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Strategic or communicative partnerships? Insights from sports programmes in the criminal justice sector

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Abstract

The concept of partnership working has gained traction as an alternative form of governance to address complex and multifaceted problems. The popularity of partnerships is also evident within the sport and physical activity sector, where their inclusion has become a staple of initiatives that utilise sport as a mechanism for development and to address social ills. This includes the issue of youth crime, where partnership working has become embedded as a key component of crime prevention and desistance strategies. While partnership working has become one of the most overused terms in contemporary policy, the failure to adequately grasp its meaning and to identify which aspects might usefully support it effectiveness is a long-standing problem. This paper adopts McDonald's (2005) theoretical framework, which draws a distinction between strategic and communicative partnerships, to examine the partnership workings of a UK organisation that seeks to build a better and safer society through the use of sport in the criminal justice system. Drawing upon qualitative data collected from the stakeholders of this organization (n=35), the paper presents insights into some of the tensions and challenges experienced by participants during the formation of operational partnerships and explores how these factors result in the development of either strategic partnerships, dominated by goal-attainment, instrumentalism and managerial authority; or communicative partnerships, where co-operation is central to the achievement of objectives.

Introduction

The concept of partnership working has gained traction in recent years as an alternative form of governance to address complex and multifaceted problems that perennially face society (Gajda 2004, McDonald 2005, Dickson and Glasby 2010, Woodland and Hutton 2012). Of these, the issue of youth crime presents a multitude of challenges (Goldson and Muncie 2006, Bateman 2014, Goldson 2019, Case et al. 2020) and multi-agency partnership have become embedded as a key component of crime prevention and desistance strategies. However, partnership working is one of the most overused yet least understood terms in contemporary policy. Indeed, the failure to adequately grasp its meaning and to identify which aspects might usefully support it effectiveness is a long-standing problem (Rosenbaum 2002, Black 2010, Lindsey et al. 2020). Therefore, a nuanced, and theoretically informed understanding of partnership working is critical to improve policy and practice.

The popularity of partnerships is also evident within the sport and physical activity sector (Mansfield 2016, Baker et al. 2017), and their inclusion has become a staple of initiatives that utilise sport as a mechanism for development and to address social ills. While literature has presented insights into how partnership working is conducted within the sport-for-development sector, and highlighted the challenges therein (Jones et al. 2017, Welty Peachey et al. 2018), there remains a paucity of theoretically informed analyses of how partnerships establish and operate in this aspect of the sport sector. This paper contributes to addressing that lacuna by adopting McDonald's (2005) theoretical framework, which draws a distinction between strategic and communicative partnerships, to examine the partnership workings of a UK organisation that seeks to build a better and safer society through the use of sport in the criminal justice system.

Drawing upon qualitative data collected from the stakeholders of this national alliance (n = 35),[1] the paper presents insights into some of the tensions and challenges experienced by participants during the formation of operational partnerships. In addition, the paper explores how these factors result in the development of either strategic partnerships, which are dominated by goal-attainment, instrumentalism and managerial authority; or communicative partnerships, where co-operation is central to the achievement of objectives (McDonald 2005). Given the widespread use of partnerships within sport-based interventions that are aimed to divert or prevent crime (Kelly 2012), this context is salient to an examination of partnership working to demonstrate how tensions theorised as inherent to partnerships are perceived within this particular sector. Consequently, the paper seeks to depict perceptions of the characteristics of successful partnership working, and in doing so, provide insights which may contribute to our understanding of partnership working, not

only as it relates to sport and criminal justice projects, but also within the broader sport-for-development sector. Furthermore, given the prominent position of partnership working as a governance tool within current criminal justice policy (Rosenbaum and Schuck 2012), the paper seeks to contribute to policy debates regarding the continued utilisation of partnership approaches.

Partnership working in sport-for-development

As noted, the notion of partnership working has been widely adopted across multiple sectors of society as a primary strategy to cultivate innovation, conserve economic resources, build relationships, and solve social, political, and economic problems (Rosenbaum 2002, Woodland and Hutton 2012). Consequently, their appeal as a means to engage a broad array of relevant actors to address complex issues, reduce duplication, and pool resources, has endorsed partnerships as the default approach within the delivery of many development programmes (Rummery 2003, Andrews and Entwistle 2010, Dickson and Glasby 2010, Turrini et al. 2010). Indeed, the centrality of global partnerships to implement the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is testament to the value placed upon this approach within modern governance. However, the inherent complexity of issues at which partnership approaches are targeted and the diversity of those operating within them makes it difficult to navigate the relationship between theory and practice in order to understand what works and why.

Much of the literature pertaining to partnership working draws its theoretical foundations from Gray's (1989) Collaboration Theory. In describing how different organisations work constructively to explore solutions to social problems, Gray (1989) identified that effective collaborations possess five distinct characteristics: (i) stakeholder independence; (ii) solutions that emerge by taking a constructive approach to difference; (iii) shared ownership by all parties for decisions; (iv) joint responsibility by all collaborative partners; and (v) collaboration as a constant, emergent process. However, operating to attain these five characteristics is not without its challenges, and effective organisational partnerships do not arise without careful management and thoughtful attention to how their development enables outcomes to be attained (Gray 1989, Vangen and Huxham 2003, Gajda 2004, Woodland and Hutton 2012). Methodological issues further complicate this issue with respect to understanding how partnership performance leads to the intended outcomes, thus making it difficult to assess the contributions made to the communities targeted by their activities (Clarke and Glendenning 2002, Cole and Fenwick 2003).

