 women), 5 from the public sector (4 women), and 3 individual participants (2 women). Table 2 demonstrates key characteristics of interview participants.

[Table 2 near here]

Interviews were conducted face to face at the employees' workplace to ensure a minimum of disruption, wherever possible within employees' personal offices, and where this was not possible, in a quiet, convenient location away from other workers. Interviews with staff in the work environment proved challenging however, with many interruptions and other demands on participants' time. Consequently interviews lasted an average of 15 minutes, and several potential participants declined to take part due to 'work-related commitments.' Interviews with CSP staff lasted around one hour. During interviews, questions predominantly focused upon how individuals were informed about the WPC, what motivated their involvement, and how they felt workplace relationships had been affected. Probing questions facilitated a thorough understanding of participants' own logic of representation and were used to uncover and explore meanings that participants felt underpinned their experiences (Bryman and Teevan, 2004, Allen-Collinson, 2009). Interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. Data were then thematically analysed using inductive analysis (Bryman and Teevan, 2004). A number of steps were taken in this process, including periods of data familiarisation and immersion after each phase of data collection. Initial codes were produced from data obtained at each phase and then tabulated and arranged into themes according to observable patterns and regularities (Bryman and Teevan, 2004). Themes were then reviewed according to whether they accurately reflected the data gained and then refined prior to the next phase of data collection through dialectical comparison of data and our figurational standpoint (Bryman and Teevan, 2004). This process also enabled the interview schedule to be

adapted and expanded between data collection phases to ensure questions focused upon issues participants felt were most relevant.

During data analysis, comparison was made between themes generated in public sector, private sector and individually-registered employees to interrogate latent meanings contained within the data. Here, a 'two-way traffic between two layers of knowledge: that of general ideas, theories or models and that of observations and perceptions of specific events' was adopted (Elias, 1987: 20). The research team sought to provide an explanation of participants' experiences with reality congruence; that is, by reflecting participants' 'reality,' rather than suggesting their accounts reflected an absolute or objective 'truth' (Dunning, 1999). Furthermore, the interviewer managed their own position in relation to the object of research through recognition that their potential insider perspective (*verstehen*) and subjectivity (*perspektivität*) were prerequisites for grasping meaning. The research team sought to ensure a balance between involvement and detachment in relation to the WPC (Dunning, 1999). This was sought as the principal researcher registered for the website and monitored updates and the leaderboards, whilst the remaining members of the research team remained detached from the programme and did not access the web platform during the duration of the WPC. Throughout the research period regular discussions were held through which a reflexive process of comparison of our own experiences in relation to the widely publicised WPC and emergent themes in the data was sought in order to delineate (and minimize) the potentially misleading influence of our *parteilichkeit*, or partiality (Baur and Ernst, 2011). Key themes in the data will now be presented.

Results and Discussion

Emergent themes from data related to two primary interdependent areas; interview respondents' perceptions of how the WPC impacted upon 'I-We' and 'They' configurations of relationships in the workplace, and personal experiences and motives regarding their participation. Each of these general themes will be outlined in the sub-sections below.

The impact of network configuration on WPC delivery and 'I-We' and 'They' relationships

Interviews with CSP staff suggested that the primary goal of the WPC was to increase participation in activity by recruiting participants, and then to 'signpost' them to existing sport and exercise services through regular updates about events, which included local running or cycling events, for example. In particular, sedentary employees, or at least 'less-active' participants were considered a key target group for the programme, although no specific strategy was taken to limit recruitment to such individuals as the CSP had no means to assess baseline physical activity levels amongst participants and was keen to maximize recruitment across the community. Indeed, the success of the scheme was largely defined by the number of participants who registered on the website. Similarly, little distinction was made between sports services, and all activity was considered 'good' activity in this regard. Consequently, the actions of CSP staff tended to focus upon recruiting employers to the scheme, who would then notionally encourage their employees to take part. The majority of CSP staff time was therefore devoted to contacting and chasing potential partner workplaces via cold calling, and by using existing contacts to enroll current commercial partners into the scheme. Here, existing bonds of association were considered essential. For example, Janet outlined this approach:

'One of the biggest barriers is unless you find the right person in the company to promote it. Um, and we also used, following on from [a second CSP] scheme the council did last year, we used their contact list. So I kind of phone up those companies which were a lot more successful because they already had been involved in one challenge, so it was kind of easier, they kind of knew...'

