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## Reflections on Return to Sport

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Kinesiology

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented community sport organizations with many complex challenges, but also unique opportunities to reflect and rethink their practices (Fullagar, 2020). This study presents an autoethnography of my experiences working as a Technical Leader for a community sport organization (CSO) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions were: 1) What were the features of organizational capacity that were most important to the CSO's effectiveness, survival and resilience during the pandemic? and 2) What were the capacity features that were most impactful to my own ability to carry out my role effectively within the club? Through the autoethnographic process, I observed leader dedication, redundancy, dedicated staff, shared values and open communication to be essential features of organizational capacity and resilience during the pandemic. I also observed environmental instability, failures to retain staff and conflict to limit the club's ability to be effective during return to play, and my own effectiveness within my role. Through sharing my experiences, community sport organizations may gain a greater understanding of the capacity features and necessary steps for efficient functioning and survival. Leaders and managers of CSOs may also gain valuable insight into how to effectively manage an organization through environmental uncertainty.

## Keywords

Autoethnography, Community Sport, Community Sport Organizations, COVID-19, Organizational Capacity, Organizational Resilience, Technical Leader

## Summary for Lay Audience

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented community sport organizations with unique opportunities to reflect and rethink their practices (Fullagar, 2020). This study presents an autoethnography, in which I study myself within my context as a Technical Leader for a community sport organization (CSO) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study attempted to identify factors that impact and improve CSO effectiveness, survival and resilience during the pandemic. Additionally, I explored the features that were most impactful to my ability to carry out my role and be effective for the club. Through the autoethnographic process, I observed leader dedication, tight coordination and control, dedicated staff, and open communication to be essential features of organizational capacity and resilience during the pandemic. I also observed environmental instability, failures to retain staff and inter-organizational conflict to limit the club's ability to be effective during return to play, and my own effectiveness within my role. Through sharing my experiences, sporting organizations may gain a greater understanding of the features and necessary steps for efficient functioning and survival during an external environmental threat, such as a pandemic. Leaders and managers of CSOs may also gain valuable insight into how to effectively manage an organization through environmental uncertainty.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my community sport club for allowing me to conduct this project and study myself within the context of working for the organization. Thank you specifically to “PC” for her willingness and support throughout the past year.

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Alison Doherty, for inspiring me to begin this autoethnographic process, pushing me in the right direction to keep an open mind throughout in letting new findings emerge, and for her attention and support through the many iterations of this project.

Thank you to the proposal committee, Dr. Laura Misener and Dr. Angela Schneider, for setting me on the right track with the methodology and for their crucial advice in allowing me to think outside the box. Thank you to the examination committee for taking the time to be part of the finishing stages of this project, and for their thoughtful suggestions.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

On March 12, 2020, amid sport cancellations around the globe, provincial and national sport organizations across Canada announced that all sanctioned sporting activity, including practices, games, tournaments, courses, disciplinary hearings and more, would be postponed indefinitely due to the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, community sport organizations (CSOs) were forced to bring their operations to a halt and scrap plans for their upcoming seasons. Since those initial cancellations of sport across Ontario, organizations were required to adapt their programming to meet the changing needs of society (Doherty, Millar, & Misener, 2020; Fullagar, 2020). In the early stages of the pandemic, sport administrators were not prepared to deal with cancellations and had to pivot quickly to utilize their resourcefulness and overcome the threatening situation from the environment (Millar, 2020a). CSOs across Canada were also dealt blows to their financial capacity due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson, 2020). They were forced to rethink budgets, apply for emergency funding, and reopen registration for brand new, adapted programs in response to a drastic drop in participation (Anderson, 2020). Cancellations of events also posed a great stress on the people who spent hours of time planning for them (Millar, 2020a). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also presented CSOs with unique opportunities to rethink their practices and inspire change (Fullagar, 2020). CSOs have needed to shift focus to safety as their number one priority above all else (Johnston, Millar, & Morrow, 2020; Millar, 2020b; Pierce et al., 2020), put a greater emphasis on creativity and innovation (Doherty et al., 2020; Millar, 2020b), and connect with external organizations and networks to learn from and support one another

(Millar, 2020b). The pandemic has given sport directors and administrators a chance to reflect on how their organizations could be more impactful, inclusive and equitable, given the changes that already had to be made to their programming to begin with (Millar, 2020b). Doherty et al. (2020) suggested there is an opportunity to build on existing knowledge within community sport by asking new research questions to ensure a more resilient future for the community sport sector.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine my role and experiences as a Technical Leader for a community sport organization (CSO) in Southwestern Ontario during the pandemic. Through an autoethnography, I detail my experiences with the management features and functions of this organization – and specifically its organizational capacity to return to sport – while also documenting and sharing my reactions and internalizations of the events. Specifically, I reflect on the questions: *(1) What were the features of organizational capacity most important to the CSO's effectiveness, survival and resilience during the pandemic? and 2) What were the capacity features that were most impactful to my own ability to carry out my role effectively within the club?*

An autoethnography is a self-narrative, first person account of a specific setting or event (Ellis, 2004). It is autobiographical in nature and attempts to connect personal experiences with greater cultural themes (Carter, 2016). A few examples of autoethnographies in sport include a volunteer's experiences at the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver (Kodama, Doherty, & Popovich, 2013); power relationships between a coach and an elite rower (Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008); refereeing community level basketball (Schaeperkoetter, 2017); and refereeing youth rugby (Baldwin, 2010).

Autoethnographies in the context of youth sport and CSOs are less common, and particularly autoethnographies of coaches or those in administrative roles (Cooper, Grenier, & Macaulay, 2017). Studying one's experiences in a given organization in the form of an autoethnography could be useful for enhancing knowledge in the field. A strength of autoethnographies is that they can provide in-depth insights and rely on the researcher's direct interpretation of an experience rather than misinterpreting the insights of others (Lapadat, 2017). As a result, new insights can be provided into the organizational context that previous research may have neglected.

The focus of the study is my experiences working for a CSO in Southwestern Ontario – which will be known as Organization A. The name of the organization and the kind of sport it offers are not disclosed in the study in order to maintain confidentiality (Lapadat, 2017). Organization A specializes in recreational programming, striving to provide a fun and safe experience for youth of all ages and abilities to enjoy the sport. Within Organization A, I hold the role of the club's Technical Director, overseeing all players, staff, coaches, teams, and curricula at the club. I am responsible for the day-to-day operations related to the sporting activity, rather than administrative tasks that happen outside of the sporting activity. My research provides insight, through my eyes, to club capacity for functioning and survival during an external threat such as a pandemic and the phases of return to sport, and the role of a technical leader in that process. The autoethnography also provides me with a greater understanding of my role as a Technical Leader during the pandemic, and insights to how I can achieve greater success within that role moving forward.

In order to have a framework to connect my experiences with greater cultural themes (Carter, 2016), the following section provides a literature review of CSO capacity for performance and goal achievement, and for resilience in the face of threats. I also provide a brief review of academic and grey literature published to date that informs our understanding of CSO and youth sport return to play in the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by a review of the autoethnographic method.

## 1.1 Community Sport Capacity

CSOs are non-profit, voluntary organizations that provide a variety of sport and recreation opportunities in their communities (Doherty & Misener, 2008). They are a source of participation at varying levels, from recreational to competitive and from children to adult (Doherty & Misener, 2008). They are often run by volunteers, who take on various administrative, coaching, and support roles (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006).

CSOs experience particular challenges on a day to day basis (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). In the unsettling time of an external threat in the environment, such as a global pandemic, those challenges may be exacerbated and create extraordinary situations for organizations to overcome in order to both survive and continue to satisfy the needs of their members and other stakeholders. In youth sport organizations, members and stakeholders may include players, parents, coaches, staff, board members, referees, sponsors, facility partners, and sport governing bodies (Misener & Doherty, 2013). In the time of the pandemic, the various stakeholders that youth sport clubs must satisfy and the varying roles they hold in their communities, have intertwined in a way where an organization's need to survive has been added to goal attainment (Anderson, 2020). For some CSOs, that has meant stopping their programming; while for

others, it has meant adapting their programming (Anderson, 2020). Either way, these CSOs have made attempts to survive the pandemic, and come out on top for when it ultimately comes to an end.

An organization's ability to perform optimally and achieve its goals, and in the case of inordinate challenges to even survive, is dependent on its capacity (Doherty et al., 2020; Wicker et al., 2013). Organizational capacity is defined as an organization's ability to achieve its mission and objectives based on resources and attributes identified as critical to goal attainment (Misener & Doherty, 2009). Organizational capacity is considered to be context-specific, and influenced by several internal and external factors (Clutterbuck & Doherty, 2019; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014; Hall et al., 2003). Hall et al. (2003) conceptualize three broad dimensions of capacity that impact non-profit organizations' ability to attain their goals: human resources, financial and structural. The structural dimension includes infrastructure/process capacity, planning/development capacity, and external relationships/networks capacity. This framework has been adopted by several researchers examining organizational capacity for sport club success (Balduck et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Gumulka et al., 2005; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Seippel et al., 2020; Sharpe, 2006). The research on capacity strengths and challenges of CSOs is presented here, as a backdrop to what I experienced with Organization A.

## 1.2 Organizational Effectiveness – Strengths and Challenges

CSOs report strengths in each of the five dimensions of organizational capacity, as well as challenges. The multidimensional consideration of community sport capacity allows this complex situation to be understood. The strengths and challenges identified within each capacity dimension are presented below.

Human resource capacity is defined as the ability of an organization to utilize human capital (i.e., paid staff and volunteers), and their competencies, knowledge, attitudes, motivations and behaviours, for goal achievement (Hall et al., 2003). Within human resource capacity, dedicated volunteers have been identified as one of the greatest strengths of organizations, particularly those of greater size (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Seippel et al., 2020). Dedicated, enthusiastic volunteers and shared values have also been found to represent a strength of organizations and to be key to their performance (Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006). On the other hand, retaining those volunteers has also been one of the most frequently reported challenges for clubs (Balduck et al., 2015; Gumulka et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014). Balduck et al. (2015) specifically found that clubs had fewer difficulties retaining board members and coaches, but more difficulty retaining volunteers. Beyond human resource capacity limitations, organizational effectiveness may be compromised by interpersonal conflict (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Conflict can have many inverse effects on organizational capacity (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van

Bussel & Doherty, 2015) and it needs to be intentionally and carefully managed when it arises.

Financial capacity is the ability of an organization to deploy and develop financial resources (Balduck et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2003). CSOs need financial resources to provide programs to members, and to contribute to the longevity of these programs and the sustainability of the organization (Wicker & Breuer, 2013). In general terms, a greater financial capacity allows clubs to provide a greater quantity and quality of programming (Wicker & Breuer, 2013). Several studies have found a lack of sufficient and stable funding to be a challenge for CSOs (Balduck et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Gumulka et al., 2005). Poor financial management (Misener & Doherty, 2009), having contingency funds in place (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020) and a lack of financial support from external organizations have also been identified as challenges of CSOs (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Gumulka et al., 2005; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). On the other hand, several studies have found that the ability to generate stable revenue is not always a weakness of CSOs (Balduck et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Gumulka et al., 2005; Sharpe, 2006; Swierzy et al., 2018; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). Doherty and Cuskelly (2020) identified fiscal responsibility as a further strength of CSOs, particularly sound financial management and ensuring a balanced budget (Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020).

Structural capacity is the third category of capacity in Hall et al.'s (2003) framework, and is comprised of relationship and network capacity, infrastructure and process capacity, and planning and development capacity. Communication and formalization have been identified as particularly key elements to infrastructure and a

strength of CSOs (Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006). Inversely, poor communication has been found to lead to conflict between organizational members (Osimore & Abiodun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Unlike communication and formalization, facility access is reported to represent a greater infrastructure limitation of CSOs (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014). However, Doherty and Cuskelly (2020) found quality of facilities to be a strength of CSOs in their study.

Planning and development capacity involves the ability to develop and draw on strategic plans, policies and procedures (Hall et al., 2003). Doherty et al. (2014) identified strategic planning, creativity and plan implementation as predictors of CSO performance and goal achievement. However, only creativity and strategic planning were reported as strengths of the CSOs in their study. Later studies also identified creativity and strategic planning as strengths of CSOs (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Fasey et al., 2021). Meanwhile, plan implementation has been reported to represent a particular weakness for CSOs (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Moustakas, 2020), presenting problems for organizations in their structural capacity. The effective management of external relationships has been identified as another strength of CSOs (Misener & Doherty, 2009), while competition for resources has been identified as an issue, limiting the ability for CSOs to collaboratively work together (Filo et al., 2015; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Within relationship and network capacity, Doherty et al. (2014) identified the following elements as important for CSO effectiveness: personal connections, engaged partnerships, balanced relationships, dependable relationships and bureaucratic partners. Doherty & Cuskelly (2020) found

having a balanced relationship and the dependability of the relationship to be among the most important. The connection to and effective management of external relationships has been identified as particularly important to structural capacity (Doherty et al., 2014; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009, 2013; Sharpe, 2006), along with an organization's ability to implement innovative practices (Hoerber & Hoerber, 2012), and, following natural disasters, recovery (Filo, Cuskelly, & Wicker, 2015).

My autoethnography of my role within a community sport club during the time of the pandemic reflects on this work in considering the various capacity strengths and challenges Organization A faced during the pandemic and how this impacted our effectiveness within a return to sport.

### 1.3 Organizational Resilience

Previous research has demonstrated that community sport organizations can be resilient in times of strife (Filo et al., 2015; Wicker et al., 2013). Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) define resilience as “the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions such that the organization emerges from those conditions strengthened and more resourceful” (p. 3418). In their field survey of CSOs' response to natural disasters (flooding and cyclones), Wicker et al. (2013) drew on Bruneau et al.'s (2003) four components of organizational resilience: robustness, redundancy, resourcefulness, and rapidity.

Robustness encapsulates an organization's ability to withstand stress and adapt to the changing needs of society. It was measured by each club's ability to cope with the impact of unexpected events, withstand external pressures, cope with challenges, and deliver services during unexpected events. Most organizations were seen as robust in Wicker et al.'s (2013) study, particularly in coping with challenges and withstanding stress.