Therefore, despite their widespread implementation, more critical literature has highlighted the potential weaknesses of partnership working and has challenged the likelihood of partnerships being able to simultaneously achieve efficient and effective responses to complex issues (see Glasby et al. 2006, Dickson and Glasby 2010, Fenwick et al. 2012). Furthermore, partnership working has been described as a term that is somewhat elusive, inconsistent, and abstract in its definition (Rosenbaum 2002, Gajda 2004, Woodland and Hutton 2012, Lindsey et al. 2020). While widely accepted by policy-makers as possessing the capacity to leverage fragmented systems and produce increased efficiency and innovation (Woodland and Hutton 2012), there is a view that proposes that partnerships are adopted not because they are proven to be effective, but because a number of key organisations stipulate their use to provide legitimacy to development projects or, more likely, specify partnership working as a condition of funding and means of ensuring accountability (Dickson and Glasby 2010, Grix 2010, Phillpots et al. 2011, Mansfield 2016). Consequently, a 'culture of partnership' (Mansfield 2016, p. 715) has been created where the necessity to work in partnership becomes an end in itself, as opposed to a means to an end.

Nevertheless, the appeal and presence of partnerships within the sport-for-development movement has largely mirrored the accepted benefits of collaborative ventures in other spheres and has become prevalent within initiatives that utilise sport as a mechanism to address development concerns (Kay et al. 2015, Baker et al. 2017, Lindsey et al. 2020). However, familiar critiques have been raised in relation to partnership working in this sector, with Black (2010) observing that the frequent use and (over-)application of partnerships has rendered them 'profoundly ambiguous' (p. 125) both in terms of meaning and implication. Such thinking has led Lindsey et al. (2020) to call for a deconstruction of the term partnership and replace it with a more nuanced appreciation of the ways in which relationships between various actors in the sport-for-development field can coordinate policy and mobilise resources to deliver on project targets.

Within the realm of the criminal justice sector, the utilisation of sport as a mechanism for individual development is a common feature of crime prevention initiatives. More specifically, sport is employed as a tool to engage young people 'at risk' of crime involvement or to divert them towards more positive life courses (Nichols 2007, Kelly 2012, Meek 2013, Parker et al. 2014, Morgan et al. 2019). While such initiatives often integrate a partnership approach to delivery (see Kelly 2012), few studies have examined the effectiveness of partnership working within the sport and criminal justice sector. Yet, in the studies that have, familiar opportunities and challenges have been reported (see Kelly 2012, Jeanes et al. 2019), with Kelly (2012) reporting that while partnership may enable a more

effective delivery of project services, strategic and operational arrangements between partners are overly complex and varied widely in their implementation. Furthermore, Kelly (2012) highlighted considerable tension among partnership members caused by the dual responsibility of delivery partners to support the recipients of the intervention on one hand, whilst, on the other, reporting information about the recipients to other partners, an issue that was intensified when local police were an identified partner. Nevertheless, as Jeanes et al. (2019) concede, there remains a limited understanding of the relationship between sport-based organisations and partner agencies within crime prevention programmes or how these multi-sector collaborations are formed and operate.

More broadly, empirical work that has examined the role and effectiveness of partnerships within the sport-for-development sector has attempted to analyse the structural characteristics of partnerships (Jones et al. 2017) and provide insights into the challenges in forming or sustaining partnerships (Welty Peachey and Cohen 2016, Welty Peachey et al. 2018). For example, Jones et al. (2017) illustrated how non-profit organisations often utilise partnerships to address limitations in resources and inadequate infrastructure but noted how these partnerships are constrained by poor communication, power imbalances, and issues of trust between partners. As such, they reported that partnerships in the sport-for-development sector are frequently disorganised and undermanaged, which creates structural disadvantages that lead to a loss of operating autonomy and a lack of cohesiveness, which ultimately limits the potential effectiveness of partnerships in the sport-for-development sector. Such challenges concerning the development and management of partnership approaches are identified in the wider literature (Hasnain-Wynia et al. 2003, Babiak and Thibault 2008, Harris and Houlihan 2014) which suggests that these issues are not specific to the context in question. Similarly, Welty Peachey et al. (2018) reiterated the propensity for sport-for-development organisations to operate and contribute to inter-organisational partnerships, but found how challenges were evident in relation to misaligned goals, mission drift and scepticism from other partners about the effectiveness of sport as a tool for development. Importantly, this research highlighted a tension between building partnerships formed on personal relationships or those that aligned with business principles (Welty Peachey et al. 2018). In keeping with other literature, this tension raises further issues in relation to the politics of partnership, where competition for resources and unequal power relations are often evident (McDonald 2005, Dickson and Glasby 2010, Woodland and Hutton 2012). Consequently, existing literature neatly captures the paradox of partnership approaches, which are acclaimed for their apparent inclusiveness, effectiveness and empowerment, whilst revealing the reality of partnerships as exclusive, ineffectual and potentially autocratic (Mansfield 2016).

Theoretical framework – strategic and communicative partnerships

This paradox is captured in more theoretical terms by McDonald (2005), who further asserts the differentiated nature of partnerships to the extent that in some circumstances they offer 'progressive forms of governance, but in other contexts they may be ideological fig leaves for dominant powers' (p. 579). McDonald (2005) presents a theoretical framework that proposes an appreciation of the limits and possibilities of partnership working based largely upon the context within which the partnership operates, but, more importantly, according to the logic of their social action. Drawing upon Habermas (1984), McDonald asserts how partnerships form and operate differently on the basis of whether the partnership is dominated by a 'means-end pragmatism' associated with an instrumental rationality, or the desire to achieve a common understanding via a communicative rationality. More specifically, the social action of instrumental rationality is infused with the successful attainment of stated goals where partnership working is driven and structured by these goals in a strategic fashion (McDonald 2005). Historical examples of this are replete in the wider sporting landscape with respect to County Sport Partnerships and Community Sport networks (Baker et al. 2017). In contrast, communicative rationality involves identifying aspects of consensus between partners as a primary objective, with goal attainment achieved through co-ordinated action (McDonald 2005).