Existing bonds of association were helpful in facilitating this, and CSP staff noted that during recruitment it was essential to find a 'gatekeeper' or someone able and willing to distribute information about the programme to other employees within an organization – referred to within the programme as a 'workplace champion'. This was based upon the assumption that such an individual would distribute unaltered information directly from the CSP to employees via the most appropriate channels of communication. Often, such individuals were familiar to CSP staff and could be identified prior to programme implementation, or had been partners in previous programmes. It was therefore felt that they could be relied upon to engage with the WPC and, possibly, to encourage colleagues to do the same. In other cases, however, there was an element of luck involved. James, a CSP staff member noted:

'Cold calling is good if you can get to the right person, but if you can't get by the receptionist, um it's quite hard to get the right person. I say, it's a bit like a school receptionist, you can never get by them, if you happen to get the right person, I think that's probably the most successful way'

Here then, established bonds of association, particularly those built around face-to-face relationships, were considered vital. When absent, failure to develop such a 'positive' relationship tended to result in low uptake or non-participation by a workplace team. Moreover, where engagement did occur, information relating to the WPC was often filtered, disseminated and reproduced or transformed within each workplace in different ways including via both mass and personal emails, phone calls, and via word of mouth (or through the web-platform in the case of the individual participants) according to participants' understanding of the programme and their roles within their organization. The assumption that information would be disseminated to employees uncritically and in unchanged format therefore appeared highly questionable, and it also became clear that the WPC was implemented via different routes across the two case study workplaces and amongst individual participants. Figures 1-3 indicate simplified versions of the three organizational structures through which the WPC was implemented and which we investigated, but which at the same time reflect only part of the array of employers that were approached in programme delivery. The impact that these structural differences had in these three cases is therefore discussed below.

[Figures 1-3 near here]

As demonstrated in figure 1, within the private sector workplace a gatekeeper did indeed exist and act as an advocate of the programme in a voluntary capacity outside of their official role. This person apparently had the endorsement of decision-makers in the upper-hierarchy of their organization. Indeed, participants described how they felt that their senior management had taken a lead in promoting and supervising participation in the programme. Emma commented:

'I think we have had one person who, I think its [name] or something, who has been sending emails about it, all of the like communications emails from one person anyway, I think it's like, er, the main manager's PA or someone high up, so they all come from her'.

Several participants from the private sector workplace recognised the efforts of the gatekeeper in promoting the WPC and in ensuring colleagues remained focused and committed for the full duration of the programme. The gatekeeper was considered 'proactive' and 'positive,' and Shaun outlined how:

'[She] was continually sending out the updates in terms of structure of the programme from more or less right the way through'

Furthermore, Hayley reinforced how the gatekeeper's actions were aided by the centralised location of the workforce, who were based in a single premises. Participants reflected how the gatekeeper had previously-established bonds of association with a large number of departments and employees due to her central role in the organization. At the same time, this individual had the power to decide upon and control which information was circulated, the tone in which it was distributed, and when it was delivered. In turn, the gatekeeper relied upon keeping up-to-date with the county-wide leaderboards and updates, which required her to continually log activity. Kate outlined how:

'[she] was continually sending out the updates in terms of structure of the programme from more or less right the way through. The way she drove it, she made sure it never lost its focus.'

It can therefore be observed here that the availability of social ties directly influenced action (Lake, 2013), and the gatekeeper acted as a fulcrum between those inside and outside their workplace. In figurational terms the role of the gatekeeper created dependent social relationships on two levels; between the CSP and themselves, and between themselves and other employees (Scheff, 2001). Dependent relationships are defined by a 'we-self' balance, in which participants came to define their participation in the WPC directly through the actions of the gatekeeper (Elias et al., 1987). For employees, the WPC was 'their' programme at the level of the whole-company, but primarily as defined by the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper's actions therefore enabled engagement with the programme at the same time as they constrained her colleagues' ability to define the programme according to their own goals and ideas. Hence, the distinction between the programme itself and the gatekeeper became increasingly blurred, and several participants referred to the programme as 'hers [the gatekeeper's]'. Hence, the gatekeeper increasingly acted as a hinge through which the 'we' group of participants within the workplace interacted with external 'they' groups, including the CSP and other workplaces.