Redundancy refers to the extent to which elements and systems within the organization are substitutable for others that may have been compromised. Wicker et al. (2013) give many examples of redundancy that clubs used in their recovery efforts, including re-allocating resources within the club, substituting human resources across multiple positions, and implementing alternative options to sustain operations during unexpected events. Among these examples, the ability to substitute human resources was the most frequently reported for clubs in their recoveries.

Resourcefulness is the capacity of an organization to identify problems, establish priorities and utilize the resources it has to halt a threatening situation in the environment (Wicker et al. 2013). The ability of sport clubs to identify problems and establish priorities were seen as particular strengths for CSOs in their recoveries, while their ability to generate revenue from multiple sources was reported as a particular weakness. The ability to acquire support from other organizations – another feature of resourcefulness – was found to be neither a particular strength nor a weakness.

Finally, rapidity refers to the organization's capacity to achieve its goals during the threat, and to avoid losses and disruptions in a timely manner (Bruneau et al., 2003;

Wicker et al., 2013). Organizations in their study had problems fully restoring their services in a timely fashion, but fewer problems achieving their goals within the same time frame. This suggests that CSOs may still achieve their goals in times of strife, even if they are required to adapt their programs and identify new ways of implementing sport. Further, Wicker et al. (2013) identified several elements of capacity that clubs utilized to aid in their short-term recovery effort up to three months after natural disasters – most notably, the volunteer workforce (human resources), financial resources of the club and grants from the government. In support of this study, Fasey et al. (2021) also identified several characteristics of resilient organizations in their field survey, with a focus on elite sport, including effective communication, shared values, awareness of priorities, employee commitment and enthusiasm of organizational members. Although a club's resilience may be different in the face of a natural disaster than a pandemic, Wicker et al.'s (2013) study provides a basis for considering key capacity features to recovering and responding in the face of an environmental threat.

## 1.4 COVID-19 Return to Play Literature Overview

In the case of this study and the context of a pandemic, it is inevitable and important that organizations adapt their programming to meet the changing needs of society (Doherty, Millar & Misener, 2020; Fullagar, 2020). But the capacity of sport clubs to recover and return to sport during the time of the pandemic may depend on their ability to draw on critical resources (Doherty et al., 2020). Clubs should assess their capacity, and understand where they are limited in regards to dealing with emerging items of interest like safe sport practices (Doherty et al., 2020). That said, the ability of CSOs to return to play in any fashion, let alone implement new programming and engage

in innovation, may be dependent on directives from their governing organizations and the organization's ability to acquire and utilize critical resources, such as human support and external funding (Wicker et al., 2013). If clubs do not have the capacity to meet the guidelines set by their governing bodies or the capacity to create new innovations within those guidelines, they may not be able to successfully complete those changes (Doherty et al., 2020).

Although literature surrounding return to sport under COVID-19 is limited, there are several articles that can be found on the Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC), a Canadian sporting website that details specific experiences to implementing sport during the pandemic. In the early stages of the pandemic, sport administrators were not prepared to deal with cancellations and had to pivot quickly to utilize their resourcefulness and overcome the threatening situation from the environment (Millar, 2020a). Proper planning and effective project management in advance of major events allowed sport administrators to pivot quickly and disseminate the information to various stakeholders (Anderson, 2020; Millar, 2020a). Volleyball Canada for example took a few extra days than most to cancel their upcoming national tournament for youth athletes. They made the decision on March 19, 2020, and announced it to the public on March 24, 2020 (Millar, 2020a). This delayed announcement gave the organization time to work with their provincial associations, staff, partners, and key stakeholders to review logistics and craft consistent messages across all platforms (Millar, 2020a).

Open communication with stakeholders such as staff, volunteers and members has been consistently mentioned as critical to return to sport in the COVID-19 literature to this point (Anderson, 2020; Doherty et al., 2020; Millar, 2020a, Millar 2020b).

Cancellations of events due to the pandemic also imposed stress on the people who spent hours of time planning for them (Millar, 2020a). The events were many years in the making, requiring thousands of hours of staff and volunteer time. Considering the importance of human resources in implementing sport programming (Doherty et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009), it may be important that CSOs work to engage these stakeholders and provide support for their mental health. For example, some major event planners who suffered cancellations to their events in March allowed their staff and volunteers opportunities to share their feelings, thoughts and emotions regarding the cancellations (Millar, 2020a). This was thought to be an important step taken by these organizations in engaging their stakeholders (Millar, 2020a). Some organizations engaged stakeholders by distributing surveys concerning what a safe return to sport might look like from their perspective (Anderson, 2020). Other organizations created return to play guides for their members to read, allowing their members to stay up to date with all the protocols and procedures in place upon a return to sport (Millar, 2020b). This level of engagement would have been key for all CSOs to consider during their preparations for return to sport, as sports rely on dedicated volunteers and staff to oversee their programs (Anderson, 2020; Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009), in addition to community buy-in and support (Anderson, 2020).

In their return to play processes, CSOs often focused on safety as their number one priority (Millar, 2020b; Pierce et al., 2020). They were required to spend considerable time understanding and applying directives from health authorities, ensuring they were compliant to new health orders. Some even implemented new positions, such as medical and safety officers, building on their human resource capacity (Millar, 2020b).

Johnston, Millar and Morrow (2020) suggest that sporting organizations have paid greater attention to hygiene and safety during return to sport in the pandemic, and will continue to do so now in the future. Members have also put a greater emphasis on safety and hygiene (Pierce et al., 2020). In their study, participants demonstrated a willingness to pay additional costs in their registration fees to cover additional safety and hygiene costs, such as hiring a professional safety team (Pierce et al., 2020). Organizations have also put a greater emphasis on creativity and innovation (Millar, 2020b), and connecting with external organizations and networks to learn from and support one another (Millar, 2020b). The pandemic gave sport leaders a chance to reflect on how they could be more impactful, inclusive and equitable, given the changes that already had to be made to their programming to begin with (Millar, 2020b). Starting small, with adapted programming at a basic level was one such change that organizations identified as important in early return to play phases for CSOs (Millar, 2020b).

In this autoethnography, I attempt to add to the existing literature on COVID-19 return to sport, with an in-depth look at my role as a Technical Leader of a CSO during the return to play process.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative method capable of providing detailed insight into a phenomenon through exploration of an individual's experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographers reflexively examine personal experience throughout the research process (Ellis et al., 2011). They decide who, what, when, where and how to do research, increasing the ease of access to data collection and decisions that are normally tied to institutional environments (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography can radically alter an individual's perception of the past, inform their present, and reshape their future, if they are aware and open to the transformative effects (Custer, 2014). Through interpretation and analysis of their own reflective narratives, autoethnographers express personal experiences to analyze cultural beliefs and social interactions and connect those insights to their own context and identity (Wall, 2008).

Autoethnography can also raise awareness to wider communities and allow others to reflect on their lives through empathizing with the stories presented (Mendez, 2013).

Despite it being a method that studies the self, the goal of autoethnography is often to educate others and bring awareness to wider social contexts and phenomena (Anderson, 2006; Mendez, 2013). Mendez (2013) describes the aim of autoethnography as reflexively recreating the researcher's experience in a way that resonates with the reader and inspires critical reflection into the researcher's experience.

Autoethnographies have generally been classified under two distinct types: evocative (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and analytic (Anderson, 2006). Both have the potential to enhance collective understanding of the social worlds we live in and make

meaning from involvement within sport and organizations (Cooper et al., 2017).

Evocative autoethnographies focus on the researcher's life and critical reflexivity of these lived experiences through an exploration of affective emotions. They can be written as short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, essays, journals and prose (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My study follows Anderson's (2006) analytic autoethnography approach, involving analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher's self, and commitment to a theoretic analysis (Anderson, 2006). I have chosen analytic autoethnography due to its theoretical lens and commitment to advancing knowledge in the field.

According to Bochner (2000), narrative research such as an autoethnography must fulfill particular standards: (1) sufficient detail that illustrates emotions and experiences; (2) multifaceted narratives and memories that weave the past and present together; (3) credibility, vulnerability, and transparency of the complex and uncertain nature of life; (4) ethical self-reflexivity in which the writer demonstrates a regard for both oneself and others in their story; and, (5) an evocative, meaningful story portrayed in a way where the reader understands and feels what it must have meant to those involved in the story. Similarly, Custer (2014) emphasizes the role of sharing emotional experiences that resonate with the reader as a mechanism for growing cultural understanding. Custer (2014) outlines that autoethnography promotes vulnerability and incites creativity by enabling the imagination of the readers. It is innovative by design because it focuses on unique individual experiences and brings the researcher into self-awareness, honouring their ability to affect the world around them (Custer, 2014). The purpose of autoethnographies is not necessarily to present a lived experience exactly as it was lived, but to make sense of these experiences and extract meaning from them (Bochner, 2000).

Lapadat (2017) further outlines several strengths of autoethnographies. Most notably, although they may strengthen a study, the researcher does not need to rely on the perspectives, agendas, interactions and interpretations of other community members (Lapadat, 2017). I followed this approach in allowing my voice to be the sole driving force of my autoethnography. However, consistent with analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), I relied on previous literature, framing my experiences around existing knowledge of organizational capacity. In doing so, I hoped to increase resonance with my stories, showcasing their relevance beyond my personal experience. Another strength of autoethnographies is that the in-depth insights they can provide have the potential to evoke an emotional response in the reader, increasing resonance (Tullis, 2013).

However, autoethnography as a method is not without weaknesses. One limitation is that it often represents only a single perspective of events and therefore the findings may not be generalizable (Chang, 2013; Tullis, 2013). Another limitation of autoethnographies is that they can expose the researcher to vulnerability and changed relationships with those who feature in the study (Lapadat, 2017; Mendez, 2013).

Many autoethnographies in the sport context have examined the intersection of sport and identity; specifically, gender, sexual identity, athletic identity, and conceptions of the body (Cooper et al., 2017). Autoethnography has been used in sport to examine post-structural feminism and gender norms in relation to identity as a cricket player (Fleming & Fullagar, 2007), masculinity in sport (Drummond, 2010), volunteer identity and satisfaction within the context of the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games (Kodama et al., 2013), race and masculinity within a sport for development and peace initiative (Forde, 2015), gender in relation to officiating community basketball (Schaeperkoetter,

2017), and parent health and wellbeing in relation to sideline behaviours during a child's sporting activity (Misener, 2020). All of these articles present exemplary cases of autoethnographies in sport. There are, however, fewer autoethnographies that examine the role of the coach or administrator in sporting contexts (Cooper et al., 2017). If, as Chang (2013) and Tullis (2013) argue, resonance is increased through autoethnography, the aim of greater social and cultural understanding of youth sport coaches, administrators, and organizations may also increase. Further, using one's own experience for research in sport management provides an opportunity for individuals to learn and reflect upon what they bring to their professional roles and how they can inspire social change (Fleming & Fullagar, 2007).

I recognize the limits to generalizability of autoethnography (Chang, 2013; Tullis, 2013); that my telling of the events surrounding Organization A's return to sport during the COVID-19 pandemic is only one perspective, and that those in similar positions and organizations may hold different perspectives. I also acknowledge the risk of exposure to vulnerability (Lapadat, 2017; Mendez, 2013), however, I present my journal notes and accompanying analysis without fear of the potential consequences, in order to elucidate the best possible account of the story and optimize wider social insight (Mendez, 2013).

## 2.1 Research Context

Before beginning the autoethnographic process, and with the approval of Western University's Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A), I approached Organization A to discuss the research project. I was given consent by the club to proceed and thus began taking journal notes on my experiences as the club's Technical Leader. I have been involved with Organization A for seven of the eight years I have coached the sport. The

Technical Leader/Director role is a unique position to organizations within the sport. Duties involve overseeing and planning all in-person events, including looking after players, parents, coaches, teams, curricula, and camps. Managing player and coach development within the CSO are particularly crucial to the role. I selected Organization A as the focus of my project due to my intimate connection to the club, and the unique role I hold within the organization.

Organization A is a mid-sized recreational sports club in Southwestern Ontario. In our district, there are twenty-seven clubs in the same sport, according to the league website. Two of those are affiliated with professional sports teams, while the rest hold varying degrees of philosophies and approaches regarding youth sport. My club is one of the few that specializes in recreational programming in Southwestern Ontario, and the only one in our region that provided a place for recreational players to play in the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organization A strives to be a leader in recreational programming for our sport, providing safe programming for youth of all ages, at a level that suits their needs. The club is characterized by high centralization (Slack & Parent, 2006), with the Executive Director, “PC”, and I having the bulk of authority and decision-making power within the organization. Those below us in the club’s structure generally carry out our plans with limited decision-making power of their own.

Throughout the process of this autoethnography, I also held a position as a staff coach for another club in the same city, which will be known as Organization B. Organization B is a professional-affiliated team, operating at the other end of the spectrum from Organization A with regard to sporting philosophies, with a focus on

establishing “elite” youth players. I joined Organization B as a staff coach one week prior to our PSO’s cancellation notice, in a joint agreement with Organization A to learn from their club Technical Director. My role as a staff coach was to be a support role, helping wherever the club needed me. However, as my Technical Leader role with Organization A remained my priority throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and involved work seven days a week, I only participated with Organization B for a few hours each week. As a result, the focus of this autoethnography is entirely on my role as a Technical Leader of Organization A.

My reflections centre around Organization A’s capacity during our return to play in the COVID-19 pandemic, and my role as the club’s Technical Leader during this period. The reflections include my own feelings, thoughts and perceptions, looking inward to myself within my role as a Technical Leader. As will be discussed throughout the journal notes and analysis, Organization A was influenced by several other organizations, including our Provincial Sporting Organization (PSO), National Sporting Organization (NSO), the local government, provincial government, district associations and leagues, and other organizations within the municipality. However, I make no attempt to study the capacity features of these external organizations. When mentioned, the focus is on how these other institutions influenced Organization A’s return to sport, and my role as the club’s Technical Leader.