Taking this argument further, McDonald employs Newman's (2001) model of governance to explain how social action is translated into the forms of power, authority and patterns of relationships evident within the governance of the partnership. As such, Newman (2001) identifies four distinct modes of governance, which emanate from the degree to which power is centralised or dispersed within the partnership and the extent to which the partnership is oriented towards innovation and change or stability and order (see McDonald 2005). Of these four modes of governance, Newman's analysis proposes two – namely the rational goal and self-governance modes – which have clear salience with the paradox of the instrumental versus communicative rationality that is present within many partnership arrangements. More specifically, the rational goal approach to governance is characterised by using centralised forms of power to meet objectives and thus, remain innovative and responsive to changing circumstances. Conversely, the self-governance mode is inclined towards de-centralising power but ensuring that social action is oriented towards retaining continuity and order (Newman 2001).

In relation to providing a theoretical framework for partnership working, McDonald (2005) suggests that the rational goal mode of governance, with its proclivity for pragmatism and an instrumental approach towards operations, aligns itself appositely with notions of what he describes as strategic partnerships. In such partnerships, goals and targets are determined and directed from the top-down, and a criteria-driven operating environment is facilitated through managerial authority that is focused on efficiency, and incentivised by the more powerful actors in the partnership. Typically, such partnership arrangements are exemplified by short-term, pragmatic relationships which are directed towards a strong means-end orientation (McDonald 2005), to exemplify a transactional approach to partnership working. Using the analogy of chess pieces, Le Grand (2003) highlights how the power differentials that are evident within strategic partnerships renders some partners to be cast as pawns, where their comparatively weak negotiating position means that they merely respond to partnership directives, as opposed to determining them (McDonald 2005).

In contrast, McDonald (2005) outlines how self-governance provides fertile ground for the establishment of communicative partnerships. With an emphasis on capacity building to enable partnerships to identify and solve their own problems, self-governance affords potential for more sustainable solutions to be generated among partners (Newman 2001). For McDonald (2005), the foundations for capacity building and the development of sustainable solutions is based upon the ability for self-governance to build genuinely empowering partnerships, where partners operate equitably and share common ideas about organisational values and project purpose. This is important because higher levels of perceived control at the individual and community level is associated with a perceived ability to influence issues at which activities are directed (Schulz et al. 1995). As such, the comparatively diffuse and more democratic structures of power that self-governance presents, permits opportunity for co-evolution of the partnership and the forming of projects based upon critical debate and co-design, where the 'force of the better argument – rather than say, power, money, habit, custom or fashion' (MacKenzie 1999, p. 42) becomes the operative way of functioning. Consequently, relationships between partners are more devolved and interdependent (Gray 1989, Woodland and Hutton 2012), where partners act as queens rather than pawns (Le Grand 2003). Therefore, and in contrast to strategic partnerships, working in partnership becomes the goal of social action within a communicative partnership, rather than the means (McDonald 2005).

Methods

As part of a wider mixed methods data collection approach, this paper reports on qualitative data derived through group discussions with stakeholders operating within a UK national alliance, that advocates for the use of sport in the criminal justice system, and wider stakeholders with links to and interests in the work of this alliance. The research involved two phases. Adopting a participatory based model of research which emphasises a collaborative approach to research design (Binet et al. 2019), Phase One involved a data collection workshop which brought together the alliance steering group members (n = 12 – see Table 1) with the intention of sharing ideas and experiences with one another in order to explore experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards partnership working. The deliberate focus on these aspects maintained the relevance of context whilst emphasising the link between research and action for the benefit of stakeholders and their target audiences, alongside a process of learning and reflection. This group comprised representatives from relevant organisations, including statutory authority organisations involved in the criminal justice and health sectors, and non-departmental public institutions. The purpose of the steering group is to share responsibility for deciding on the alliance's strategic priorities and managing the general delivery of project outputs. All members of the steering group were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1 Participants in Phase 1 data collection.

n	Pseudonym	Role
1	Ewan	Chair of a national sport-for-development organisation
2	Frances	Civil servant in a Central Government department
3	Henry	Civil servant in a Central Government department
4	Fiona	Manager for a prison education charity
5	Anna	Programme manager for an international children's charity
6	Kate	Representative of a national sport-for-development charity
7	Chris	Representative of a national non-departmental public body
8	Jo	Representative of a national executive agency for public health
9	David	Chief Executive of a national sport-for-development organisation
10	Jason	Chief Operating Officer of a national sport-for-development organisation
11	Richard	Strategic Lead of a national sport-for-development organisation
12	Suzy	Representative of a Higher Education institution

Lasting 90 minutes, the data collection workshop took place following a routine steering group meeting and was designed to initiate discussion between attendees via four main questions to explore perceptions concerning the characteristics of successful partnership working, the benefits and less positive aspects of working in partnership, and things that would improve partnership working. Prior to attending the workshop, the participants completed individual data collection

templates which encouraged them to document the aspects that they perceived as important for successful partnership working and the factors that helped or hindered this. This information was returned to the researchers who used the responses to guide subsequent discussion in the workshop. Two participants who did not attend the workshop completed and returned the template via email. The workshop provided time for discussion between participants and was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team. Research and consent information was distributed to participants prior to the workshop. All procedures complied with university ethics and General Data Protection Guidelines (GDPR), and participants were provided with contact information for the researchers with whom they were invited to communicate concerning any aspect of the research if they felt it necessary. The structure of the deductive data analysis was operationalised on the basis of McDonald's (2005) theoretical framework, with recorded data analysed using NVivo 12 Pro to identify and expand themes in the data (Braun et al. 2016).