Moreover, the number and strength of bonds of association within this workplace appeared to be a crucial factor in the effective delivery of the WPC, and an emphasis upon contributing to the team through shared participation in activities was expressed. Hayley commented how:

'It's just improved the atmosphere, its given people something to talk about which everybody is doing'

In addition, although the workplace was organised around individual departmental teams, 'supportive' relationships between these teams were described. Participants therefore considered the WPC to be a whole-company activity; awareness of lengthened interdependency chains was evident in this case.

Conversely, despite the public sector workplace having a similar organizational structure (see figure 2), perceptions of involvement at the organizational level were largely absent. Within the public sector workplace no gatekeeper existed. Instead, minimal information about the WPC was distributed infrequently through mass communication sources such as whole-staff email chains and online portals. Consequently, participants from the public sector workplace felt that, although their senior management did pass on information to employees directly from the CSP, they had not particularly advocated the programme or used it to achieve any particular objective. Concurrently, participants felt this reflected a lack of programme ownership by senior management, who did little to encourage or control participation across their organization. Phillip described how:

'the [senior management] didn't set this [the WPC] up, didn't encourage us, didn't give us, how can I say it, didn't email staff and say 'oh we noticed [employee 1] and [employee 2] have done particularly well this week'

Consequently, WPC participation in this workplace lacked cohesion. In the public sector workplace bonds of association were strongest between members of departmental teams situated in dispersed office locations across an urban area. Perhaps as a consequence, in the public sector workplace participants' knowledge of whom else was engaged in the WPC, not to mention their wider workplace figuration, appeared weaker. Employees in this workplace therefore considered the WPC a team-based activity rather than an organizational one. Strong bonds of association between departments were largely absent. Instead, 'we' groups were considered to exist locally rather than at the organization level. Sally identified this trend:

'I guess where people work in an office or in a building together and maybe they're a bit more active physically anyway they would think about it [the programme] and be more competitive and sort of 'egg each other on' [encourage one another] a bit more'

Indeed, an individual's knowledge of who they are connected to within a figuration is often imperfect, incomplete or inaccurate, and individual actions can be based upon this inadequate knowledge (Mennell, 1998). In the case of the public sector workplace, although interdependency chains ran within and between departmental teams, participants' awareness of them in the WPC remained elusive. Whereas the actions of the gatekeeper in the private sector workplace had apparently made cross-organizational interdependency chains visible via their focus upon performance on the WPC website, in the public sector workplace this focus was largely absent and therefore the networks associated with the WPC were smaller.

In opposition to both case study workplaces, study participants who either enrolled on the WPC without association with a specific workplace or enrolled as the sole representative of their organization discovered information about the WPC via mass communication sources (see figure 3). In this case, however, this came directly from the CSP through advertisements on the internet and social media. These messages, which were often openly accessible and related to the programme in

general, often bypassed employers entirely. Consequently, they appeared to be interpreted in different ways by different participants. For example, in contrast to the CSP's aim of engaging with workplace structures and whole-organizations in order to encourage **sedentary participants** to increase their sports and exercise participation, several participants considered the programme to be equally oriented towards individuals regardless of their activity habits. Stephen noted:

'I think the way the website was set up meant that you didn't have to be part of a team really. You could still be on a leaderboard and still be able to log what you are doing, and keep a check.'

This unintended consequence of the CPS's advertising strategy, together with the 'open' registration on the website, allowed many individuals to participate, most of whom were already highly active. The CSPs actions in promoting the programme through public sources had therefore enabled those not initially targeted to take part. The impact of this unintended consequence will now be outlined in terms of participant perceptions and experiences of participation in the WPC.