Our PSO was a fundamental influence in the club’s return to sport, with the establishment of various “phases” in its *Return to Play* plan. “Phase 1”, lasting only a few weeks, centered around skills-based training, with each player restricted to their own marked out ‘box.’ Youth of a certain age needed a parent to participate alongside them,

and each individual box was separated by a minimum of two meters. “Phase 2” included contact between players, inter-squad games, and training as normal, albeit with a few adapted rules to the laws of the game. No games against other clubs were permitted during this time. This phase technically lasted two months. In “Phase 3”, games against other clubs, tryouts, trials and leagues were allowed to take place. Our PSO never reached their intended “Phase 3”, and instead adapted Phase 2 to include all of those same things, with a few slight modifications. One of those modifications included the laws of the game staying at a Phase 2 level, with the recognition that our sport might not return “back to normal” for much longer than first expected. At the time that I had completed my data collection, our PSO had shut down all sporting activity and reverted back to a pre-Phase 1 stage, banning all sanctioned sporting activity. In order to bring greater connection to the events within my autoethnography, I adopt the “phase” terminology to describe my experiences.

## 2.2 My Autoethnographic Process

Data collection during the autoethnographic process occurred via journal notes kept in an electronic document at my home in Southwestern, Ontario. Data were collected on a near daily basis, capturing a range of events from the mundane to the noteworthy. I simply reflected on the tasks and events that happened during that day, which usually included some form of planning, participation in programming, reading of emails, and conversations with other members of the club. Journal notes were collected starting in early May. After making the decision to pursue a formal autoethnography, I obtained Western University ethics approval (See Appendix A) and approval from the club. These approvals included incorporating my journal notes prior to that point into the

autoethnography, thus capturing a complete story and reflection on the return to sport process, from May 1<sup>st</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. All journal notes were recorded using an electronic document at the time of the event or within 24 hours. Some notes delve deeper to reflect on feelings at the time of the event and from before the event took place, connecting a range of experiences together. After every journal note, I attempted to look inward and explore my reactions and feelings toward the circumstances (Chang, 2013). My journal notes therefore are not just a reflection of what happened, but also how I felt about what happened.

This process of looking inward allowed the data analysis to take place throughout the data collection, and throughout the writing of this thesis. During the analysis, I reflected on my experiences in real time and made sense of how my perspectives aligned or differed from relevant theory and knowledge (Chang, 2013). I read all journal notes several times, identifying themes pertaining to capacity dimensions and organizational resilience, while also remaining open to additional themes that stood out. That is, during the analysis process, I intentionally searched for new and emerging themes, rather than relying solely on pre-determined themes (Charmaz, 2006). This process allowed for deeper reflection, as I attempted to identify exactly what each journal note spoke to, rather than trying to fit them into a specific box. The process of searching for literature also occurred throughout the entire process, as I attempted to connect my findings and analysis to wider social contexts and pre-existing research (Charmaz, 2006).

Thus, the study most closely followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theorists conduct research with a high degree of flexibility, including a continuous process of data collection, analysis, redefining research questions,

and identifying new literature throughout the research (Charmaz, 2006). As an example of this, my initial research questions centered around themes of culture, innovation and capacity in return to sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after a few months of data collection and reflexively analyzing the data at the time, I determined that capacity was the most prevalent subject in my notes, and adjusted my research questions. Consequently, I searched for additional literature on organizational capacity, identified new themes in the journal notes, and shifted the focus of the research project. A constructivist approach to grounded theory encourages researchers to construct an interpretive rendering of the worlds they study rather than an external reporting of events and statements (Charmaz, 2006). Through the constructivist approach to my autoethnography, I attempt to raise awareness of how I see myself and club effectiveness in the community sport context, simultaneously raising awareness of how others may see themselves and their roles as leaders in community sport (Riessman, 2008). Key characteristics of constructivism in my study include: storytelling as data (Smith & Sparkes, 2008); making sense of my personal experiences through a focus on context and deeper underlying meanings (Smith & Sparkes, 2008); the recognition that my telling of the story is only one of many truths (Smythe & Murray, 2000); and, a close examination of the self and how others related to the self may have influenced both my research context and research process (Riessman, 2008).

All collected data have been kept confidential through the elimination of identifying factors, and the use of pseudonyms for any organizations or individuals mentioned in the study (Lapadat, 2017). For example, I make several references to my boss “PC” (an acronym based around a joke nickname for the individual). PC ended up

being a focal point of the story throughout the process, as we were responsible for running the club throughout return to play together. Recognizing the role that PC plays in my autoethnography, I have attempted to keep them anonymous. However, in publishing my own name, individuals and organizations mentioned may be easily identifiable, presenting an ethical dilemma for my research (Lapadat, 2017). To further protect others who appear in my autoethnography and reduce potential harm for myself as the researcher, the sport has also been de-identified through the elimination of identifying factors. Holding an active position at both clubs could be a conflict of interest that has been intentionally negotiated throughout the research process (Lapadat, 2017). I endeavoured to ensure both clubs were aware of my involvement with the writing of the autoethnography and data collection, and that I had their approval for the continuation of the process. Additionally, I was careful both in the writing of the journal notes and the thesis itself to do no harm to the club or any individuals that appear in the study (Lapadat, 2017; Mendez, 2013). Initially, I feared that I would be selective over which journal notes I included in the thesis. However, I have since calmed those concerns, and included the journal notes that I see as being most beneficial to the autoethnography, regardless of any potential consequences. Those potential consequences may include jeopardizing my position with the clubs or changed relationships with my employers (Lapadat, 2017). I have relaxed these concerns due to awareness of the unique, powerful, and meaningful stories that autoethnographies have the potential to create (Lapadat, 2017). However, I felt it was still important to de-identify the sport, the club, and related individuals and organizations in order to at least mitigate those potential risks (Lapadat, 2017).

Analysis of the data occurred throughout the research process. I reflected on knowledge and theory throughout the time of the journal notes, with that process intensifying following the last collection of data on December 1, 2020. Autoethnographic analysis includes an effort to link existing theory and knowledge with one's reflections and context (Cooper et al., 2017). My research followed similar methods of analysis as Fleming and Fullagar (2007), Kodama et al. (2013), and Misener (2020), each of whom conducted autoethnographies within sport. Fleming and Fullagar (2007) utilized post-structural feminism and literature on gender norms in sport to further their exploration of gender identity through an autoethnography of the self while playing the sport of cricket. Misener (2020) examined literature on parent-sideline behaviour, parent health and wellbeing, and situated that literature within her autoethnography of her own sideline behaviour during her son's sport. Kodama et al. (2013) examined literature on volunteer satisfaction, volunteer experiences and identity theory to situate the lead author's experiences and volunteer identity within that context. Not only do these autoethnographies provide an example of research where theory, literature and the self were linked together and intertwined, they represent the potential for autoethnographies to provide new insights into fields that are largely dominated by the use of other methodologies (Cooper et al., 2017). My research takes a similar approach to analysis, situating literature on community sport club capacity and resilience within my context working as a Technical Leader of a CSO during the pandemic.

## 2.3 Researcher Position

In qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to identify the potential influence of their backgrounds, assumptions and relationships on the research (Misener &

Doherty, 2009). My narratives and analysis of those narratives are influenced by my status as a graduate student at Western University, where I study Sport Management and Leadership in the School of Kinesiology; and my identity as a white male of a privileged socio-economic status, single, university educated and living in Southwestern, Ontario, Canada. I acknowledge that I have preconceived notions about CSOs, and make no attempt to eliminate them. I believe that the function of CSOs is to serve families and individuals within their communities, and provide a chance to participate in sport at a level that best suits their needs. I do not believe that there is one right philosophy for a community sport club to adopt, and instead that CSOs must decide their own mandate, and communicate that vision clearly with all of their members and stakeholders. CSOs that provide programming for youth, such as the two that I work for, have an additional duty to provide a fun, safe sporting experience that inspires participation in sport for life. One best practice that I believe will provide youth with a fun, safe sporting experience is to provide players a chance to play at a suitable level. Another is to have trained staff in leadership positions who share the same vision as the organization.

My perspective is shaped by the various roles I have held within community sports for the past eight years, predominantly as a coach. In that time, I have worked for three different sporting clubs of varying competitive and recreational levels in Southwestern Ontario, which hold distinct philosophies on community sport. I am currently working for both Organization A and Organization B, just as I was throughout my autoethnography. These experiences have led to my assumptions and philosophies about community sport that influence my research process and analysis.

My pre-ascribed assumption of this research is that I may have a different perspective than other members at both clubs, and that my perspective will only be one telling of the story. This may be amplified given that I hold a unique role at Organization A, as the club's Technical Leader. I also acknowledge that my described experiences may be different from those of other Technical Directors and managers at other clubs in Ontario, and around the world. Although others may feature within my autoethnography, I am the sole research "participant". In the analysis, I consider my own experiences, thoughts and feelings with regard to Organization A's return to sport in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next section presents my autoethnography of events that transpired just before and during our sport's official return to sport through the COVID-19 pandemic. I present my journal notes and analyses in "phases" that correspond closely with our PSO's "phases" of return to play, from June 2020 to December 2020. "Phase 1" is titled *The New Normal*. "Phase 2" is titled *Making our Way*. Finally, "Phase 3" is titled *Fluctuation and Change*. These phases do not necessarily align exactly with the time trajectory of the actual three-phase return to play process. For example, our PSO's intended "Phase 3" never truly came to fruition, and instead became an adapted version of "Phase 2". In addition, some of the dates may overlap between phases, given the dynamic nature of return to play, with things constantly changing every day. Following each phase of notes, I present an accompanying analysis, situating my experiences within the literature.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Phase 1: The New Normal

In this phase of return to play, characterized by a resumption of skills-based training only, Organization A experienced much in the way of uncertainty. We were constantly forced to react to the changing demands of the environment, the protocols from our governing bodies, and the fluctuating capacities within our organization. We made attempts to quickly adapt to the “new normal” but ultimately had no idea what was in store for the months ahead.

#### **Establishing the New Normal in Uncertain Times**

***June 14, 2020***

*Yesterday marked three months since the cancellations of sport across the country. Two weeks from now, after the most unprecedented time in my career and in the sports world for that matter, we will return to play. A lot of people are using the term “new normal” to describe what life is going to be like once we get back out there. We can’t really ignore that it’s like an apocalyptic, dystopian world come to life. In terms of my own readiness to return to play, I’m simply not ready and would rather continue working on personal projects. It seems a bit intimidating, and I’m sure once we get out there it won’t be as bad as it sounds. But it really does sound like something you’d see in an apocalypse movie. Everyone will be wearing masks or face shields, sometimes even safety gloves. We need to have “sanitation zones” at every entrance and exit spot, which is basically a fancy way of saying players need to hand sanitize before and after the event. We need a “safety officer” at the facility greeting*

*players and coaches as they come in, making sure that they've completed their online "declaration of compliance" screening form prior to training (it's basically just a symptoms checklist that they sign). My understanding is that parents also have to complete a symptoms checklist, but aren't allowed in the facility and have to stay in their cars. Meanwhile, cars have to be parked ten feet apart in parking lots. That's just not going to happen. People are going to park next to each other, no matter how many times we might reiterate that rule.*

*There's a lot of uncertainty right now about all the protocols and whether or not it's even worth it to get back out there. Some clubs won't be participating this summer or have cancelled some of their programs due in large part to a perceived lack of capacity. I simply see that as an opportunity for clubs like ours to take advantage and get ahead, even if it is under abnormal circumstances. Although, return to play will definitely have its challenges, particularly with all of the "safe sport practices" that need to be upheld. It's already enough of an issue getting volunteers to coach and referee in a normal year. How are we going to get volunteers to be part of a special safety officer and hygiene task force? Instead of hiring additional personnel, it will probably need to be the people at the top of the totem pole, myself and PC, who operate as safety officers.*

***June 17, 2020***

*Today I attended a meeting with other club leaders around the province, where the PSO's seventy-seven-page Return to Play Guide was basically just regurgitated over Zoom. I then began working on curricula and developing ideas for what we could do as individual skills-based training, before working on rewriting our province's return*

*to play guide to fit the verbiage and needs of our organization. I also looked over some applications for our summer staff. We will need to go through hiring and training processes in the next twelve days, despite not having started that process. I'm just hoping that those that applied between March and May are still interested, as we will desperately need the help of others in order to make our plans work. It's one thing to be lucky enough to have a grant that will allow us to hire summer staff, but it's another thing to find qualified, capable summer staff on short notice. It's crazy how fast everything has happened and how much we need to get done in the next twelve days.*

***June 22, 2020***

*It's crazy to think that last week I was doing practically nothing and that even just last Saturday I had one of the most boring days I've had in this break from sport, with practically nothing to do. Now, I have no time to do anything else other than prep for what we need to do to get back out there. At our first official meeting since the cancellations, I learned quickly that PC had not given much thought to what return to play would actually look like. After a few hours of work, we eventually discovered our plan to be creating 4x10m boxes for each individual player in Phase 1 of our governing body's three-phase process. The trick was how many boxes we could cope with having within the boundaries of our facilities, compounded by social distancing requirements. It didn't help that our PSO had no clear guideline for how big or small the boxes should be. We ended up going with twelve 4x10m boxes per each quarter of the facility, adding up to 48 boxes total, with one staff coach per each quarter and more coaches or volunteers at the entrance and exit (which needed to be separate*

*locations). This would mean 48 players (plus their parent or a sibling for ages where that was required) could be on our facility at a time. I didn't realize until the day after (after we had already sketched everything out and spent seven hours there) that our province's social gathering limits were still set at 10 people. So now we'll have to wait for an answer from our local health unit regarding how big of space a "social gathering" is allowed to have. For example, can we have four social gatherings of 10 people, still following our plan of splitting our facility up into quadrants? Probably not. But we'll wait and see, I guess.*

### ***June 24, 2020***

*Centralization is high here and that is important to me. Everything goes through PC and myself, and I like it that way. I think it's important to have centralization of tasks during a pandemic so that we can keep a close eye on every facet of this club and ensure everything's being done in the proper, safe ways regarding return to play.*

*Consistency is key. Our ability to minimize the number of facilities we are using, for example, will help to keep centralization high and keep everything consistent.*

*Coaches will have autonomy to coach in a style that works for them, but it's within a certain framework, within a certain session plan and activity design. There is a team at our club that wants to do their own thing. They want to use their own facility. They want to pay less than other teams. They want to be the only team in the facility at a time. This is not possible for us. They need to have a Safety Officer present (PC or myself). They need to use our facilities because of the permits and insurance. That means they must share with other teams and other programs. They need to pay the same amount. That's non-negotiable. If not, they can do their own thing, but they are*