Instigated by the research team as a discrete data collection opportunity, Phase Two involved a data collection event with stakeholders with links to and interests in the work of the alliance (n = 23 – see Table 2). The event sought to bring together people representing diverse organisations with a common interest in youth crime prevention partnerships and was structured around four, short (15 minutes) presentations from stakeholders working within the field of crime prevention and desistance strategies through sport. Seeking a diversity of views and experiences, each presentation was designed to provide an opportunity to build upon data from Phase One with a specific focus on the individual perspective, the community perspective, the multi-agency perspective and the prison perspective. Following each presentation, the researchers facilitated discussions between the participants concerning the content of the presentations and broader partnership issues to explore issues in more depth. These facilitated discussions lasted between 10 and 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Consistent with the participatory research approach, these discussions enabled the researchers to seek confirmation and elaboration from participants of the points being made in order to ensure that these discussions explored the issues that participants perceived as important for successful partnership working. Using a convenience sampling approach, participants were recruited through an open email sent by a member of the alliance steering group to known contacts within the sport and criminal justice sector. Representatives included statutory and local authority organisations, third sector organisations including those working in sport-for-development, higher education institutions, and professional sports clubs with an interest in crime prevention and desistance strategies. Again, all participants were assigned with a pseudonym.

Table 2 Participants in Phase 2 data collection.

n	Pseudonym	Role
1	Neil	Owner of a community gym
2	Ray	Project leader of a sport-for-development organisation
3	Delyth	Founder of a homeless charity
4	Keith	Director of a sport development consultancy
5	Darren	Outreach manager of a national sport-for-development organisation
6	David	Chief Executive of a national sport-for-development organisation
7	Jason	Chief Operating Officer of a national sport-for-development organisation
8	Laura	Representative of a Higher Education institution
9	Lisa	Director of a not-for-profit community support organisation
10	Carys	Development officer for a social enterprise for young people at risk of criminal involvement
11	Kate	Representative of a national sport-for-development charity
12	Emma	Representative of a regional active partnership
13	Sally	Representative of a regional active partnership
14	TJ	Founder of a non-profit organisation that uses sport to desist re-offending
15	Matthew	Representative of a Higher Education institution
16	Luke	Representative of a Higher Education institution
17	Mark	Enrichment co-ordinator at a youth charity
18	Mo	Founder and Executive Director of a youth foundation
19	Pete	Head of Community Development at a professional football club
20	Rachel	Representative of a drug and alcohol recovery organisation
21	Jack	Representative of a drug and alcohol recovery organisation
22	Steve	Representative of a regional active partnership
23	Liz	Community sport development organisation

Research and consent information was distributed to participants prior to the event and all procedures complied with university ethics and General Data Protection Guidelines (GDPR). As with Phase One, data recorded were analysed using NVivo 12 Pro via a deductive approach to identify and expand themes following McDonald's (2005) theoretical framework. Together, Phase One and Phase Two data provided an account of the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of a range of stakeholders relevant to the underpinning theoretical framework, to which this paper now turns.

Results and discussion

Challenges in partnership formation – building personal or business relationships

Respondents from both Phase One and Phase Two outlined that their organisations were involved in multiple partnership arrangements to reinforce the assertion of Welty Peachey et al. (2018) that partnership working is the lifeblood of sport-for-development organisations. Without exception, respondents reported how most, if not all, sport and crime prevention projects with which they were associated involved some form of collective or collaborative engagement with another

organisation to secure resources or deliver services. However, respondents reflected a breadth of perceptions in relation to how these partnerships were established and observable variation in how the levels of formalisation present within and between each partner impacted on attaining project objectives. In keeping with Babiak's (2003) definition of formal partnerships, several participants noted how partnership working had assumed characteristics of a business relationship in recent years and that this had beneficial dividends not only in terms of forming partnerships, but also in specifying operating arrangements (Welty Peachey et al. 2018). For example, when outlining the benefits of formal partnership arrangements, Ewan, the Chairman of a national sport-for-development organisation, noted:

Structure, I think, is the key word. Agreed operating framework, clear terms of reference, particularly in relation to our objectives – why are we here, where do you want to be in 12 months' time, so structure and protocol are very important.

Along similar lines, Frances, a civil servant in a Central Government department, outlined how formal partnership relationships were critical to ensuring that sport and criminal justice partnerships remained focussed on its mission and main objectives (Babiak and Thibault 2009, Welty Peachey et al. 2018). In particular, Frances explained how, in her experience, formal meetings and reporting structures had proved useful to maintaining a sense of direction towards outcomes. She reported:

I think regularly assess it [progress towards objectives], so have regular meetings, constantly have that goal and vision always at the forefront of your mind, so if it's clear to everyone what it is, and that you're regularly having meetings, you can regularly assess how it's going, what's changing, but also steer it [the partnership], so it goes back in line with what the original goal was.

In terms of forming partnerships, Jason, the Chief Operating Officer of a national sport-for-development organisation, outlined how formal, business-minded relationships helped to clarify roles and responsibilities for each partner and to 'know where we fit and know what that agenda looks like'. Likewise, Neil, the owner of a community gym in North West England that provides targeted provision for former offenders and individuals 'at-risk', spoke for many of the respondents by highlighting how more formal approaches to constructing partnerships were effective in addressing skill or knowledge gaps among respective organisational partners. He explained how the sport and criminal justice sector is comprised of many 'passionate people' who have clear intent and enthusiasm to utilise sport for beneficial ends, but that these same individuals may be limited in terms of business acumen to increase operational capacity, create effective

organisational/partnership structures, or source human, physical or financial resources. By generating formal partnership relationships, Neil indicated that a diversity of specialist knowledge and expertise regarding the instrumental use of sport within crime prevention could be brought to the partnership and avoid situations where partners attempted to contribute beyond their own capabilities. He explained:

I'd like to think most people get into doing it [sport-for-development work], because they genuinely just want to do good, but they see, for instance, a bid [funding opportunity] and think, "Oh my God, wouldn't it be great if someone could do that, let's do it". But, they're not capable of doing it because they don't have the finance, or the capacity, or the structure to do it. I don't think you go into this kind of work unless you have a passion for it, so people do want to deliver what they say they want to deliver, [but] we've found that what would happen is that people would - really cliché this - but people would over-promise and under-deliver.