*Situating the self within WPC networks: **Personal experiences and motives regarding participation and Tensions in the I-We balance***

Amongst study participants, individual motivations and goals appeared to cut across workplace bonds of association. **Although motivations to participate were highly diverse, participants across all three case groups consistently tended to associate their participation with one of two main drivers behind their enrolment on the WPC**; either they considered themselves already self-motivated to exercise and wished to keep track of their performance, or they looked to the WPC for motivation **to record more activity**. The first group included all individually-registered participants and one participant from each of the public and private sector workplaces. **As outlined in Table 1**, these individuals scored on average four times as many activity points as the other, less active participants during the WPC. Moreover, they utilised website features such as graphs to track their training progress, in many cases in relation to other participants' performance. **Such participants sought to cultivate an active 'I' identity**, and reference to shared goals and 'we' groups were largely absent in their accounts. For example, **Olivia described that it was interesting for her to be able to compare her activity points against the entire range of participants, thus situating herself within the general population of participants**. Moreover, Stephen outlined:

'I train every day, fitness is very important to me, so for me it was a chance to record this and log it down, almost like you know a training-type diary'

Such comments were especially apparent amongst individually-registered participants, who all described themselves as 'very active'. The language used by these individuals in relation to their physical activity often focused upon terms like 'fitness' and 'training.' For them, the WPC served as a vehicle through which they could log and formally track their daily exercise habits at the same time as gaining rewards for doing so. Indeed, as part of the programme spot prizes were offered to highly active and motivated participants as an incentive. Keira described how the offer of a bike motivated her:

'I wanted a hybrid [bike], and I thought 'oh I can't really, I don't know what I am going to do, I am just going to have to save up this year', and then this challenge came up and I looked at it and I thought [about the top prize] 'that's *my* bike!...' So I looked at what they [other participants] did, when they did it, what type of activities um, how frequently they logged it! I know quite addictive'

This notion of comparison and competition was endemic in participant accounts of the WPC. For some, particularly individual participants, this was a motivating factor. Shaun emphasised this point further:

'I suppose when I was, in the first few weeks before I got my cold, it was definitely sort of pushing, you know I can see I've fallen behind the live sort of flow of people's points thinking, right they have done that I need to up my game, so that was quite good.'

Indeed, the use of a leaderboard was a key driver of supporting participation for some, particularly when participants had similar scores and felt able to 'overtake' or 'beat' someone else. In several cases this drove participants to do more. Keira outlined how this influenced the workplace:

'There was a lot of competition between us, trying to, you know, 'up it', you know going 'I did this last night', it was like, right what else can I do!'

Such attitudes, together with the constant availability of **data** relating to the performance of other participants across the county, appeared to conflict with CSP aims which focused upon encouraging sports participation amongst the less-active. At the same time, the definition of being 'active enough' remained elusive; reference was paid here more to other participants rather than specific activity guidelines **of any kind**. Hence, confusion was commonplace. For some, being 'active' meant being at the top of the leader board. For others, being active was to log activity every day, whilst for others, doing activity for five hours on one day was appropriate. Moreover, the experiences of other participants were interdependent with the actions of the most active. For example, several participants highlighted how they felt the levels of activity recorded by those at the top of the leaderboards were unassailable and intimidating. This left some participants feeling less confident about their exercise habits. Participants who had previously considered themselves active suddenly doubted whether they were active enough, and several stated they had lost all hope of ever being able to match the most active participants. Helen described this feeling:

'I was quite shocked at some of the scores on there [the website]...they all seemed very, very high... I was surprised how low I was, and I thought I did quite a bit but erm compared to a lot of people I don't. It made me feel really lazy.'

Seemingly therefore, the web-platform performed a central role in lengthening interdependency chains within the WPC. Moreover, due to the self-report nature of the leaderboard, together with the faceless nature of the users registered there, some participants doubted the honesty and accuracy of the activity reported by others. The 'virtual' nature of these relationships, many of which did not go beyond the website, created suspicion of these disembodied 'others'. All that could be observed of other participants was a username, gender and workplace, and participants were unable to speak

directly to other website users about the activity they were reportedly undertaking. Kara emphasised this point:

'I mean three hours of climbing, *you* [another user] didn't do that! *And* three hours of spin and three hours of boxing on the same day!'