*not part of our club. They are not going to be insured and we are not going to pretend like they exist as part of our club. Because they don't. So if they want to come back to us later on then that's fine, but things have to be done here a certain way right now. Maybe they would have gotten away with this kind of thing if I wasn't here. Not anymore.*

### **July 6, 2020**

*Funny enough, as PC predicted back in April, today was our first training session with Organization A following a four-month quarantine away from the sport. In other words, today was the first training session where my neck was on the line. Everything went smoothly and things seemed organized. Late last night, in the dark, PC and I painted lines on the facility space as though we were graffiti artists. It's not something we would normally do, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Quite simply, hiring an external company to line the space would have been thousands of dollars more. It's not just outside lines on the facility that we have to paint, but also the individual boxes for players. Organization B is using cones to separate the different grids, but using lines actually worked really well and I'm glad we did, because cones just get in the way and then it's more to sanitize and deal with anyway. So the lines worked well and I was happy we spent the time putting them in place, even if it was a bit of extra unpaid labour. I'm assuming that'll be a common trend in COVID-times. One nice thing for me was that it was really helpful having the experience of already having done everything with Organization B and applying it to my role as a leader of Organization A. Without that, the first day might not have gone as smoothly. The only thing I'm worried about is tomorrow. Under COVID-19*

*protocols, we need to have a Safety Officer at the facility checking players in and making sure they've done their waivers, and then complete the declaration of compliance (symptoms checklist) before entering the facility. Unfortunately, Organization A is basically run by two individuals...myself and PC. We have Summer Staff, but when they are away, we're basically on our own...and that is what is going to happen tomorrow. I have no idea how I'll fulfill the roles of coach, technical leader and safety officer...but I guess I'm going to try.*

### ***July 23, 2020***

*Most days I can fulfill a role as a Safety Officer without needing to do any extra coaching. But I like that, on occasion, I am still able to engage with the sessions I create and see for myself what works and what doesn't. It is important for me, and all of my coaches, to interact with all players at the club and get a balanced perspective on coaching different ages, abilities, genders, etc. Quality of experience is very important to me at this club. There is no reason why we cannot be the best club for recreational level players in Ontario. But I believe it takes talented staff coaches, rather than parent volunteers, to do that. In my opinion, this has allowed us to be more effective and be at the level of quality we want to be. In fact, I think this will be our best year of coaching at the club, with no complaints from anyone about 'this coach did this, this coach did that.' Because we are all on the same page and everyone needs to buy-in, otherwise this isn't the club for you. Everyone needs to buy-in to the COVID-protocols and the way we are running sessions. COVID has allowed us to achieve more buy-in too. Because people know that safety and health is also at stake here. They are more inclined to listen and follow instructions. So running things*

*in a centralized way is perhaps more possible than previous years, and so too is buy-in to this centralized structure.*

### ***July 30, 2020***

*Our human resource capacity is in a good place right now because of the grant we were given by Canada Summer Jobs prior to the pandemic. We hired three staff coaches, and re-hired two from previous years that won't be part of the grant. So if everyone is available we should have five staff coaches plus myself and PC, to spread across two locations. Then PC's niece and nephew have been helping out as volunteer safety officers to decrease the burden on me to have to do both coaching and attendance/safety. But we are lucky because of the grant that we had to be able to do that. Without the grant I am positive the club would be in a darker place and maybe PC wouldn't even have opened up the club's return to play. PC might have gone ahead and done it, without realizing how impossible it would be to rely on parent volunteers and not staff coaches. I am very much of the opinion that I'd rather have staff than parent volunteers, because staff are more eager to learn and develop. Parent volunteers can be more stubborn and stuck in their ways. They want to do things the way their grandfather did when they were a child. Staff coaches want to do the same thing. But it's easier to change their mind, especially when they see it is not working. Parent volunteers don't know what to do when something is not working. In fact, they usually don't realize it's not working. So the grant has allowed us to do away with parent volunteers and have more talented human resources at the club.*

### **Establishing the New Normal – Uncertainty**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs have been facing much in the way of uncertainty (Millar, 2020a). Uncertainty can be described as a lack of information about one's environment (Slack & Parent, 2006). It is determined by multiple elements that make for a complex organizational environment and the stability (or turbulence) of that environment (Slack & Parent, 2006). The considerable uncertainty for Organization A centered particularly around the turbulence of the ever-changing, and sometimes conflicting, information about what activities, numbers of participants, and safety measures were allowed and required in the return to play. However, this turbulent environment was additionally complex, with Organization A relying on the government of Ontario, our PSO, our NSO, district leagues and associations, the district health unit, facility owners, and other CSOs. Normally these external organizations would operate with a relatively consistent and dependable set of demands and deadlines, that we have become accustomed to meeting year after year. During the pandemic, however, there was rapid change for all of these organizations. Often, these organizations, particularly our PSO and local health unit, even had differing and contradicting guidelines to follow, only amplifying the uncertainty. This uncertainty started in "Phase 1" of our return to play, but continued throughout all phases.

Organizations may cope with uncertainty by acquiring information about future trends (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971). Given that PC and I are very tapped into our sport's system, and hold multiple roles within our sport's community, we were able to acquire good information on possible and likely next steps in our sport's and our community's safety restrictions.

### **Establishing the New Normal - Human Resource Capacity and Resilience**

Human resource capacity was a particular strength for Organization A in our initial return to play efforts. The dedication on the part of PC and I to do everything in our power to ensure our club's return to play, inspired greater buy-in from our staff and our community of parents and players. We had a common focus to ensure a safe return to sport through quality programming for youth of all ages, enthusiasm to get back out onto the fields regardless of the circumstances, and support for one another (Doherty et al., 2014). The importance of passionate, dedicated volunteers and staff in support of CSOs' goal achievement is consistently noted in the literature (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Seippel et al., 2020; Sharpe, 2006) and this was also highlighted for Organization A's challenging experience with return to play during the COVID-19 pandemic. The risks PC and I were willing to take, especially in implementing new activities or safety precautions that had never been done before, were consistent with characteristics such as risk taking, forward thinking, and challenging the status quo that have been shown to support innovation within non-profit organizations (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Jaskyte, 2004). Many other clubs in the region may have been intimidated by these changes and may not have felt they had the capacity to return at all.

The efforts put in by PC and I from the outset, and indeed in advance, of the first phase of return to play, are also consistent with Wicker et al.'s (2013) finding that clubs frequently substituted human resources around multiple positions during the recovery from natural disasters. Without both of us substituting our traditional roles for other roles (i.e., being a safety officer, managing equipment, coaching and leading all programs), I am confident that Organization A would not have survived. Wicker et al. (2013) similarly

found that human resource redundancy – or staff and volunteers filling in for other roles – was a key mechanism for sport club resilience in response to a natural disaster.

The need for this redundancy to survive was due in part to the small size of Organization A. Research suggests that larger clubs are more likely to report sufficient, dedicated human resources (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Seippel et al., 2020), and certainly Organization B, for example, had an easier time appointing Safety Officers. That organization's human resources capacity was such that the leaders in the organization were more likely to fulfill their normal roles during the time of return to play from COVID-19, rather than taking on several additional roles. For Organization A, however, the club's size and lack of human resources, meant that myself and PC had no other choice but to take on multiple roles and identities within our positions at the club. An example of this can be found in the journal note detailing how PC and I went out and painted lines on the facilities we were to use like "graffiti artists". We simply had no time or financial resources to rely on anyone else to do it, so we did it ourselves.

We had summer staff to rely on for our return to play programming, but their schedules fluctuated and they lacked the necessary experience to leave in charge of a field for the night. This was exacerbated by more human resources being required throughout the summer than normal, simply out of a need to uphold safe sport practices and guidelines from our governing bodies alone (Anderson, 2020; Millar 2020b). In the early days of returning to play, I was particularly anxious about having sufficient staff capacity to execute our adapted programs and required safety measures effectively. As indicated earlier, and consistent with the research on CSO capacity, sufficient human resources (typically in the form of volunteers) is a common challenge for non-profit sport

clubs (Balduck et al., 2015; Gumulka et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014). Our challenge in Phase 1 was not so much having enough staff to run the programs, but their fluctuating schedules. We went from being in trouble one night to having too many coaches another night. The fluctuating schedules of our staff coaches, all of whom are students, can be expected. However, I believe these fluctuations were more challenging than it would have been in a non-pandemic year, because of the extra safety steps we needed to uphold. There does not appear to be any research on fluctuations in sufficient human resources for community sport club capacity, and this may be a new area for research emerging from the pandemic (Doherty et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, the government grant received prior to the pandemic boosted our financial capacity and ensured that in the later weeks of Phase 1, and particularly in phase two, we had sufficient human resource capacity in terms of coaching staff. Similarly, Wicker et al. (2013) found that clubs that obtained a government grant were more resilient following natural disasters. Adding to the existing literature (Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006), it is clear that when we had sufficient coaches, who were dedicated to the cause and available to do the work, we were more effective in our return to play during the pandemic than when we did not have those resources in place.

### **Establishing the New Normal – Infrastructure Capacity**

Although PC and I had too many responsibilities for only two individuals to fulfill in the “new normal” conditions, this situation was supported by our club’s centralized structure. Our ability to substitute our roles was not entirely due to a lack of sufficient

volunteers or club size, but was also an intentional strategy to maintain coordination and control throughout the pandemic through our centralized structure. Centralization refers to the way in which power is distributed in an organization through decision making and authority (Cunningham & Rivera, 2001; Slack & Parent, 2006). In centralized organizations, decision making takes place at the top of an organization, within the strategic apex comprising one or a few key individuals (Mintzberg, 1979; Slack & Parent, 2006). Slack and Parent (2006) outline several benefits of centralized organizations, including greater coordination and control. The high centralization of Organization A, and the ability of PC and I to oversee every single program, was very important to our success at the initial, and subsequent, stages of return to play. Due to our club size and the lack of trust we had in our summer staff, our organization was never going to be decentralized during the pandemic and it was an intentional approach taken by myself and PC to maintain control. For example, we oversaw every aspect of check-in, attendance, hand sanitization and all the safety procedures when programs went live. By having this structure in place, we were able to prioritize safety to the highest extent and ensure a safe return to sport. Decentralized organizations may have an easier time responding to changes in their environment, based on the assumption that people closest to the changing situation have instant access to the necessary information. This means the organization as a whole can respond more quickly (Mintzberg, 1979; Slack & Parent, 2006). However, our centralization helped us to maintain greater coordination and control during the pandemic, furthering our safety practices and ensuring everything was up to code. Centralization has not been identified or considered in CSO research to the same extent as other structural capacity features such as formalization and open

communication (Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006). Given its importance to my experience, it may warrant further examination as an extension of the pandemic response and recovery experience (Doherty et al., 2020).

### **Competition for Resources**

*July 9, 2020*

*We have to follow all of these safety protocols and make sure all participants have signed waivers and are upholding all the necessary safety requirements. But that becomes more difficult when another team, from another club, shows up on the facility that we're using and makes our ability to do that much harder. About halfway through our first session tonight a group of players started showing up and a group of dads started putting up a net. About five minutes later, there was about twelve kids there, not maintaining social distance, standing side by side, waiting in line to shoot on a net that had been put up by the parents/coaches. I approached the group in the middle of my session, taking the attention away from my group of players and their parents to deal with them. I asked who the "coach" was and someone pointed to the coach so I talked to him and asked what was going on. The coach lied and said they were a group of neighbourhood kids (as if it were that easy to get twelve neighbourhood kids and their parents together) and that they come to the facility every Thursday. I explained that Organization A had a permit to use the facility, that they did not, and that they needed to leave as they were not adhering to social distancing measures and were interfering with our ability to do so too. They refused to leave, said that a permit wasn't needed because it wasn't a city-owned facility. "I know the guys at the church. I can go*

*talk to them right now if you want? We come here every Thursday.” They shouldn’t have been coming every Thursday. Because our PSO only allowed for a Return to Play last week. In addition, the facility is ours and only ours. We built it ourselves from the ground up. On top of that, the organization that I am certain they were a part of (Organization D), cancelled their season in May. So it makes sense why they were using our facility. Their organization hasn’t provided them with a space to use. But it’s not okay. If they didn’t need a permit, you’d have teams from multiple clubs at the same facility at the same time and it would be constant chaos. So guess what? You need a permit. When I told them that they weren’t social distancing and had more than 10 people in the space they were trying to use, the coach replied “You aren’t social distancing either.” We had every kid in their own grid, with a parent. Five players with a parent each on one side of the facility, four players with a parent on the other side + one coach (me). We were upholding social distancing measures and every single safety protocol that had been set out by our governing bodies to be able to return to play, including a safety officer. When I explained this to them, they said “I don’t care about (insert PSO name).” So there was no getting through to these guys and they continued to refuse to leave. Instead, they called me aggressive and insisted they didn’t need a permit to use the facility. I apologized for my “aggressive tone” and explained that the reason I need to be stern is because if someone came by from our PSO, the district, my club or the police, that my neck is on the line and that my organization could get fined because of rules they were breaking by being on the premises with us. By this time, I had probably left my club’s parents and*

*players for about five minutes. I completely forgot that I was basically the only one there capable of leading anything and that I had just abandoned all the players and parents I was supposed to be leading to deal with this situation. I retreated to my position, leaving behind “Your balls don’t get anywhere near any of these grids” on my way. It’s not like me to be confrontational or “aggressive”, but I know I did the right thing and I know they did the wrong thing, so at least there’s that to help me feel a little better.*

*I told PC what happened. I’m super happy with her response. She told me I did the right thing and that she was glad I chose to focus on the parents and players rather than escalating things more. I’ve felt her stress about everything and I understand why. Our necks are on the line here and if we slip up, it could mean not just our parents and players don’t get to play, but everyone in our municipality or province doesn’t get a chance to play. It makes everything that much more frustrating when people that don’t know what they’re doing start to get in the way of that. We actually had a similar issue on the first day for Organization B. A few hours into our first set of sessions we had a group of families start to show up to play a game of pick-up and have a little party. Nobody told them to leave, to my surprise, which meant they must have had at least some kind of agreement with the facility owners to be there. But it definitely got in the way of all of our safety protocols. At the same time that we were going above and beyond all the safety protocols necessary, here was a group of people doing the exact opposite – playing a game with way more than 10 people, parents and kids together, not social distancing whatsoever. I think Organization B’s stance on just*