This tension between enthusiasm and expertise that formal partnership arrangements could address was singled out by Fiona, who worked for a prison education charity and often partnered with sport-for-development organisations. She commented:

. . . lots of [sport] organizations that go in to work in prisons have really good intentions but don't really understand enough about how prisons work. So, I think it's important to have good cultural understanding and technical understanding before you go in if you want the project to be effective.

While the benefits of formal partnership arrangements have been widely presented in the literature and largely echo the testimonies presented here, an interesting development on the literature was the extent to which organisations involved in sport and criminal justice partnerships utilised formal, written partnership agreements when conceiving new collaborations. Respondents highlighted how documents such as memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or service level agreements (SLAs) were widely employed to further emphasise the formation of partnerships in keeping with a business relationship (Welty Peachey et al. 2018). Perspectives were mixed regarding the perceived benefits of MOUs and SLAs when forming sport and criminal justice partnerships. Among the more valuable purposes reported in the data, Delyth, the founder of a homeless charity in South Wales that often provided accommodation for ex-offenders, explained how the inclusion of SLAs provided role clarity and overcame challenges that she had experienced in partnership working when such agreements were not in place. She reflected:

I didn't do this previously with my [former] charity, but with this one, we have service level agreements. [Each partner] puts in what they are going to provide our service users, so if they fall down on that, because it's a signed service level agreement, it is easy to see [who is at fault] . . . we need to have these SLAs in place to show that this is what we deliver, but that is what you deliver [emphasis added].

Neil highlighted the value of SLAs when projects involved larger numbers of partners. Reinforcing Delyth's points about role clarity, he highlighted how signed SLAs between partners had become a necessary component of funding bids for projects that utilised sport to address crime, to accentuate the shift in partnership work to align with business principles. Neil explained:

. . . when you get to larger bids or larger pieces of commissioning work, towards the of it, there will be something there about how you're going to make sure, for instance, that every member of this partnership [will deliver], that you all sign this . . . so I think the SLA is only there really, I suppose, to get you past . . . to get you the bid. You know, [indicate] who's responsible for what, that's why it's good to have an SLA, not even something that needs to be signed, but just being able to go, 'alright, okay, we won't touch this because it's going to mess up with what you're doing'. So, to some extent, even if it's just to clarify the bid, an SLA is useful.

However, other respondents expressed frustration with the use of SLAs, indicating that their sole purpose was added bureaucracy, which diverted attention from the main purpose of the partnership. Respondents also questioned the extent to which these signed agreements actually constituted a legally binding contract between partners. Keith, the Director of a sport development consultancy and an experienced sport-for-development project manager noted:

. . . we've used them [SLAs] for years. I think one of the perils, one of the dangers that I've seen over the years is people will sign a piece of paper, it's not legally binding and they might not read it, to be brutally honest. At times that is a little piece of paper to use maybe in recognition of an organization, but whether that's practically understood by delivery partners at times, I would question . . .

Similar sentiments were shared by Laura, a representative of a Higher Education Institution, who highlighted the turnover of personnel with partner organisations as problematic when trying to enforce the terms of an SLA. Drawing upon her experience of using SLAs, Laura explained:

I've used SLAs and sometimes they're not worth the piece of paper they're written on. There's always a get out clause and [they're] not legally binding anyway, and the way that organizations come and go, and change the kind of management structure and is changing more every year, that sometimes you end up with somebody [as a partner] who wasn't even the person who was there at the time [of signing the SLA].

The apparent limitations of formal, written agreements between partners exposed further discussion points in relation to the formation of partnerships needing to be constructed upon more informal foundations (Shaw and Allen 2006). In particular, respondents indicated that personal qualities such as honesty, mutual respect, trust, and partner involvement (Welty Peachey et al. 2018) were more important factors in partnership formation within sport and criminal justice projects than more formal criteria. Lisa, a Director of a not-for-profit community support organisation in South Wales, captured this sentiment most appositely by outlining her own approach to partner selection within sport and criminal justice partnerships. She explained:

. . . this isn't just about bids, this is about our whole partnership role and integrating the members that we have into the community as a whole. So, we work with [multiple partners] but they don't necessarily sign an SLA with us for parts of their work . . . we bring them into our hub without going, actually I need you to sign this to be part of what we're trying to create. So, what I'm saying is, actually we need to think of partnerships in a much broader sense instead of it just being based on a piece of paper.

In this sense the organisational reputation of partners became an important factor that respondents emphasised, in particular within a highly networked and comparatively small sector like sport and criminal justice. For Carys, a development officer for a social enterprise based in South Wales that worked exclusively with young people 'at risk' of criminal involvement, the credibility of a partner was far more important than formal agreements in the form of SLAs. In trying to articulate a creditable partner, Carys suggested:

Sometimes the likeability factor, the rapport, the credibility, people who know you as an organization say, we recommend them. That credibility, so your service users think 'well, actually yeah, they're worth working with', it's a way round SLAs contracts . . .

Respondents outlined what credibility meant to them and, more importantly, how this might be achieved. For Neil, credibility was 'just about being honest' and demonstrating a passion for the work they did to help disadvantaged or 'at-risk' individuals through sport. Keith added that gaining credibility involved demonstrating an authenticity in their actions when engaging in a partnership. He commented:

. . . a lot of it is about people and like-mindedness. You need to be somebody who can get on [with others] . . . sort of find a common ground with people . . . [but] is it a bit of a salesman job, or is it more of a natural synergy?

Kate, who represented a national sport-for-development charity, suggested that in trying to ascertain the credibility of a partner, an important insight to obtain was the culture and values of the partner organisation and the extent to which these aligned with those of her organisation (Frumkin and Andre-Clark 2000, Shaw and Allen 2006, Jones et al. 2017). This was particularly important within sport and criminal justice partnerships, where an understanding of the unique challenges facing project recipients was as vital as a detailed understanding of sport. She elaborated:

. . . it's really all about understanding how the partner works and how they do things and having that set out from the beginning, 'coz otherwise you can have two different cultures working together and six months down the line by the time you've realised that, you're in a bit of an issue. So, I think getting that clarity at the beginning and how both of you work, what you're bringing to it [the partnership], really helps.