These 'others' were not entirely faceless in the mind of other participants, however. In the absence of personal, face-to-face interaction with website users beyond their own workplaces, some participants created an imagined, 'virtual' image which they associated with the most active participants. Often, these had negative connotations which emphasized obsession or unnatural ability. For example, Olivia referred to those at the top of the leaderboard as 'fitness freaks.' As Wilcox and Stephen (2013) purport, online users are also often more inclined to present themselves favourably through virtual mediums, selectively presenting what they want others to see, and many participants expressed doubts about the authenticity of the information provided by others.

On the other hand, participants who sought to increase their activity tended to focus upon the team-based elements of the programme, but not in a competitive manner. Such participants were exclusively from the two case-study workplaces, rather than individually-registered participants. Within the private sector workplace, for example, participants were either encouraged to join the programme by other colleagues, or joined to be part of the team and help contribute to overall points accumulated. As a consequence, several participants suggested that the WPC had not fundamentally changed their activity habits. Emma commented:

'I don't think it [the programme] could motivate me more because I think that's just me being lazy...I just wanted to lose more weight! (laughs) I think that's every woman's goal isn't it (laughs)!'

For such individuals, the face-to-face interaction associated with participation with colleagues was considered the main benefit of the WPC. Hayley identified how other colleagues (but not herself) had found that:

'It just makes people more open instead of whingeing about work, they have got something else to talk about'

Such interaction was not always considered purely enabling. Combining both personal and professional networks presented challenges for employees who wished to maintain respectful relationships within their professional figuration, particularly with less familiar colleagues from other departmental teams (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). **The emphasis upon team competition in the WPC meant employees relied upon each other to log activity in their leisure time in order to maintain their professional organization's performance. In short, private habits were ascribed value, which subsequently became visible to, and scrutinized by, professional colleagues.**

This could be exacerbated by the virtual nature of the WPC figuration, and how this influenced participants' perceptions of their overall **position** in their organization. For example, because a minimum of three participants had to be registered to acquire a team-registration, participants in the private sector workplace became aware of their position in an organization-wide 'we' group because their management took ownership of the programme. On the other hand, participants in the public

sector workplace tended to focus more upon smaller teams. Moreover, where participants were the sole member of their department to participate they were forced to enroll as a member of their wider organization without having spoken directly to other colleagues. Phillip, a public sector worker, noted:

'there might have been [competition] in other departments but I didn't notice anything, in my team itself, I was the only one in it.'

In both case-study workplaces, this made such participants feel more aware of their lack of face-to-face bonds of association. Consequently, the lack of face-to-face, embodied bonds of association with colleagues could lead to participants feeling 'isolated' and 'separated' from colleagues (Sally). Evidently, the bonds of association created within virtual networks on their own did not appear to supersede more embodied, face-to-face bonds of association satisfactorily.

Here, embodied, face-to-face bonds of association were considered vital because they facilitated encouragement, discussion of common areas of interest and the relative 'seriousness' of a group's engagement could be defined. For example, Lily outlined how:

'We all kind of talk about it together, [it was] a good way of getting all your team mates involved.'

When participants were registered at the level of the whole-organization, however, such interaction was more difficult, and virtual networks were considered insufficient routes through which to engage with colleagues. Instead, they were publicly associated with unknown individuals online and, as a consequence, could open participants up to unfavourable comparisons that could reflect badly upon their commitment. In effect, by converting participation into a score and a ranking, the website opened up participants' physical activity habits to scrutiny by professional peers and, if their participation was low or inconsistent, left them feeling like they were letting their organization down. Seemingly, the WPC had blurred the boundaries between the interdependent fields of (public)workplace and (private)leisure. As if to emphasize this point, several participants suggested that they had minimal time to discuss their physical activity habits during **working** hours, which seemed to reinforce the taken-for-granted distinction between the two fields which the WPC had begun to disrupt. Physical activity, leisure and sport were no longer purely self-oriented activities (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Instead, physical activity appeared to become associated with the demands and obligations most common in the workplace. Participants' professional threshold of acceptable behavior therefore became transposed onto their participation levels. **Consequently, failure to match the contributions of others within a workplace team caused disappointment or anxiety.** Phillip noted:

'If I look at other people, like the guy I mentioned in sport for example, his score was four times my score (laughs). I'm not even on the scale here! Bit disappointing really. But I was comparing myself to others [in my organization].'