*letting them be and leaving them alone was probably more dangerous, being a “professional” organization and having to uphold a higher standard due to their reputation. But it was also the less “aggressive” approach, so at least they were probably able to sleep at night.*

***July 16, 2020***

*The team from Organization D came again about halfway through our first session tonight. The moment the coach showed up I left my group to go and talk to him again. I very politely asked him to leave and explained why, and he refused. He was very shaken and again, knew that he shouldn't be there, which is why he was so nervous and shaking. But despite that, he argued with me every step of the way, while also quite confusingly, asking me to call the cops on him. We did. A by-law officer claimed that they were on their way. Unfortunately, no one showed up to help us out. It was really ridiculous though and again, one of my biggest problems with this situation is that their group of seventeen parents and players on our premises, not social distancing, being loud and obnoxious makes our organization look very bad. They know they shouldn't be there, especially not during this dark time, but they are again acting like they aren't doing anything wrong and like we (or rather me) are the problem. Not only was he being obnoxious and showing his unintelligence for the second week in a row, he was also trying to find fault with us. “Why are you using the middle? So that we can't go on it?” I explained to him that we painted our lines in the middle so that we could easily oversee two halves, since we could only have ten people per half, a rule that his team would be breaking if they stepped onto our space again. It's just*

*not fair to our parents and players for me to waste time that could have spent developing the players.*

### **Competition for Resources – Conflict**

This series of journal notes illustrates the challenging nature of structural capacity, and specifically access to facilities, not just within our organization but across our community of sport organizations. During our return to play, having exclusive access to a quality facility was a major asset for us, as we were able to use the field whenever we wanted at a minimal cost. For this reason, it was a complete surprise to be faced with a rogue team showing up to our facility and attempting to use it on our time. This caused friction between myself and a coach from the other club. Sporting facilities are often owned and operated by other community entities (e.g., churches, schools, universities) that rent out their facilities at cost (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Sharpe, 2006). Further, these sporting facilities are often only accessible because of an existing relationship and any social capital or trust and reciprocity generated within that connection (Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that organizations within the same municipality typically compete for resources (Filo et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2003). Hall et al. (2003) discovered that competition can be a constraint on the ability of non-profit organizations to collaborate and share resources.

Competing needs, and scarce resources, are often at the heart of many interpersonal and interorganizational conflicts (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). Organization A and the team from Organization D both had a desire to use the field, and both believed they had a right to do so. Conflicts can also occur in a frequently changing, uncertain organizational environment (Starks, 2006), which has already been discussed as the

reality for our club, and all sporting organizations, during the pandemic. In any other year, the team from Organization D would have had access to another field and would not have ever stepped onto ours or gone behind their club's back. Van Bussel and Doherty (2015) identified three common triggers of conflict, including daily operations, market demands and external relationships. In my situation, both the demands of the market and external relationships were undoubtedly triggers for the conflict between Organization A and Organization D to take place. Due to Organization D cancelling their season, a demand was created for teams at the club to go around the rules and find solutions for themselves.

Previous research suggests that collaboration is the most effective method to deal with conflict (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Further, Van Bussell & Doherty (2015) found that it was the most commonly used method for clubs in their study, along with compromise. However, given the circumstances of the pandemic, the need to prioritize safety (Anderson, 2020; Millar, 2020b) and the severity of the situation, compromise and collaboration were not suitable options for us in dealing with this conflict. After a certain amount of time leaving my players alone in both situations, I had to retreat to my position, thus avoiding the conflict in the moment. However, we took two significant steps in contacting the police and contacting Organization D's club president to ensure the conflict ended.

Previous research has found that avoidance is an ineffective method for resolving conflicts (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). However, all of these studies consider inter-organizational conflicts, in which the conflicting parties need to continue working together. In our situation, once the conflict

was over, we never had to see each other again. Therefore, avoidance of the issue in the moment in not escalating it further was an effective approach for us to mitigate any future conflicts. But that avoidance was still backed up by other active measures including going to the proper authorities, which is not backed up in the literature as a method of handling conflict (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015).

Additionally, for our organization, the problem was more than just a matter of conflict. It was also problematic for us in upholding safe sport practices and following the protocols set into place by our governing bodies. By leaving my group of players to go and talk to the other coach on two occasions, I was not able to spend that time developing and focusing on the players in our programs. Fortunately, the issue was resolved after this date, when PC was able to use her relationship with the club president of Organization D, to help us get back to ensuring safe sport for all of our participants. The connection to other organizations, and effective management of those external relationships, has been identified as particularly important to structural capacity of CSOs (Doherty et al., 2014; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009, 2013; Sharpe, 2006). However, competition for resources between clubs can impact their human, financial and structural capacity (Filo, Cuskelly, & Wicker, 2015; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). The structural capacity of Organization A was directly affected by the experienced competition for resources, and resulting conflict, as we were not able to run our programs the way we wanted and needed to, despite the fields being ours to use exclusively. Until it was resolved, the conflict also limited my own ability to effectively fulfill my role as the club's Technical Leader.

## **Phase 1 – Looking Inward**

Although Phase 1 of return to play was characterized by uncertainty and conflict, I learned a few valuable lessons. Most prominently, I learned the importance of a centralized structure in maintaining control of a threatening situation. Through that centralization, PC and I were able to be redundant in our roles and ensure a safe return to sport. I also got the first glimpse of just how much more effective we could be with sufficient staff available, in comparison to nights when staff were missing. Although I was very unhappy with the conflict in Phase 1, I went into Phase 2 full of hope that things would get easier with the loosening of restrictions and a return to semi-normal training.

Having dedicated human resources has been consistently mentioned as important to CSOs in their effectiveness (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey, Sarkar, Wagstaff, & Johnston, 2021; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Seippel et al., 2020; Sharpe, 2006). In examining my own perceptions of the events on a deeper level (Chang, 2013), I constantly reflected in my notes during Phase 1 of feeling like “my neck was on the line”. I was aware of the severity of the pandemic and knew that if we had any slip ups, our entire community of organizations could be shut down. I believe that having this awareness only raised my dedication to the cause and inspired me to take a stand when things were not up to code (e.g., in the conflict with Organization D). Through this awareness of the necessary steps to ensure our priorities were met, I became more dedicated toward ensuring a safe, fun return to sport for all of our players.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Phase 2: Making Our Way

Phase 2 of return to our sport involved a relaxing of certain restrictions, and new opportunities to provide programming to a certain degree of normality that we had become accustomed to prior to the pandemic. Although Phase 2 was still categorized by uncertainty, it was undeniably Organization A's most successful phase. Phase 2 was when we were at our most resourceful and committed to the cause of ensuring a safe, fun return to sport for all players.

#### **Executive Decisions in Uncertain Times**

*July 19, 2020*

*I am feeling overwhelmed. Our PSO has given us clearance to begin Phase 2, but they haven't made everything clear in their document. Most notably, do players aged four to nine still need to have a parent accompanying them or not? We all assumed they wouldn't need that, as now we are doing games (i.e., contact). Before this, the parents were required to participate alongside their child to ensure children of a certain age maintained social distance. But now there is no need for that if contact is allowed. If we are doing games, the parent will just get in the way. But now because things are unclear, we have to wait to start Phase 2 until we get clear answers from our governing bodies. It's the right decision, but it's frustrating to know that we have to be stuck in individual grids doing activities that are not game-realistic, simply because of a lack of clear guidance on one crucial component of Phase 2 from our PSO.*

**July 21, 2020**

*We are preparing to start Phase 2 tomorrow and I am excited to begin. We got clarification from our governing body in a webinar today that the players don't need to be socially distanced when participating in games (a.k.a. can have contact). It is very strange. They need to be socially distanced when entering and exiting the facility, when taking a hydration break, during goal celebrations, etc., but not when they are playing the game. Not sure who made the executive decision there, but I am happy that the players can have contact. Otherwise, there would have been no point for us to move into Phase 2. It's still unclear whether or not the parent needs to participate with the younger players. I was just about to ask my question when they said the next one would be the last question, which was disappointing. Because I then had to follow up in an email to our governing body, which I am waiting for a reply (they never replied). We might not get a reply before tomorrow, and we are starting Phase 2 tomorrow regardless at this point. If the parent needs to participate then that's silly, because the players no longer need to be socially distanced, so the original rationale for having them has disappeared. I'm really hoping our PSO gives us the "okay" to not have parents involved. But in the meantime, I'm making the executive decision for our club that we don't need the parent to participate for the younger ages, but that the parent should remain on the premises and not leave during the session.*

**July 24, 2020**

*PC texted me this morning in a bit of fearful, frantic state. She realized that we're probably the only club in our region (maybe even province?) that is offering*

*programming right now for U3-U6. She was worried that we were missing something and doing something that we weren't supposed to be doing. For me, it just demonstrates how well we've done to maintain our mandate and organizational values. We are all about providing a fun and safe environment for players of all ages and all abilities, and we have continued to do that even in a post-pandemic world. I'm positive that we haven't missed any major regulation stating you can't have kids under a certain age playing sport this summer. I'm more positive that other clubs just didn't think they could manage it, didn't think it would be feasible and didn't think they'd have enough players register. But we are pulling it off, and we're likely the only club in our region and potentially beyond doing so. We are also the only recreational program in our city for our sport and we're going to keep offering our players additional opportunities to learn, develop and have fun as we're looking to offer camps for ages 7-14.*

***August 2, 2020***

*In just a few weeks, we will hold our first camp. We are lucky because we have an office at the best facility for our sport. We also have a good relationship with the people who work there. They like us and they trust us. They know we will pay them on-time and that we won't do any damage to their facility. So using this relationship and the office we have there as leverage to hold programming is key for us. We are going to be the only ones in the facility, and be the facility's first booking since March. This, I think, will be fun for us. No one else is allowed in, except us. So we have this state-of-the-art facility all to ourselves. We could easily hold the camp at one of our two outdoor facilities, which are also very nice. But*

*having the office gives us something different to do and another place to have the kids go to when they need to. If they need a snack or want to use a washroom, our outdoor facility is not going to be as good. So we are lucky.*

***August 5, 2020***

*I believe we are going to come out of this more resourceful. I for one have learned new skills and I have a keener sense for safety now. I think some changes for the better will be made not just at our club, but others too. I believe safety and hygiene will be taken more seriously. Before this, no clubs were diligent enough with tracking things like attendance or sanitizing cones and balls, washing pinnies. Before this, twelve different kids might wear the same bib before it gets washed. Now, that has to change. And I think people will carry on these good hygiene habits after it is over. Why not have every player hand sanitize or complete a symptoms checklist before arriving? Maybe other things should be added to that checklist like injury or concussion protocols. Maybe we should be more diligent about having players complete waivers more often, not just once a year. Further, some good changes may come out of this like the changes of certain rules (laws of the game) that have been outdated for far too long. For our club in particular, I believe we survived this pandemic with relative ease because of our high centralization of tasks and the way PC and I championed everything to make sport happen this summer. Our buy-in toward everything we needed to implement garnered buy-in from coaches, then parents and players. There was no real pressure from the environment. Only challenges ...most of which came from a lack of clear guidelines from our governing bodies or conflicting restrictions*

*between our governing bodies. I think PC and I in particular were adaptable. We held roles as safety officers, coaches, marshals, and more. We didn't need to go out and hire other safety officers. We just did it ourselves. Sure, we benefited from PC's niece and nephew being there to help with that. But the organization of tasks was such that PC and I managed just as seamlessly when they were not present, so long as we had other staff coaches available. It was hard sometimes with competitive because those coaches were not as ingrained with our protocols and club procedures. But overall we made it work and eventually made them buy into the process.*

***August 24, 2020***

*PC said today that we haven't had any negative feedback this summer and that everyone's been really positive about everything. It was nice to hear and definitely makes me encouraged that we have done a good job, and that we can do the same thing again another year, hopefully when this pandemic has settled down. We agreed that parents in our program were probably just happy to have something; and they didn't want to fight anything we were doing; knowing that we were doing the best that we could do under the pandemic. But I suspect it's so much more than that.*

*First of all, we've abandoned parent coaches in our recreational programming this summer. There's been no need for them, and at first, when we could only have 10 people, parent coaches were just going to add an unnecessary body. After things expanded to 50 people, we continued not to need them, as our staff coaches could handle the number of players we had registered with relative ease (five staff*

*coaches + myself and PC, to about two hundred players spread across five days a week). This is a massive thing for our club, as parent coaches are always going to get us into more trouble than our staff coaches, who we can nurture more and garner buy-in from much faster. Complaints in the past have revolved a lot of the time around things parent coaches were doing. With no parent coaches, we've massively cut down on that negative feedback that would come from crazy, inexperienced people being stubborn and poor within their roles. I would love for this to continue to be the case where we don't need parent coaches, but the club (a.k.a. PC) is adamantly against that idea. I have to know when to press the gas and pump the brakes on certain things and that is one thing I can pump the brakes on more than others, given that parent coaches could be helpful in some specific situations. However, I will be working to reduce the amount of parent coaches needed in our recreational programming in the future, and I think I can get away with not having any in the upcoming fall and winter months.*

*Secondly, I also think having everything at two locations with PC and myself overseeing every single day, every single program that we put forward helped a lot to keep everything under control. It isn't something that is normally manageable for our club due to the need to spread out our high member base across the many facilities we have access to. However, utilizing fewer locations and increasing our club's centralization will undoubtedly be something that I will be pushing for moving forward. I want to oversee everything, and I know that is impossible. But if it is possible to oversee as much as possible, we will be a more efficient club. The evidence is clear as day from this summer, which should have*

*been our toughest season. I simply feel as though it was actually our easiest. We had fewer registrants, staff coaches, parent coaches and locations; all of which made the season more manageable for the club. Despite those figures, we also had our most innovative year. Some things were forced from our governing bodies like adapted programming to have players in boxes, with their parents. Other things were our own innovations to secure greater revenue. Two weeks of camp is something the club has not done for a very long time; let alone a summer camp indoors. We've never done programming in September, which will suddenly now be taking place to help players get back time that they lost from May to June, and secure greater revenue for us. Finally, we've never had competitive teams participate in the same programming as our recreational players, which allowed for greater control and centralization of all of our activities, and an increase on coaches actually coaching the right way, because they couldn't get away with stuff they'd normally do on their own when we're not there (e.g., making kids run laps, do push-ups, etc.). Competitive teams also had to buy-in to our curricula in order to be able to participate. This helped our club to be more effective in furthering player development and keeping everything under control, ensuring the players had a safe return to play.*

*Centralization of tasks in this manner is one more thing that I will be pushing to keep as we move into next year. I feel proud that the things I did and the things I implemented this summer worked so well to this extent that I would do most of them again, under non-COVID-19 circumstances.*

### **Making Our Way – Continued Uncertainty**

This second phase of return to play was also categorized by uncertainty, just like the first phase. Hickson et al. (1971) describe one method of coping with uncertainty as taking action after an event has occurred (Hickson et al., 1971). For most of return to play, our club tried to avoid this reactive approach. We tried to plan out every detail in advance so that we were prepared for anything to happen. But in certain cases, PC and I were required to make decisions on how our club was to advance with procedures based on unclear expectations and guidelines from our governing bodies. This demonstrates the complexity under which our organization was operating, as we had to rely on guidelines from our PSO in order to make an incredibly important change to our internal processes (Duncan, 1972; Wicker et al., 2013). This reliance on an external influence was more detrimental to us given that our PSO never replied to my email, and we had to react in the moment by making the executive decision. This could have easily led us down a path of trouble and resulted in fines, had my decision been an incorrect one.

