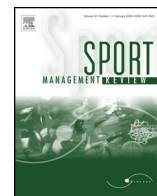




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# Sport-for-development: Inclusive, reflexive, and meaningful research in low- and middle-income settings



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## ABSTRACT

Research in and around sport-for-development (SFD) has increased steadily since the first scholarly work in the field was conducted in the 1990s. As SFD has grown into an established and respected area of study, it has also diversified in its research approaches and methodologies. In this article, we reflect on our experiences as researchers in low- and middle-income countries and specifically discuss the combination of traditional research methods and innovative approaches to qualitative inquiry within two distinct projects that were funded under a single SFD program. We highlight the efficacy of a flexible, innovative, and locally-relevant research design, and advocate for inclusive, reflexive, and participatory research approaches during the monitoring and evaluation processes. Finally, we identify likely success factors and challenges for current SFD research, and offer recommendations for future qualitative inquiries in and around sport-based development programs.

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## 1. Introduction

The field of sport-for-development (SFD) has undergone significant growth and diversification over the past 15 years. All over the world, sport-based development programs aim to contribute to positive social, cultural, educational, psychological, physical, and economic change for disadvantaged communities and their individual members (Levermore & Beacom, 2009; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014). In their recent review of SFD literature, Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe (2016) identified that research within the SFD domain has predominantly been undertaken with a qualitative research lens but data collection in the SFD field has been largely confined to traditional qualitative methods, such as interviews, observation, and document analysis. This finding provides evidence for recent calls that have been made to encourage more innovative, culturally appropriate, and technologically advanced research methods as well as locally relevant presentations of findings in different SFD settings (Carroll, Dew, & Howden-Chapman, 2011; Garbutt, 2009; Siefken, Schofield, & Schulenkorf, 2014, 2015).

In this article, we report on the specific research approaches, methodologies, and methods employed during investigatory SFD research across two research projects in the Pacific islands region. While both projects were funded under the same

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Australian government SFD international aid program, they had separate and specific development foci; hence, they required tailored approaches to research engagement and delivery. In presenting our practical research engagement in more detail, we provide a critical and applied discussion of qualitative research methods and approaches used in SFD. In doing so, we have a desire to inform the development of culturally sensitive approaches in SFD, and to further current debates by outlining the innovative, qualitative methods we employed to achieve this. In particular, we utilized reflective surveys, stories of change, and photovoice/videography, which have received limited focus in SFD research to date.

## 2. Literature review

To explore the deeper meaning of a certain phenomenon, it is essential to follow a qualitative mode of inquiry (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2010; Young & Atkinson, 2012). For example, Eisner (1985) argued that “truth” can only be achieved through flexibility, prioritizing the subjective over the objective, intuition over the rational, interpretation over measurement, and surprise over the predictable. In this context, the qualitative researcher is very much like an artist at various stages in the research process, who—in line with Weber’s concept of *Verstehen*—tries to establish an empathetic understanding<sup>1</sup> to explore different realities and multiple truths. In the context of SFD, numerous studies have applied a variety of qualitative research techniques to investigate, monitor, or evaluate different sport-based development programs. These approaches have largely drawn on “traditional” qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observation, focus groups, document analysis, and, in some cases, a blend of these tools. In contrast, quantitative research designs (e.g., Armour, Sandford, & Duncombe, 2013; Bloodworth, McNamee, & Bailey, 2012; Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007) and mixed method approaches (e.g., Mammen & Faulkner, 2013; O’Brien & Ponting, 2013; Okada & Young, 2012) are less prominent in the current body of work. For the purpose of this article—which provides a reflection on our experiences in qualitative research in the Pacific islands region—we focus our review on previous qualitative research that has been conducted in the field. Here, we broadly distinguish between traditional approaches and participatory research, and focus on reflexivity as a foundation for conducting meaningful and locally relevant research, particularly in low- and middle-income (LMIC) settings.

### 2.1. Traditional approaches in SFD research

The majority of studies investigating SFD employ multiple methods; typically a combination of interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and document analysis. For example, Okada and Young (2012) utilized open-ended interviews and participant observation to analyze the Siem Reap Hotel Football League in Cambodia. Similarly, Schulenkorf, Sugden, and Burdsey (2014) used interviewing techniques and focus group discussions to understand participant experiences of the Football for Peace program in Israel. Further applications of these traditional method combinations include interviews and focus groups (e.g., Gavin, McBrearty, & Harvey, 2013; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2013; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013), interviews and participant observation (e.g., Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Hill & Green, 2008; Intrator & Siegel, 2008; Ley & Rato Barrio, 2013; Light, 2010), and interviews and document analysis (e.g., Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007; Ekholm, 2013; MacIntosh & Spence, 2012). Larger research projects, including Masters and PhD theses, have typically utilised interviews, focus groups, participant observation and document analysis in a single study (see, for example, Cohen, 2013; Oliver, 2014; Schulenkorf, 2009).

While this brief overview provides only a snapshot of the most common research methods in qualitative SFD work, it assists in highlighting a reliance on traditional methods and, arguably, a lack of methodological innovation in the field. This observation is supported by highly charged methodological debates within the SFD literature regarding the legitimacy and efficacy of research methodology; for example, Hayhurst (2015) contended that there is a history of inequality and colonialism imbued in SFD, which extends to the research context. She argued that there is a need to disrupt “conventional” research processes in this space to account for the complex social relations and nuanced sociocultural contexts in which SFD programmes are situated.

Against this background—and considering the valuable contribution made by traditional methodologies in the initial exploration of SFD programming and associated processes—we are proposing a more participatory, reflective, and collaborative approach that extends existing data collection and research engagement tools. “Being collaborative” goes beyond “speaking to” individuals who are directly involved with SFD programming; in fact, it aims to create research spaces where power differences between research partners are less pronounced, critical reflection is encouraged, and research tools are jointly chosen and therefore most appropriate for the context (see Kay, 2012). In short, the collaborative process is underpinned by a quest for multiple knowledges that are embedded in local cultures and the understanding that local voices can and should be included to offer more value to in-country SFD programs (see also Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). This can generate insights for a variety of potential audiences, including those researchers actively engaged with the program, local sport and community organisations, as well as SFD scholars and practitioners more widely.

Our work builds on previous research by utilizing a cooperative and participatory approach, which fostered the production of a tailored research design that is empathetic to unique Pacific nation contexts. Furthermore, we have

<sup>1</sup> The German term *Verstehen* is best understood as an enhanced and deep understanding.

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