It was therefore apparent that sustained, embodied bonds of association which internally linked departmental teams proved difficult to challenge or expand through the WPC, and several participants focused upon using the programme to act as a means to strengthen and enforce existing bonds of

association in workplace 'we' groups in relation to 'they' groups often situated within different teams within the same organization.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study focused upon the manner in which the WPC programme was experienced by a sample of participants from workplaces from the public and the private sector, together with a group of participants enrolled as individuals. **Two service providers were also interviewed prior to the programme in order to ascertain their perceptions of what the WPC should look like and could hope to achieve.** The manner in which participant experiences were contoured by networks of relationships, or figurations, in which they were situated was examined. This analysis highlighted how programme dissemination related to the creation of we-groups of individuals within and across workplaces. Both case-study workplaces were divided into a number of 'teams' or departments with a central management team. **They differed in terms of geographical organization, however. The private workplace was based in a single location which, when combined with the presence of a gatekeeper, helped to ensure the WPC became associated with an organization-wide we-group.** Conversely, in the public sector workplace, a lack of central co-ordination meant that we-groups associated with the WPC rarely went beyond existing, face-to-face relationships in an office team **and were not supported by virtual relationships alone.** In both cases the importance of embodied, face-to-face bonds of association was highlighted in defining which 'we' group participants identified with. These relationships were considered to facilitate support, allow discussion of achievements, and provide a forum through which activities or achievements could be discussed, validated and reinforced.

Where such relationships were unavailable, participants felt disjuncture from their team-mates that was not compensated for by the virtual relationships created on the WPC web platform. Participants in this situation often outlined how, by rating their activity and turning it into a score, their physical activity habits became open to scrutiny by unfamiliar colleagues. This was a source of angst, particularly given that the WPC apparently blurred the boundaries between (public)work and (private)leisure activities and spaces. Indeed, the workplace is associated with obligation and accountability, whereas leisure has been conceptualised as a space of choice, relative freedom and socially-accepted self-centredness where the choice to participate or not is often self-directed (Elias and Dunning, 1986). The emphasis upon team-based activity in the workplace meant that, for participants who were less active, dropping behind on the leader board felt like 'letting colleagues down' in a socially unacceptable manner. In short, the WPC made them feel like outsiders in their workplace-WPC figuration whose actions had transgressed their existing performance-oriented professional habitus (Elias and Scotson, 1994).

Moreover, motivations to participate in the programme cut across professional affiliation and the establishment of 'we' groups of professionals. Here, in addition to professional identities, definition of the self in relation to how 'active' participants considered themselves was made in relation to participants beyond the workplace. **Perhaps predictably, as found elsewhere by Kahn and colleagues (2002), those who engaged most successfully with the programme were those who considered themselves already active.** For these individuals the programme was a chance to both track their physical activity participation and to demonstrate their prowess and conformity to the ethos that all

activity is good activity to a county-wide audience in a relatively anonymous manner. **In figurational terms, these participants were the established group of the WPC.** As found in other studies, this provided validation for the top-achievers, who found satisfaction in 'beating' others, and who received tangible prizes as a result (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013, Gonzales and Hancock, 2011). For those lower down the leader board, however, the impact of rating activity habits caused some to question whether they were really as 'active' as they had previously thought. Others despaired of catching the leaders, or questioned the validity of the activity reported by the most active participants. This lack of trust was compounded by the lack of information presented about participants on the website. Participants therefore 'othered' those at the top by caricaturing them as dishonest, 'freakish' or 'fanatics.'