### **Making our Way – Resourcefulness**

Wicker et al. (2013) identified resourcefulness, the ability of an organization to establish priorities, as an important function for organizational resilience. Within a capacity framework, resourcefulness would fit best with planning and development capacity (Hall et al., 2003), which is the ability to develop and draw on strategic plans, policies and procedures (Hall et al., 2003). Doherty et al. (2014) identified strategic planning (long-term vision and direction), creativity (new ideas), and plan implementation as key predictors for CSO performance and goal achievement. I handled the bulk of our club's planning and plan implementation throughout our return to sport. We had two key priorities throughout, which were safety and fun. Safety has been

identified in the COVID-19 literature up to this point as the top priority for community sport clubs to consider (Johnston et al., 2020; Millar, 2020b). Prioritizing safety contributed to the consistency across our organization and our ability to return to play both efficiently and effectively. This conscious recognition of what we wanted to provide, who we wanted to provide it for, and how best to safely provide it, allowed us to adequately make decisions that suited those goals throughout the process. For example, due to low registrations, we combined several ages together and separated groups by ability rather than age. These innovations allowed us to maintain our priority of providing a place for all players to play at a level that suited their needs. As another example, our decision to keep the facility usage down to just two locations in the summer was an important step toward maintaining safety, as it allowed PC and I to oversee all aspects of our return to play.

Wicker et al. (2013) also note the ability of organizations to generate revenue from multiple sources to be a key predictor of resilience. Organization A generated revenue through membership fees and the grant, but also through the creation of new programs. Two weeks of camp was an example of new, innovative programming that we developed in part to make up for lost revenue between May and June. With our resourcefulness to acquire funding from multiple sources, we were able to maintain a strong enough financial capacity to continue to have paid staff throughout the year. Doherty et al. (2020) hypothesized that the ability to generate revenue beyond membership fees was going to be crucial during a return to sport from the COVID-19 pandemic, due to membership fees normally being such a major revenue generator for CSOs. My findings in this autoethnography support that sentiment.

## **Making our Way - Leader Dedication & Innovation**

Research on innovation in community sport clubs has found that the leader's role in leading and supporting the innovation can be crucial to garnering greater buy-in across the organization (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Jaskyte, 2004). I believe the way in which PC and I championed all of the innovations (i.e., new safety protocols, new ways of doing sport, etc.) and communicated why they were necessary, through the return to play guide and email communications, allowed us to garner buy-in from our staff coaches. This in turn led our staff coaches to achieve greater buy-in from our members when it came to delivering programs.

However, what I found most interesting to reflect on was exactly how we were able to achieve buy-in to all of the radical changes so seamlessly. In their return to play processes from COVID-19, CSOs have tended to focus on safety as their number one priority (Millar, 2020b). The focus on safety and communicating this to all of our stakeholders as our number one priority, allowed us to gain greater buy-in to everything we were doing as an organization, including the radical change. This acceptance toward radical change contradicts prior research on innovation. It has been accepted that gradual changes that do not completely abandon existing practices, also known as "incremental" changes, are usually viewed as more feasible and accepted by members and stakeholders than changes that are considered "radical" (Camison-Zornoza et al., 2004, p. 336; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Hoeber et al., 2015; Wemmer et al., 2015). The assumption for organizations attempting to operate in a pandemic, a time where radical change was more than necessary but a means of survival, would therefore be that they would have trouble achieving buy-in from their stakeholders. Innovations like players needing to stay in their

own box, increased safety procedures, activities without contact, and a complete overhaul of activity design, were among several “radical” changes Organization A implemented during return to sport. All of the ones mentioned above were mandated by our governing bodies, but Organization A also implemented other radical innovations like separating groups by ability rather than age, that were out of our own desire to make return to sport work for our organization. All of these radical changes, from our perspective, were not met with any resistance. Although sometimes these radical changes were painful for players, they were for the most part just happy to be back playing the sport they love. Likewise, parents were happy to have an outlet for their kids to engage in physical activity. Coaches also understood our club’s priorities and why the restrictions were necessary.

In my journal notes, I posited that our various stakeholders were okay with these radical changes given what was at stake and the awareness of the need to prioritize safety. We increased this awareness through our open communication, such as our return to play guide. Communication and formalization have been identified as particularly key elements to infrastructure and a strength of CSOs (Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006), and important to the response plans of CSOs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson, 2020; Doherty et al., 2020; Millar, 2020a, Millar 2020b). Previous research on innovation has also found that sharing knowledge with members can lead to greater acceptance (Hoerber & Hoerber, 2012; Wemmer et al., 2016). However, this autoethnography sheds new light on radical change in the CSO context. If stakeholders hold the same values as the organization with regards

to change, and the organization effectively communicates why the radical change fits those values, greater acceptance of the innovation may occur.

## **Phase 2 – Looking Inward**

At the end of the summer months, I was prompted to reflect on the success of the club throughout return to play. Much of these reflections, such as my preference for a centralized structure and my awareness of the importance of redundancy have already been noted. In the previous phase, I also discussed my dedication and commitment to the cause, which continued in Phase 2. However, I grew in confidence in this phase, both within my role and in my ability to manage our return to sport. I established a clear vision for how I wanted the club to run, including having staff coaches rather than parent coaches, and providing innovative programming found nowhere else. PC and I shared this same vision, which I believe allowed us to flourish during this phase and have a clearer understanding of what we needed to do to ensure a safe, fun return to sport. Having shared values has also been identified in the literature to represent a strength of organizations and be key to their performance (Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006).

I also learned the value of taking risks (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Jaskyte, 2004), such as creating programming models that had never been done before. One of those ideas included the creation of two summer camps in August. By taking this risk as a manager, we were able to secure additional funds to support the sustainability of our programming long-term. Given that insufficient funds can pose problems for organizations with regards to project funding (Balduck et al., 2015; Gumulka et al., 2005; Wicker & Breuer, 2013), and a lack of support for other capacities such as paid staff

(Hall et al., 2003), infrastructure (Balduck et al., 2015; Wicker & Breuer, 2013), and planning and development capacity (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018), that financial security was important for us as we moved into Phase 3.

Finally, in this series of journal notes, I described times where I was forced into making executive decisions on behalf of my club, based on unclear guidelines from our PSO. I had to use my best judgement and the limited information that I had at the time, and I still believe that the decisions made, such as parents no longer being needed in Phase 2 of play, were correct assumptions to make. However, if I hadn't been willing to take those risks, our programming might have suffered as a result. Instead of moving to Phase 2, we would have stayed in Phase 1, which was characterized by several limitations to our ability to adequately develop players.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Phase 3: Fluctuation and Change

The third phase of return to our sport was characterized by fluctuation and change, not just in our capacity, but also in our environment and the restrictions thrust upon us by our governing bodies. The fluctuation and change impacted our participation levels, our short-term planning, and my relationship with PC, leading to conflict.

#### **Fluctuating Participation and Safety**

*September 3, 2020*

*The uncertainty under COVID-19 continues every day. In less than one week we start our Fall programming – five weeks of indoor training in September and October. It's something our club, and our sport for that matter, would never do. Normally these months would be focused on tryouts for the following year and a period of rest. With nothing going on in May or June, we wanted to offer programming in September and October. But nobody's registered. It might be because our indoor facility is far away from most of our stakeholders, it might be because the price is too high (as a result of using an Indoor facility) or it might be because we don't normally do programming in September/October. But either way, we wanted to offer programming and now we are unsure if we are going to be able to do it, or what the repercussions might be if we can't. We could move it outdoors but PC doesn't seem too keen to do so. We could combine all the ages into an hour rather than two, but I'm not keen to do so because of space. We could refund the age groups with lower numbers, but I definitely don't want to do*

*that. I always want to provide a place for players to play, no matter what; so that's not an option for me.*

***September 8, 2020***

*I feel rather disappointed about the first day of the Fall training season. Due to low registrations, we needed to make a last minute change to the older group and switch their time to be the same as all other age groups. The email was sent with a few days notice, but apparently that wasn't enough for people. That resulted in about half coming at the proper time and half coming at the original time, meaning neither the proper session or the players who came in late got in a good enough session. Coaching points just simply cannot come out to the same extent in a session for four players as they can for eight players. It was also just a bit disorganized because the facility we were using didn't have their act together. Some nets that we were relying on using were moved off to the side, and we didn't know the proper way to get them back inside because the doors are very thin in comparison to the nets. But more importantly, their handling of the COVID-19 protocols was lackadaisical to say the least. When we arrived they didn't have paper or pen on the table at the front for purposes of contact tracing and only provided it once we told them to get their act together. Nobody stood at the table when players/parents were arriving, so some of our participants didn't sign in. From now on, we're just going to have to do everything ourselves. I don't mind doing it and for that matter, we're doing it anyway. But they are now held responsible as another stakeholder, now that we're using their facility. They are supposed to be doing their own contact tracing and their own strict enforcement*

*of protocols (i.e., wearing masks, contact tracing, hand sanitization, etc.). We can be responsible to a degree for what happens with our parents and players, but we're not the only ones using the facility. That makes it all the more dangerous for us if they don't follow the proper protocols. Their disorganization caused us to be disorganized, and the last thing I want to do is be a disorganized club.*

*Unfortunately, we looked like a disorganized club last night and I'm not entirely pleased about it.*

#### ***October 4, 2020***

*It was a cold and rainy Sunday. Unfortunately that meant I got about a couple of dozen of emails across the board from players letting me know they wouldn't be attending practices. This is competitive, so it is a bit of a higher standard and players are generally expected to attend rain or shine, and normally would in a regular season. But the current state of the world has left parents and maybe even players themselves (but definitely more so parents) in a heap of fear that any drop of rain will get their kid sick and cause them to get the coronavirus. So more than half of the players on the team I was to coach that day + about 70% of the players from the game I was supposed to lead, decided not to attend. Most emailed, saying their daughter had a case of the sniffles or a cough or a sore throat, which would be worrying...if every parent was telling the truth. If every parent was telling the truth we'd have a COVID-outbreak on our hands that we needed to worry about. But given the connection to the rain and the last minute nature of all emails (most were sent about an hour before), you have to feel it's just more paranoia about the virus and rain, rather than anything for our club to seriously*

worry about at this time. If I still have that many players sick on Thursday for our next set of events for competitive, I'll worry then.

**October 6, 2020**

*It's impossible to schedule anything more than a few weeks in advance these days. Everyone is just so uncertain about the virus and their plans. Many players also play another sport and don't know their schedules, on top of not knowing what's going to happen with the virus and the recent rise in cases in our area. This level of uncertainty is like never before. Normally players might need to wait for the schedule of another sport to come out before committing to anything, but these days you get almost no replies to any emails about future events if it's not in the time frame of about two weeks. For example, this week I have started to get replies to an email I sent about two weeks ago, asking players their thoughts on a variety of different days and programs that might work for them in the winter. Most of the replies I'm getting are along the lines of "We're not sure what we can commit to with the recent rise of cases." Or "We just need to wait for our other sport's schedule before committing." People aren't just worried about the virus, but almost more about paying for something that gets cancelled. There's a big fear about refunds right now that we're all going to be like Organization C and not refund anyone. That's not true. PC worked day and night in the summer to get hundreds of players full refunds. We'll do the same again in the winter if it comes to that. But hopefully it doesn't.*

**October 21, 2020**

*What a frustrating day! Today, our local health unit established new restrictions for Indoor facilities, limiting festivities to just ten people per group, with nine metre distances between groups and physical distancing of three metres in place within the groups. At first, I skipped the physical distancing part and thought we just had to go down to 10 people per group and be strategic with our space. I thought 'Okay, that sucks, but that's manageable.' I sketched out six different diagrams for our six different indoor facility time slots that were set to start in three days. When I finished, I read a text from PC that simply said "no games" and my heart sank. I re-read the articles and this time noticed the "3-metre distance" note. This basically means we have to go back to our Phase 1 of training when indoors, which involves each player in individual boxes, and no games, no contact. In other words, all my sketches were pointless, because this now requires more space than would be manageable, and more space than I had sketched for. This news just feels so sad. So much of what I had planned and organized and worked on these past few months is just like POOF! Gone. I'll be interested to see the different responses from all the organizations. The league will certainly be shut down, as was always probable. But I imagine our indoor facility will close to the public, after opening at the beginning of September when we all still had hope. I imagine Organization B will try to stay Outdoors, despite the cold and darkness. I imagine Organization D will go back to hiding underneath a rock and shut down all their programs again. That'll be really awkward for the two coaches who just chose to go to their club instead of us. Perhaps we'll have more intruders again. I emailed competitive teams that we*

*will try and hold some kind of programming for them regardless of these decisions. It just sucks because it will either need to be moved outdoors, in the cold, or indoors with players in individual boxes, which isn't fun for anyone and a massive nightmare for me as the Technical Leader in terms of the design of the activities and my sanity. Sigh. Oh well. I must stay positive. If I am not optimistic, no one at the club will be.*