While many respondents, in particular those whose primary operational purpose was ground-level delivery of services, spoke encouragingly of partnership formation based upon relational aspects such as trust, credibility, and mutual respect, contrasting viewpoints were provided that outlined how a more informal, personal approach to partnership construction had severe limitations. For example, Henry, a civil servant in a Central Government department, pointed to issues surrounding corporate memory, and the maintenance of the accumulated body of knowledge held within individual organisations, and more specifically, held by pivotal individuals within those organisations (Walsh and Ungson 1991). Speaking directly about a challenge often observed within sport and criminal justice partnerships, Henry remarked:

. . . too often partnerships are run on the basis of good personal relationships rather than any sort of proper structure. Because there's such a high turnover rate in a lot of government departments and a lot of organizations, you can have a couple of years of having a good thing going and just one person moving on can set everything back to square one and trying to build that again, So there's a lack of consistency when it's based on personal relationship – that corporate memory . . .

Clearly, the findings indicate that there was no consensus among respondents regarding the extent to which they sought to form partnerships with other organisations based upon personal qualities or business principles (Welty Peachey et al. 2018). However, further analysis revealed that the nature of partnership formation within the sport and criminal justice sector, and the level of formalisation

in constructing these relationships, impacted on the operational and functional aspects of partnership working. To this end, respondents were able to articulate how their approach to partnership formation led to membership of a collaboration that aligned with notions of either a strategic or communicative partnership (McDonald 2005).

Reflections on strategic partnerships

As noted, strategic partnerships are based around a rational goal approach to governance (McDonald 2005), which involves an orientation towards objectives and outcomes, pragmatism and instrumentalism, and an emphasis on efficiency, economic rationalism and managerial authority (Newman 2001). As is demonstrated in the presentation of the findings above, respondents provided numerous examples of their experiences of being engaged in such partnerships within the sport and criminal justice sector and how their actions were influenced by prescriptively defined goals and the power that they were subsequently able to exert relative to other partners (McDonald 2005). As an employee of a national non-departmental public body, Chris had experienced several instances of strategic partnership, and recalled aspects that had led to the successful attainment of project outcomes among other beneficial factors.

. . . certainly that idea of improvement of impact against a set of outcomes, sharing learning, building capacity amongst the group, greater understanding of the issues and challenges involved . . . [and] if that partnership is done well, certainly to do with economies of scale as well, particularly in terms of value for money and the ability to raise [further] resources or funding . . .

In contrast, many respondents articulated their frustration with strategic partnership arrangements, especially those who lacked utilitarian power (Mitchell et al. 1997) due to their receipt of material rewards from other partners (see Etzioni 1964). In this sense, a common experience for partners within sport and criminal justice projects was that managerial authority was exerted through regular auditing and reporting on progress towards project objectives (Newman 2001). Carys recounted her experiences of this power imbalance, outlining how her role as a development officer for a social enterprise was regularly impeded by the cascading of targets from more powerful partners (McDonald 2005). She explained:

I would say this last year or two, we've seen a lot more scrutiny, a lot more challenges of what we're delivering . . . gone are the days where you'd just get a bit of money and go and deliver it [the project]. It's a lot more of a professional entity now. We are responsible for the reporting which unfortunately, I'm up to my eyes with at

the moment, outcomes, outcomes, outcomes . . . I feel like I've turned into this robot that just says, "What outcomes have we achieved, da, da, da?"

In trying to recall examples of her own involvement in collaborative projects that resonated with the characteristics of a strategic partnership, Carys revealed how the strong 'means-to-end' orientation (Newman 2001) of many sport and crime prevention partnerships detracted from developing projects that operated beyond attaining prescribed goals and meant that the often-reported benefits of partnership (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008) were overlooked. Consequently, there was a tendency for sport and crime prevention partnerships to operate in a transactional manner, where attaining project objectives became the sole focus at the expense of offering any value-added to the recipients of the project. She noted:

I suppose it's more of that transactional approach . . . people who are just there for the sake of it, who don't really care. It's that silo mentality. On reflection, why didn't it work? I think it was mainly just because it was about money, the workers didn't really care about what was going on with the young people, you know, that was their job . . . it was like, "We get the money, we'll engage with you because we've been told to through a contract" and it just didn't really work.

A further issue that was identified within collaborations that reflected strategic partnerships was raised by TJ, Founder of a non-profit organisation that uses sport to desist re-offending. He spoke of the challenges that arise from different partners being incentivised for aspects of their delivery (McDonald 2005) and that, in his experience, this had a negative impact when outcomes and objectives were not attained. In particular, TJ outlined how he felt pressure to attain targets to remain a valued partner to the extent that he felt 'there is no room for failure'. He continued:

. . . as a business partnership, we have got to expect losses, we have got to expect some failures and learn from it . . . because you have got some partnerships and if there is a failure, people exploit and capitalise off that for their own gain.

Other respondents recalled similar experiences of the competitive environment that was created when partnerships were driven by incentivism and the managerial authority of more powerful stakeholders (Mitchell et al. 1997, McDonald 2005), which can serve to embed power inequalities rather than increase influence within decision making processes (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008). For example, during Phase One, Anna, a programme manager for an international children's charity, relayed how competition between partners was often evident and the necessity to 'stand out' from

other partners appeared to be the objective of some organisations. Anna elaborated on her reservations about competition between partners:

. . . competition and attribution . . . and everything that comes with attribution . . . "my organization did this, so give my organization more money, or give my organization more headlines". I think that's an on-going tension.