In a similar manner to social network sites (Ellison et al., 2007), the WPC web platform therefore drew attention to physical activity habits between interdependent participants who may otherwise have remained largely unaware of one another's activity choices. This had unintended consequences. Individuals participating in the programme assumed the role of players, often working in a team, who frequently acted according to the choices that other individuals or teams participating in the programme made. Indeed, the use of leaderboards in the virtual figuration created by the WPC was an example of the power struggles that existed within figurations through a minimal number of variables. In this game dynamic (Elias, 1978), activity points became a form of currency that created a hierarchy based upon *any* physical activity. If an individual recorded a high number of activity points which saw them rise above other participants on the leaderboard, it was then the task of other individuals to respond, making the next move in the 'game'. For some individuals an inability to achieve sufficient activity scores resulted in marginalization or demotivation. The use of virtual relationships within the programme therefore enhanced notions of competition amongst participants by facilitating comparison both within their workplace and in the wider county. These short-term, virtual networks did not, however, replace the embodied, face-to-face workplace relationships which most participants felt defined whether their experience was positive or not. In this case, being a member of an established group appeared to depend more upon the density and duration of an individuals' bonds of association in the workplace than athletic performance alone.

Hence, the WPC affected relationships in a subtle, indirect manner such that comparative social relationships were constructed both within the workplace and beyond. These relationships were both enabling and constraining. The processual of participation in the WPC meant that participants had to negotiate several fluid 'I' identities that were interdependent with one another and which were also juxtaposed against other participants within the WPC figuration. For example, participants became part of 'I-we' groups according to the extent of, and their identification with existing social relationships within their workplaces. The bonds of association within departmental I-we groups could be strengthened, whereas for those who participated without concurrent access to embodied relationships in the workplace could become aware of their isolation from colleagues when face-to-face relationships were less well established. Moreover, the online platform gave a veneer of objectivity to comparisons between participant scores which caused an oscillation between workplace and personal goals. This offered competitive individuals the chance to virtually compete with others through the use of leader boards, at the same time as causing consternation and disillusionment

amongst participants who were less physically active. Here, the notion that being physically active was a positive, desirable thing remained unquestioned. More problematic, however, was the way in which participants' experiences of the WPC were contoured by the comparative, interdependent nature of the programme in which the boundaries between professional and leisure spheres were blurred, and in which identification with shifting 'I,' 'We' and 'They' groups within and beyond the workplace could clash with personal motives (Elias and Schröter, 1991). It was unclear, for example, whether some participants took part for 'me,' for 'us,' or in order to compete with 'them.' This created a virtual-social hierarchy based upon performance which simultaneously created an 'I-We' identity where shared experiences were emphasised through face-to-face relationships, and an 'I-in-relation-to-Them' identity in which participants sought to rationalise their own experiences in relation to both colleagues and virtual participants (Evans and Crust, 2014). Participants' autonomy within the WPC was contoured by their interdependence with others in enabling and constraining ways. Clearly, therefore, not all networks created by the WPC operated quite as initially intended.

Although taken from a sample of participants with whom conducting interviews was challenging due to their placement in the work environment and relatively short periods of availability, the findings have implications for the manner in which similar interventions are conceptualised. In the past, evaluations of workplace-based interventions have examined changes in physical activity, nutrition and other health indicators, and programme efficacy (Bull et al., 2008, Chen, 2012). These evaluations do not, however, focus upon whether such programmes can be dove-tailed to existing social networks in the workplace in order to promote physical activity all of the time. The findings also call into question the notion that developing social networks is purely beneficial, particularly if individual goals are overlooked or if physical activity becomes excessively associated with workplace pressures. Such fluidity is suggestive that a single model of defining how networks operate in sports governance is insufficient to encapsulate the complex manner in which power-relationships can alter service delivery chains and the meanings associated with a programme, and future research could focus upon how these dynamics operate in other programmes and in other populations. Similarly, the mode of interaction within networks can influence participant perceptions, particularly where familiarity was lacking, and participants suggested that virtual networks alone were insufficient for them to feel positively connected with others in the programme. Consequently, an effective combination of face-to-face and virtual networks appeared to offer the best potential for engagement with less-active participants in this case. Future programmes must therefore seek to take care to offer participants choices, for example by giving them an option of whether to appear on local or population-wide leader boards.

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