**October 24, 2020**

*The restrictions have now changed again. A bunch of people in our community fought the district on the new restrictions and they've relaxed a bit. We can now have twelve people per group, and social distancing between participants is no longer required during the activity. This means we can have contact, and not have to resort to having players in individual boxes. The news comes with mixed feelings for me. Firstly, I spent the last three days stressing about the restrictions and planning my heart out for how we were going to overcome it. Then out of nowhere, it's no longer that big of a deal. Now the only major problem for us is keeping our programs to just 25 people per space, which will be manageable. But simultaneously, I'm happy for the change, as it would have been just too much stress if things had stayed the way they were set out to three days ago.*

**October 31, 2020**

*I'm going to have to get used to people sending in refund requests. I feel like it's so abnormal to have people ask for refunds in a non-covid world and I haven't had any problem accepting people who ask our club for refunds before programming begins because they are concerned about COVID. But I'm having*

*to get used to people asking for refund requests after they've already attended. I don't know if it's a COVID thing or what, but I've rarely ever had this happen before. It always makes you wonder what you could have done differently, especially as the Technical Leader who is in charge of planning, implementing and overseeing these programs. When someone doesn't enjoy it and wants a refund, it's hard not to take it personally. But it might just be one of those things that is exacerbated by the hyperness of everything to do with COVID-19. Because of all the refunds we gave out in April as well, maybe people have realized that if they want a refund, they can get a refund without us putting up much of a fuss. It's just the way things are these days.*

#### ***November 15, 2020***

*It's November 15<sup>th</sup>, and I'm stressed again, because the restrictions just changed again. We've planned everything for the upcoming league to have twelve players and a coach (including registration fees, communication to parents/players, etc.,) but now our health district has just changed the rules to be eleven players and a coach. It sounds so small and insignificant but it's a really big deal. Now, I have to tell someone they can't play or I need to rely on someone not being there each game, when they've already paid for the league. It's incredibly frustrating. If the number was going to be eleven and a coach, that's what it should have been originally. They probably don't realize just how significant this change is. It has ramifications for each and every single program and each and every team attempting to compete in the league. The district is just doing everything they can to increase stress on us as leaders in sport and we'd honestly be better off if*

*everything had just been cancelled, because at least that way the stress would be gone.*

### **Fluctuating Participation and Safety – Continuing Uncertainty**

Like the first two phases of return to play, phase three was categorized by more uncertainty for myself and my organization. Parnell et al. (2000) found that organizations with more uncertainty about their customers were more likely to be ‘Reactors’, struggling to adapt to their environment and stabilize. This was certainly the case for Organization A during this phase. The uncertainty over our number of participants, compounded later by restrictions on number of participants allowed, forced us into reactive decisions closer to the start date of our programs. We would have wanted everything to be set in stone months in advance, but this was simply not possible due to the fluctuating participant levels and the restrictions imposed upon us during this period. The uncertainty also worsened the conflict between myself and PC, which will be explored later in this phase.

As discussed in previous chapters, Organization A had a very complex environment during the pandemic, relying on the government of Ontario, our PSO, our NSO, our district leagues and associations, our district health unit, facility owners, and other CSOs. Under Duncan’s (1972) classification, Organization A would be seen as operating under tremendous uncertainty, due to the high complexity and high instability by which the organization was forced to operate under. There was no possible way to be anything but a ‘Reactor’ during this time, as the restrictions changed with the wind.

Slack and Parent (2006) suggest that organizations attempting to control the uncertainty in their environments can do so by either responding to the demands of their external environment, by making changes to their internal structure, processes and

behaviours, or they can attempt to change the nature of the external environment. Although some changes to our internal processes can be seen in other phases (see “Resourcefulness” in Phase 2), very few can be seen here, as we were constantly needing to react and had little human resource capacity at this point to adjust properly. We had to constantly change plans based on directives from our government, increasing uncertainty for us, but also acting as a mechanism that ruled how we would overcome that uncertainty. For example, the limit of sporting events to just twenty-five people on the facility space we were using, made the decision of how many participants to allow into our programs for us. Before that restriction came into place, we did not plan on capping our participants at a certain number, due to the financial resources that could be provided to us by allowing as many participants to register as possible. By following these government orders and guidelines required of us from our PSO, Organization A relied not only on internal process changes, but also externally directed ones (Wicker et al., 2013).

We ultimately had to find ways to adapt to the restrictions imposed upon us, in order to uphold safety to the fullest extent. The COVID-19 return to play literature up to this point has also identified safety as the number one priority of CSOs, and a critical focus to maintain in order for these organizations to continue offering sport to their members (Johnston, Millar, & Morrow, 2020; Millar, 2020b; Pierce et al., 2020),

### **Fluctuating Staff**

#### ***October 13 and November 18, 2020***

*We are having trouble retaining staff coaches. All have left citing busy-ness and school, not that they haven't enjoyed it or that they have fallen out of love with the club, etc. But it is not a victory that they are leaving for reasons not to do with us.*

*It is still a bad thing. The first coach to leave went back to school in a city an hour or so away. We knew she was leaving for that and that was too bad, but I hired an apt replacement who I felt would be eager to learn and grow. Then another coach left because of a change in home address. A few months later another coach left because of the stress of balancing school and work. We always say school comes first, so we can never be upset by these decisions. The coaches are doing the right things. But it is still hard to have university or high school aged coaches, who need to focus on other things.*

*Last week, the coach that replaced the first coach decided to go back home and focus on mental health, which I felt like was the right decision. I think it is partially school and partially COVID-19 that is making things extra difficult for these coaches. Because they cannot just worry about school, they also have to worry about a pandemic, and then come to work. That is my opinion on it anyway. I have only heard that reiterated by one of the coaches who left. Now we are down to just two coaches. One of those two told me this week that they are not available on Thursdays any longer. So now we are just down to myself and one other. So that means I have to do more coaching again. I don't mind, but I would rather be able to oversee everything and look after all the safety elements and ensure we are not breaking restrictions. For example, a few weeks ago I needed to jump in to help a coach deal with negative behaviours of her group. Then I completely missed that the other coach (PC's replacement for the second coach that left) who I genuinely believe didn't read anything to do with COVID-restrictions, started a game that broke several COVID-related rules. I asked her*

*to stop several times before making her stop, since she would not listen. I was just like 'what on earth are you doing? The players cannot do either of those things. Why are you forcing players to stand in a line and each touch the same ball with their head and hands? Stick to the session plan.'*

*This was an example where a coach did something against both the restrictions (several restrictions) and our culture. It is partially my fault because we did not have the time to train this new coach in the COVID-restrictions and she was unresponsive to any of our attempts to do that. So we needed to rely on our formalization, which I felt like would be enough. She acknowledged that she had read all the COVID restrictions and understood, but she clearly hadn't. So you need to watch. But you cannot watch if you are stuck with a group, because you need to watch your group and make sure they are following the rules, etc. So this will be a challenge for us. I want to recruit more volunteers or staff and at this point I don't really care if they are parents or not. But the problem is any moment the programs could be shut down. So what is the point of recruiting new coaches, who haven't engaged with any of the restrictions at all, when they could be out of work in two weeks?*

### ***October 26, 2020***

*One of our staff decided recently that they were going to take a hiatus to focus on school, which is completely okay. Her replacement was someone who held a dimmed-down version of my job before I arrived here. She was brought back into the fold by PC, but she seems to be the worst with communication I've possibly ever seen with coaches over email. I can't for the life of me get a hold of her, even*

*when asking very basic questions. I emailed her today to just say, “Hi \_\_\_\_\_. Please confirm that you have read the below email. Please let me know if email is not the best way to communicate with you as communication will be extremely important for the success of our program.” I struggle with people who cannot communicate, because for me it is something I thrive off of, particularly email as I am better writing my thoughts than speaking them. If our staff coaches can’t communicate, it makes everything so much more difficult, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic landscape. There are so many different protocols to follow and I need to ensure each of my coaches understands all of the protocols to the fullest extent. If they can’t even answer a basic email, how can I trust and rely on them to come and coach sessions in the most unique and delicate time in our club’s history?*

### **Fluctuating Staff – Human Resource Capacity**

Research on capacity has demonstrated that under normal circumstances, CSOs often face the challenge of recruiting and retaining enough skilled volunteers (Balduck et al., 2015; Gumulka et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014). This is a particular problem for community sport clubs, as having dedicated personnel and the recruitment and retention of those personnel are critical components to organizational effectiveness (Doherty et al., 2014; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Gumulka et al., 2005). By not being able to retain the summer staff that not only kept us afloat in the summer, but allowed our programs to run smoothly, our programming suffered in the winter and was never the same. When things got really dire, our redundancy again came into effect as I had to switch roles several times to that as a safety officer, coach, technical leader, and what PC and I call ‘club caretaker.’ But this

redundancy also compromised our ability to uphold safety to the fullest extent, as I had to focus on too many things at once. Hall et al. (2003) identified that organizations frequently report problems retaining volunteers due to burnout, in turn leading other volunteers to suffer from burnout due to the lack of help. Organization A likely suffered with this phenomenon. As our human resources dwindled, the few that we had remaining suffered stress as a result of their workloads and decided to just focus on their schoolwork. With the dwindling number of staff, our organization was undoubtedly unable to be as effective as it otherwise would have been (Balduck et al., 2015; Gumulka et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014).

### **Conflict – Lack of Shared Values**

*September 13, 2020*

*My level of disorganization seems to be continuing under COVID-19 RTP. But it's arising more out of stubbornness from the club, rather than any fault of my own. I'm just doing too much...overseeing too much. We had three teams of 12-15 players each on an outdoor facility today, which is massive for us. It's probably the most players and parents we've had in a while. It was our first session for competitive players and great to have one of our competitive teams back in action for the first time since March. But it was too much to manage. I'd love for us to have high centralization and for me to oversee everything, but it's impossible when the high centralization means I literally oversee everything with no help. My job today involved setting up the equipment, keeping an eye on my players, and doing the attendance/symptoms checklist for all the players as they arrived between the three teams. In the future, I believe we need a safety officer to be*

*there, so that I don't have to do the attendance and can just focus my attention on the team I'm working with. But the club is unwilling to provide one. It's strange because PC wants to ensure we are being diligent with the COVID-19 protocols and said just as much. But not having a safety officer makes everything so much less efficient. PC wants each team to be independent with the hand sanitizer, checklist and attendance. Which is fine, but I don't trust the volunteer competitive coaches to arrive on time, early enough, to actually do it, meaning I don't have to. I also don't believe they will have the diligence that we would have if we were to do it ourselves. Corners will be cut, players will participate without having done waivers, hand sanitizer won't be used. That's just the fact of the matter.*

*I always find it strange what me and PC disagree on. To me it seems like a no-brainer. I spoke to a coaching friend at Organization B, who echoed my thinking about how important the safety officer role is for ensuring efficiency. We both agreed, having both done the safety officer role several times, that it is imperative. You're never just doing nothing. You're always a big help to the organization. I know PC knows it too. So it really just comes down to a matter of sacrificing efficiency for decentralization. Which is not what I would personally want on either account. I'd want an efficient, centralized organization with tight control, especially given how tight of a rope we are walking right now. For me, there's no other way but to have that tight control, especially given the relatively small size of our membership base right now. It's unfortunate, but I know when to stop pushing. And unfortunately, this is one of those times to stop pushing and not*

*say another word about it. Half of my role is making PC happy anyway. For one, I need to keep my job. For another, I need to persuade her to keep hers, and not cancel all of our programming. So unfortunately, it's another COVID battle lost, and I don't really understand why. I guess that's just the way it is.*

***October 14, 2020***

*Every time we have any kind of program, I need to talk PC into keeping it about a week before. Her first instinct is always to cancel things and worry about all that could go wrong, which is a repetitive cycle given that registration numbers are always going to be low in the world we live in. Cases continue to rise, so we're getting a lot of refund requests and our participation levels are again in flux. But at the same time, each day we get new players coming in the door too. My perspective on it is that the players who want it, really want it and that we should do everything we can to provide the sport for them. If we're not losing money, who cares? I think it really gets to me as well because I become so invested in these things. I'm just naturally a passionate person who devotes a lot of energy and attention into every project I set my mind to, but I also spend weeks to months being the biggest cheerleader and promoter for all of these programs, only to have PC want to shut them down prematurely. Her reasoning this time doesn't have to do with profit, but more about giving them a good experience. I think we can do that, no matter what. It's up to us to provide that, regardless of how many players we have.*

***November 14, 2020***

*Today we paid a fifteen-year-old fifteen dollars to play for an hour with one of*

*our programs. PC is adamant that she wants a staff coach involved in the High School age programming as a referee, even though a referee is not needed. The program is self sufficient and there are several people willing to give their time for free. The coach she wants involved has also proven herself to be irresponsible, having put up a fuss over scheduling in the summer and most recently, losing a key to our office that I was bewildered to find out that she had. The thing is too, I probably wouldn't care as much if it weren't for the restrictions limiting us to just 25 people in our facility. Last week, with all the volunteer coaches (parent coaches) we have involved in the program, we were at 26 with the staff coach involved. PC refused to do anything about it and instead said that I am the one who shouldn't be there. This was very disheartening to hear. I fought to keep the program alive and was the one who ensured it would not be cancelled. I got us over the line by recruiting several players into the program. I am the one who has been organizing and leading and communicating to everyone involved in the program. It is my job to be there. Instead, she implied that she was confused why I "kept on showing up". This was even more bewildering to me than her insistence on continuing to show faith in someone who has proven to be irresponsible. Quite simply, the players and volunteer coaches are looking to me to oversee everything. It's disappointing that PC would rather have a fifteen-year-old play for an hour for pay than have her Technical Director in attendance. Very disappointing. It's even more disappointing given that I'm the one who is supposed to schedule coaches anyway. But as I found out in the summer, it's not*

*up to me to schedule the coaches. It's up to me to email them based on what PC wants.*

### **Conflict – Lack of Shared Values**

Often, conflicts in organizations arise out of competing needs and/or differing responses of individuals encountering an issue or problem (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). This can also be exacerbated by interdependence on tasks and power relationships (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). I experienced all of these as reasons for conflict between myself and PC. Firstly, we often relied on each other to carry out tasks. I was responsible for scheduling coaches, but PC could overrule any decision I made. There were times where I wanted, or even required more help but I was told it was not needed or not financially feasible. Then there were other times where we did not need the extra help and, again, I was overruled. During earlier phases of the pandemic, I often asked for her input before sending out the schedule, to ensure we were on the same page. This sounds collaborative in nature, but it was more like her telling me what to do and me following, than us truly coming up with a solution where both parties had a voice. In this phase of the pandemic, I really felt like my voice was completely lost, but I felt like I could do nothing about it because she was my boss and the person given more credence to make executive decisions.