However, despite these perceived limitations, respondents regularly found themselves engaged in strategic partnerships for pragmatic reasons (McDonald 2005). Intentionality with respect to achieving certain organisational goals or ambitions is a common motivation for partnership working and in many cases, it was clear that engagement in strategic partnerships enabled access to important financial resources or connections to key stakeholders or powerful actors within the sport and criminal justice sector, both of which assisted with organisational viability. For example, Keith noted that it was often in the wider interests of his organisation to be involved in certain partnership opportunities, despite the short-term challenges that might be created. He commented that he had experienced several scenarios where he felt his organisation was 'railroaded into working with sports development partners' merely to sustain projects and the employment status of the organisational workforce. Fiona echoed this sentiment by indicating:

. . . sometimes people go into [sport and criminal justice] partnership because they think it looks good to policy makers, or just because they need funding and then you don't necessarily have the same shared vision and values and that gets complicated, but that is a reality I think, particularly for the voluntary sector.

In this sense, data reinforced the power relations at play within strategic partnership arrangements to support Le Grand's (2003) assertion that partnerships of this nature accentuate 'partners as pawns' (p. 2). To exemplify, Jo, a representative of a national executive agency concerned with public health, outlined the nuances of these power relations and how this impacted on the strategic direction of the partnership. She explained:

. . . what you have is competing priorities and tensions, and those are the things that start to hit in . . . where you've got your vision of what you want to do but you're kind of fighting your way into other people's agenda.

Data indicates that the use of strategic partnerships, whilst widespread, appears to present several challenges to those participating in this research. Most of these relate to the de-humanising of partners, where individual or organisational involvement is reduced down to feeling as though each

partner is no more than a 'cog' in the broader project 'machinery'. This perception was summarised by Carys who likened some partnerships to be reduced to a 'product', but also typified the quandary that being involved in a strategic partnership presented.

[Other partners] get what we do, they like what we do, but it is a bit more of a . . . have we become a product? On reflection, I suppose yeah . . . I suppose, yeah, [but] you sort of go with it because if you've got a funder that backs you to secure jobs, you focus on that, don't you, and that's your bread and butter. So, it's like, "Well, if I've got to keep my team, I'm going to make sure I keep them happy" and then try to develop new partnerships around that.

This draws attention to the need for effective and sensitive management in order that sources of tension and mistrust, for example, competition for resources (Babiak and Thibault 2008, 2009), are addressed in a way that maintains consensus and co-ordination between partners. Indeed, while the majority of respondents were able to articulate their perspective of strategic partnerships from personal experience, there were fewer examples in the data that related to communicative partnerships (McDonald 2005). However, those who had experienced communicative partnerships were able to draw out the benefits of operating along the lines of a self-governance model (Newman 2001), an area to which the paper now turns.

Reflections on communicative partnerships

As noted, communicative partnerships are most likely to flourish within environments where self-governance is promoted and the priority is on developing effective partnership processes, rather than achieving pre-determined outcomes (McDonald 2005). Data revealed some examples of where a self-governance approach to partnership within sport and criminal justice projects was evident and how this provided the basis for better problem analysis in the first instance (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008) and the development of sustainable solutions that emerged from the 'bottom-up' (Newman 2001). For example, Anna, a programme manager for an international children's charity, outlined how self-governance was particularly important within the broader sport-for-development sector as it enabled partnerships to remain focussed on their primary purpose of responding to the populations that the partnership was in place to assist. She explained:

. . . one of the dangers of partnerships [is] sometimes you can get really outcome focussed and lose the focus on the stakeholders that you exist to serve.

Ewen agreed stating that self-governance was equally critical in sport and criminal justice partnerships:

I think we need to remember as well, that it's not about us, it's about our stakeholders. A lot of organizations live by their own internal objectives forgetting a lot of the time that they're there to serve somebody else.

Carys provided further benefits of a self-governance approach within sport and criminal justice projects and how this provided the flexibility to be innovative in generating sustainable solutions that were driven by all partners. She observed:

. . . it's more about transformational thinking as well. So, if funding is quite limited, how can we make the most of what we've got and how can we utilise other funding that might come in . . .

In this sense, participants aligned their responses with Le Grand's (2003) argument that partners are more active in planning and decision making when self-governing, and that this ownership inspires diffuse and more democratic structures of power that serve to motivate and stimulate action (McDonald 2005). For Anna, the focus on process over outcome enabled partners to feel that they were making an active contribution to partnerships development where partners, using Le Grand's (2003) analogy of chess pieces, were treated like 'queens' rather than 'pawns'. To this extent, the relationships between partners took on more importance where self-governance permitted open and trusting ways of operating. She continued:

. . . the test of a good partnership is the partnership endures personnel change. I would say that's almost an indicator that you've got an effective partnership. But I do think personal relationships are really important as well and that sense of openness . . . that everyone feels welcome immediately, and that's more than ways of working and codifying. It's really, really important because it engenders that sense of trust, we trust you to be acting in our collective best interests, but more importantly, in the best interests of service users, that's part of it, I think.

Along similar lines, Jason, the Chief Operating Officer of a national sport-for-development organisation, reported how self-governance allowed for more equal relationships between partners and facilitated a shared purpose which laid the foundation for the co-design of sport and criminal justice projects (Pratt et al. 1998). He mentioned:

. . . the trust bit is about respect too . . . so that's the whole point [of partnership] that everyone's got a valid space and that everyone's from respected organizations, but you're also respected people, trusted people with a valued opinion.

Carys continued this theme and spoke of how alliances that cohered with communicative partnerships not only equalised status between partners, but also promoted critical debate, with the purpose of developing specific solutions that were obtained by consensus. As such, communication between partners was less about defending a position of power, or restricted to conversations about funding or outcomes, but more open and based upon inclusionary argumentation (McDonald 2005) where collective experience and expertise of the sport and criminal justice sector came to the fore. In describing such partnerships Carys said:

I suppose it's the theory we all know, it's that fair, consistent approach, people on the same page, people that care. You know, there's passionate people, people who, let's be honest, give a shit and are not just there just for the funding. They're involved for the right reasons and are happy to share . . .