In regards to conflicting goals, PC and I were hardly ever on the same page in Phase 3, which led us down completely different paths. I never wanted any programs to be cancelled, because then my livelihood would be cancelled, and our opportunity to provide players with a chance to play the sport would be lost. I also thought that if we

were not losing money, even if we were just barely breaking even, that we should run programs. PC often looked at the bigger picture, always wanting to ensure we were making substantial profit from each program before giving it the full go ahead. In the September 13<sup>th</sup> journal note, I wanted to strengthen our club's centralization and have tighter control over the program, so that we could ensure we were being as diligent as possible with the safety protocols. I had no problem with staff and those higher up in the organization being in control of everything. In fact it was my preference. PC on the other hand wanted to decentralize the program, so that the competitive coaches would not get accustomed to the club doing everything for them. All of these issues demonstrate the validity of conflicting goals being a key mechanism for conflict between leaders in community sport organizations (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). Inversely, shared understandings and values among members have been found to be an essential characteristic of resilient organizations (Fasey et al., 2021).

Finally, many arguments also came from power relationships; specifically, the power that PC held over me due to her role (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). I had to learn to be okay with her exerting power without consulting me. PC's refusal for a volunteer or staff coach to help as a safety officer for our competitive programming, paying a staff coach fifteen dollars to play with our high school age group, or the camp being released for different ages than I had asked for, are all examples of this power imbalance that resulted in greater conflict. My opinion in these circumstances didn't matter, and PC exerted her power to get her way.

Van Bussel and Doherty (2015) outline that an organization's internal and external environment can also act as conflict triggers, and that aspects of communication,

organizational structure and personal variables (such as individual values) are important antecedents to conflict. Conditions for conflict in community sport clubs frequently include poor communication and lack of human resources within the board (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Inversely, effective communication and shared values has been identified as vital to community sport club capacity (Misener & Doherty, 2009) and organizational resilience (Fasey et al., 2021). When it came to conflict resolution, PC and I often relied on avoidance as our key strategy of overcoming the conflict, which unsurprisingly is not seen as an effective approach (Slack & Parent, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Instead of confronting our issues and finding compromises, we often stopped talking about our issues altogether, and changed the discussion to other important topics. We withheld our opinions and the conflict was never resolved. It might help us in the future to know where we stand on several different topics and better communicate, avoiding new conflicts altogether. However, as Starks (2006) points out, avoidance may help organizational members to move on with their work, but it may also lead to lingering negative feelings and emotions. Instead of this avoidance approach, perhaps we should have been more collaborative, in understanding each other's viewpoints and working toward a solution together (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Collaboration allows opinions from both parties to be heard, and helps to remove emotional responses (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). This, in turn, should help to avoid conflict and tension in the future between the two parties (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). If collaboration becomes unsuccessful, clubs will often adopt a compromise strategy, whereby involved parties make small sacrifices toward a solution that works for everyone (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015).

This has implications for club leaders such as myself in how to both avoid conflict, and manage conflict after it occurs, in working towards a collaborative approach where every voice is heard. PC and I should have been working harder to collaborate and compromise with our disagreements. If we had done so, we would have been on the same page about more issues, neither of us would hold any feelings of discontent toward each other, and I believe we would have then been able to run our organization more effectively as a result.

### **Phase 3 – Looking Inward**

Phase 3 was very frustrating, personally and professionally, characterized by fluctuation, staffing challenges, and conflict. At the same time, reflecting on it now, I can recognize that it was a valuable learning experience for me as a first time Technical Leader. One lesson that was reinforced was the importance of communication with all stakeholders (coaches and staff, parents and children, people in charge of facilities, and others). Moreover, I can recognize how times of flux can foster conflict, and having engaged with the literature, I am now better aware of how to manage conflict, and avoid it altogether, through compromise (Omisore & Abidoun, 2014; Slack & Parent, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015) and effective communication (Omisore & Abidoun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). This may include sitting down with PC to discuss our differences, allowing both voices to be heard (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015), or simply letting go of my personal opinions and my ego when differences arise, working to compromise from the start (Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Unfortunately, due to my inability to effectively handle the conflict in the moment, my relationship with PC will likely never be the same. Reflecting on how I could have handled the conflict differently

has been a massive learning experience for me as I look to improve as a Technical Leader.

## Chapter 6

### 6 Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented community sport organizations with unique opportunities to rethink their practices and inspire change (Fullagar, 2020; Millar, 2020b). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine my role and experiences as a Technical Leader for a community sport organization (CSO) in Southwestern Ontario during the pandemic. Through an autoethnography, I detailed my experiences with the management features and functions of this organization – and specifically its organizational capacity to return to sport – while also documenting and sharing my reactions and internalizations of the events. Specifically, I reflected on the questions: *1) What were the features of organizational capacity that were most important to the CSO's effectiveness, survival and resilience during the pandemic? and 2) What were the capacity features that were most impactful to my own ability to carry out my role effectively within the club?*

In answer to the first research question, I observed that the features of organizational capacity most important to my CSO's effectiveness, survival and resilience included: leader dedication, redundancy and centralization, human resource capacity (i.e., dedicated staff), access to high-quality facilities, and open communication. Simultaneously, inter-organizational conflict, environmental instability and failures to retain staff reduced our ability to achieve organizational effectiveness, particularly in the third phase of return to play.

There were some differences across the different phases, which can be expected due to the fluctuating nature of the pandemic (Anderson, 2020; Millar, 2020b, Pierce et al., 2020). For example, in Phase 1 and Phase 2, PC and I held many of the same values, which led to effective programming. However, in Phase 3 we disagreed on many key issues pertaining to how to cope with the changing restrictions. This led to conflict between myself and PC, and stopped us from having the same level of effectiveness within our programming and our roles. As highlighted throughout the autoethnography, this further supports the notion of shared values as an important consideration for CSOs and organizational effectiveness (Doherty et al., 2014; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006). However, other capacity features, such as our ability to have access to high-quality facilities and leader dedication, were present throughout all three phases.

With respect to the second research question, about my own role at Organization A, I found that my personal dedication to the cause, redundancy in my role, resourcefulness in terms of establishing priorities, and attempts to maintain a centralized structure with tight control were some of the most important elements of my success during return to play. My failure to effectively manage conflict during Phase 3 demonstrates one particular limitation that I experienced in the return to play process as a Technical Leader, and I am now aware that I need to work to collaborate and compromise in the future (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Starks, 2006; Van Bussel & Doherty, 2015). Further, although my dedication to the cause and resourcefulness were consistent throughout all three phases, the extent to which redundancy was helpful fluctuated. Organization A and I were less effective when our redundancy (i.e., PC and I fulfilling

multiple roles) was out of absolute necessity, such as low human resource capacity. In cases where I needed to step in and abandon my normal duties, our organization suffered and I was not able to oversee all safety protocols as diligently as I needed to. When the redundancy was more out of strategy, such as establishing priorities, I was more effective in dealing with and mitigating the uncertainty, simply by being able to keep a watchful eye over all aspects of return to play. This also demonstrates the importance of resourcefulness – the extent to which we were able to establish priorities and utilize the resources we had, to halt a threatening situation in the environment (Bruneau et al., 2003; Wicker et al., 2013) and leader dedication to supporting the innovation process (Hoerber & Hoerber, 2012; Jaskyte, 2004).

Finally, in dealing with uncertainty, it is important to note that our ability to do anything during the pandemic, and even begin to deal with uncertainty, was based on directives from our governing bodies. As Wicker et al. (2013) note in their study of organizational resilience, the ability of CSOs to return to play in any fashion, let alone implement new programming, may be dependent on directives from their governing organizations and the organization's ability to acquire and utilize critical resources, such as human support and external funding. We had to constantly change plans based on directives from our government, increasing uncertainty for us, but also acting as a mechanism that ruled how we would overcome that uncertainty. This reliance on external organizations meant that we were able to overcome disruptions, as all stakeholders recognized the need to prioritize safety and that the innovative changes made to programming were not necessarily by choice. This differs from previous literature on

radical change, which suggests that it is often met with more resistance than incremental change (Camison-Zornoza et al., 2004; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Hoeber et al., 2015).

### **Recommendations for CSOs**

Based on my research, I suggest that CSOs be aware of the fluctuating nature of capacity and put a greater emphasis on both short-term planning and strategic (long-term) planning. That is, they should have plans in place in case crucial capacity features, such as dedicated human resources or access to quality facilities, are reduced. In the case of Organization A, PC and I constantly needed to react to the uncertainty in the environment. We did not have plans in place to deal with situations like changing restrictions, and we often reacted differently in terms of how best to handle the issue. Had we had discussions surrounding these worst-case scenarios in advance, we would have been better able to handle them. It would be unreasonable to plan for every possible emergency that could occur, but organizations like ours can think more carefully in the future about what would need to happen if their programs or events were to be cancelled on short notice, or significantly impacted by an environmental threat. Organizations should specifically consider what they would do in case their programs or plans were to be cancelled or drastically changed due to pressure from the environment, and how they would communicate with stakeholders, support the mental health of their staff and volunteers, and avoid financial losses (Millar, 2020a).

Clubs should also be aware of the fluctuations that can occur in the environment, particularly during a pandemic. If CSOs need to pivot quickly following unforeseen circumstances, open communication with stakeholders is particularly important

(Anderson, 2020; Millar, 2020a, Millar 2020b), including garnering buy-in when innovative practices need to be introduced (Camison-Zornoza et al., 2004; Hoerber & Hoerber, 2012; Hoerber et al., 2015; Wemmer et al., 2015). The open communication that PC and I had with our stakeholders throughout all three phases, such as communicating our refund policy, disseminating our return to play guide and constant email communication, allowed us to gain greater buy-in from our members and coaches. Finally, I recommend that CSOs not rely solely on their leaders in achieving organizational effectiveness during environmental uncertainty, and ensure their leaders are backed up with support from other dedicated human resources (Doherty et al., 2014; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Fasey et al., 2021; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006). As I noted throughout the autoethnography, when the dedication PC and I had within our roles was backed up by other human resources, we were much more effective than when we had to take on too many roles ourselves.

## Chapter 7

### 7 Conclusion

Although autoethnography is a useful method for elucidating personal experiences (Chang, 2013; Mendez, 2013; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), I recognize that my account is only one telling of the events and that others who experienced the same exact circumstances may identify completely different insights (Chang, 2013; Tullis, 2013; Misener, 2020). This study is therefore limited in that it only tells a story from my perspective. Due to a personal desire to have my autoethnography be guided by only my own thoughts, feelings and opinions, I did not do any member checking – by going to people or organizations that feature in the study and asking for their opinions on return to sport during the pandemic - which could present another limitation of this study. Doing interviews with other actors may have strengthened the validity of the study (Anderson, 2006; Lapadat, 2017) and allowed other voices to be heard in the telling of the events, enhancing trustworthiness (Mendez, 2013). However, although this may have strengthened a study, the researcher in an autoethnography does not need to rely on others' perspectives, agendas, interactions and interpretations (Lapadat, 2017) and is the owner of their story (Ellis et al., 2011). Finally, my study is limited due to the active role I hold within my community sport club and the potential for me to have been cautious and selective about what to include and what not to in the thesis. However, the purpose of autoethnographies is not to present a lived experience exactly as it was lived, but to make sense of these experiences and extract meaning from them (Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnographies of youth sport organizations are a relatively unexplored area, particularly autoethnographies of coaches or those in administrative roles (Cooper et al.,

2017). As a result, this study allowed for new and expanded insights into the organizational context that previous research may have neglected. My intention in sharing my story is to spark a wider dialogue about how community sport organizations can overcome future environmental turmoil. Through sharing my experiences as a Technical Leader of a sport club during the COVID-19 pandemic, community sport organizations may gain a greater understanding of the capacity features and necessary steps for both efficient functioning and survival during the time of an external threat in the environment, such as a pandemic. Leaders and managers of CSOs may also gain valuable insight into how to effectively manage an organization through environmental uncertainty.

Future scholars should continue to examine radical change and the circumstances by which it is met with more acceptance than resistance, such as if the change is externally directed. Future research could also elucidate the extent to which redundancy helps or hinders an organization's resilience and capacity in general, and what elements of capacity need to be in place in order to fully make the most of redundancy. Finally, future research could uncover how to adequately devise strategic plans in an unstable environment. In my autoethnography, it became clear that greater strategic planning would have benefited our ability to manage the fluctuation and change. However, it was ultimately difficult to adequately plan due to the constantly changing environment around us.

This autoethnography contributes to the broader literature on CSOs in periods of change and crisis, through the identification of organizational features and practices that facilitate or hinder CSO success. As detailed in previous chapters, these include leader

dedication, redundancy and centralization, human resource capacity (i.e., dedicated staff), strong infrastructure, and open communication. Other CSOs may be able to learn from these experiences to navigate environmental change more effectively. At the same time, this autoethnography has contributed to my own reflections and practice. That is, through this process, I gained a greater understanding of how to be effective in my role as a Technical Leader and the intricate procedures of working alongside others in the field. By developing these new understandings of what makes an effective organization and an effective Technical Leader, I believe I will be able to help my organization be more effective in the future.

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## Appendix A



Date: 26 August 2020

To: Prof. Alison Doherty

Project ID: 116189

Study Title: Reflections on Return to Sport: An Autoethnography of Youth Soccer Clubs Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic

Short Title: Reflections on Return to Sport

Application Type: NRMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: 04/Sept/2020

Date Approval Issued: 26/Aug/2020 22:01

REB Approval Expiry Date: 26/Aug/2021

Dear Prof. Alison Doherty

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NRMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NRMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NRMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Document Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Letter of Information and Consent_Return to Sport_Revised Clem	Written Consent/Assent	19/Aug/2020	

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NRMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NRMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NRMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NRMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Katelyn Harris, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NRMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Rhys Desmond

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Waterloo  
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