Jason admitted that the opportunity to communicate in a more inclusive manner created space to engage in critical debate with partners where operating in partnership became the objective of social action rather than the means (McDonald 2005). Therefore, and in contrast to findings related to strategic partnerships, communicative partnerships enabled individuals to be more open about failure or missed targets, and use this experience as an opportunity to learn and inform future planning in a more efficient manner (Morgan and Costas Batlle 2019). This underscores the importance of effective and equitable communication between partners in sport and criminal justice projects to foster partnership synergy (Baker et al. 2017, Hermens et al. 2019) and the ability to explore ways of improving approaches, as Jason explained:

From my perspective, I guess it's about experience . . . so having learned experience, as in, from failure, from success, from all of those things. So, in the sense of what's gone right, what's gone wrong in the past, so we don't reinvent the wheel, constantly. So, we know what works well, if we know what's happened, if we know what works well and build on that rather than start again.

While few respondents articulated experience of communicative partnerships within the sport and criminal justice sector, the testimonies of those that had presented evidence for how such collaborations facilitate an empowering form of partnership where individuals engage in a more

equitable manner to co-construct sustainable solutions (McDonald 2005). Jason summarised the benefits of this approach to partnership by remarking:

. . . basically, everyone wants to be part of that, so that 'want' is driving things forward, it's not a case of 'I have to, so I'll go along'. It's because people want to be in that room, hearing all the time from people in the network, that they all want to be at an event, they all want to talk to each other; North, South, wherever they're from, they want to come in to that conversation and learn and develop and grow.

Arguably, the scarcity of communicative partnerships within the sport and criminal justice sector is indicative of the broader political context and the pervasive influence of neo-liberalism. While the relationship between neoliberalism and sport has been rehearsed elsewhere (see Andrews and Silk 2018, Mori et al. 2021), the findings from the sport and criminal justice context further highlight that when social activity becomes subject to market forces, communities cease looking out for one another and become more focused on their own self-interests (Klein 2007). Furthermore, as a mainstay of government policy, solutions to address crime are often founded on a necessity to 'demonstrate impact', typically through the lowering crime rates. Not only does this further validate the ideals of new public management (Dean 2010, Grix 2010), but also may incubate a more strategic and instrumental approach to partnership working (McDonald 2005), a finding that is evident within the sport and criminal justice context.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to present insights into the characteristics of successful partnership working from within the sport-for-development sector by examining the perceptions of policy and operational stakeholders of a UK national alliance that advocates for the instrumental use of sport to address issues related to crime. Drawing upon their collective, considerable and varied experience of partnership working, respondents were able to articulate these experiences to reflect upon factors that may contribute to successful partnership working in the sport and criminal justice sector. In keeping with contemporary, and often uncritically accepted, views surrounding the worth of partnerships (McDonald 2005, Woodland and Hutton 2012), the participants of this study highlighted the widespread employment of partnerships as an alternative form of governance in related projects (Houlihan and Lindsey 2008).

However, more specifically, the findings revealed the heavy preponderance of strategic partnerships in operation within sport and criminal justice projects in the UK and how a rational goal approach to

partnership governance was paramount, whereby partnerships were managed through incentivised, short-term, and pragmatic relationships (McDonald 2005). Data inferred that respondents were often frustrated by strategic partnerships and often resented the additional scrutiny on the attainment of outcomes. In addition, respondents were mindful of a fear of failure and competition between partners, to underline the challenges that are typical of strategic partnerships (McDonald 2005). Nevertheless, it was also evident that respondents willingly entered into such partnership arrangements for reasons of enhanced legitimacy (Mitchell et al. 1997) or to ensure the repeated influx of financial resources to ensure organisational survival (Babiak and Thibault 2009). Crudely put, this points to an inherent tension between the social factors driving communicative partnerships and the political and economic factors that demand clear and measurable partnership performance. Hence, whilst organisational legitimacy and survival is maintained, such a scenario might serve to limit the potential of partnership approaches to address the very issues on which they are focused and demonstrate a somewhat unevolved conception of what partnership is and what it can achieve.

Importantly, the findings revealed perceived limitations associated with the more transactional approach to development work that strategic partnerships permitted, whereby the attainment of predetermined targets became the primary concern, rather than a broader developmental focus. In this sense, the instigation of communicative partnerships in the present context may appear to be more closely associated with the foundational aims of sport-for-development work (Kidd 2008, Guilianotti 2011), where working in partnership is aligned with the goal of social action rather than the achievement of narrowly defined targets (McDonald 2005). However, evidence from the current study indicates that such partnerships remain rare within the sport and criminal justice sector in the UK. As such, this paper provides important findings concerning the willingness and intention of actors to engage in communicative-style partnerships. In doing so it provides the basis for future research which could usefully explore the experiential nature of participation in partnerships in order to better understand the individual and organisational dimensions that support or hinder involvement.

While this study has offered some insights into how collaborative arrangements that are more characteristic of communicative partnerships may hold potential to provide a more empowering form of partnership working, clear challenges remain in enacting them in reality. Indeed, the notional benefits of communicative partnerships have long been argued (McDonald 2005), yet there is limited empirical evidence to substantiate the theoretical potential of communicative partnerships

in practice. Therefore, future research might examine partnership working through a case study approach and may also explore the wider moral and ethical dimensions of these partnerships as they pertain to the democratic involvement of the communities and individuals at which they are targeted. Of course, this study is limited by the relatively small number of participant perceptions offered, and the challenges of displacing the findings presented here to other contexts. Nevertheless, exploring these complex challenges in more depth will yield theoretical and empirical studies which better examine the efficacy of communicative partnerships in delivering more impactful collaborative work within the sport and criminal justice sector.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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[1] The stated mission of this alliance is to build a better and safer society through the use of sport in the criminal justice system. This is achieved through the alliance's various activities, which include actively supporting individuals and stakeholder organisations in reducing violence, crime and reoffending; building an evidence-base to inform best practice in this sector; and building a nationwide portfolio of solutions supporting sport in criminal justice.

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