



Review

Understanding the concept of professionalisation in sport management research



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ABSTRACT

It has been 80 years since the concept of professionalisation began to take root within the sociology and management disciplines. Similarly, the study of the professionalisation of sport has a relatively prominent and longstanding history within the discipline of sport management. Notwithstanding its continued usage and importance, there has been little systematic attempt to examine how the concept has been operationalised within sport management. In light of this recognition, this review piece draws upon extant sport management, sociological and managerial literature to (i) explore the various ways in which the concept of professionalisation has been employed within sport management, and in doing so, (ii) identifies potential research gaps and future avenues of inquiry within the sport management discipline. The review identifies three broad classifications of professionalisation (organisational, systemic, occupational) and calls for more research surrounding broader conceptualisations of professionalisation that remain relatively unexplored by sport management scholars.

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1. Introduction

It has been 80 years since the concept of professionalisation began to take root within the sociology and management disciplines (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Hall, 1967, 1968). In contrast, the concept has only been discussed within the field of sport management since the late 1980s and early 1990s (c.f., Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992, 1995; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Thibault, Slack, & Hinings, 1991; Whitson & Macintosh, 1989a, 1989b). Yet, despite the concepts' relatively short lifespan within sport management, there has been much work dedicated to understanding the ongoing professionalisation of sport. Historically, the study of sport professionalisation stems from the advent of television and the rise of commercialism (Slack, 2003) throughout the 1960s–1970s, with scholars recognising that “one of the main consequences of the commercialism that has occurred in sport over the past few decades has been the increasing professionalisation of those who have been and are involved in managing sports organisations” (Robinson, 2008, p. 313).

This recognition has led academics to study professionalisation of sport using various methodological approaches across a variety of empirical settings. These settings include, but are not limited to, the examination of not-for-profit organisations

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(O'Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Slack & Hinings, 1992; Thibault et al., 1991), governance structures (Bayle & Robinson, 2007; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Shilbury, Ferkins, & Smythe, 2013; Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009), organisational policy making processes (Houlihan & Green, 2009; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Whitson & Macintosh, 1989a, 1989b), collegiate sport (Kaburakis, 2007), and the coach-athlete environment (Taylor & Garratt, 2010; Visek & Watson, 2005). Consequently, much is now known about the professionalisation of sport.

In spite of the merit of these aforementioned studies, two interrelated shortcomings can be identified with professionalisation-related research to date. First, although the concept of professionalisation has enjoyed a continued and popular usage, its precise definition, the unit of analysis employed, and the exact manner by which the concept is operationalised is often ambiguous, unclear, implicit or omitted entirely. The second shortcoming is a notable discrepancy between the extant sport management, sociological, and managerial literatures with regards to how professionalisation is conceptualised.

To elaborate further on these shortcomings, in reviewing the professionalisation-related literature a series of, albeit for the most part implicit, conceptualisations were identified. In other words, of those who adopt the term professionalisation, many do not provide a concrete definition of the term, and in doing so leave the reader to infer the exact nature of the phenomenon in question. As Forsyth and Danisiewicz (1985) state, "the efforts to investigate the nature of professionalisation empirically have not been tied to a unified explanation, partially because the meaning of the concept of profession has eluded scholars" (p. 72). In this regard, many authors (Abbott, 1991; Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Hall, 1968; Lawrence, 1999; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Vollmer & Mills, 1966; Wilensky, 1964) refer to professionalisation as a process by which individuals, organisations, and systems become a professional association or receive accreditation. These processes may include: specialised training and skills, exclusivity, complexity, code of ethics, gaining specific credentials, and establishing professional-client relationships. Based on these processes, Vollmer and Mills (1966) suggest professionalisation is a process with a "predictable sequence in the way in which occupations assume the attributes of a profession" (p. 19). Similarly, Abbott (1991) adopts professionalisation to examine how and why "expert, white-collared occupations evolve towards a particular structural and cultural form of occupational control" (p. 16). The commonality between the above quotes (i.e., Abbott, 1991; Vollmer & Mills, 1966), is that professionalisation is understood to be the process through which occupations change to obtain a professional status.

In contrast, another group of scholars have adopted professionalisation to refer more specifically to organisational changes towards a more business-like approach to its operations (e.g., Auld & Godbey, 1998; Chelladurai, 1999; Houlihan, 1988; Kikulis et al., 1992, 1995; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Shilbury & Moore, 2006; Thibault et al., 1991). Shilbury and Ferkins (2011), for example, refer to professionalisation as the "transition from an amateur, volunteer-driven pastime to a more business-like sector" (p. 108). Consequently, although the above two sets of works collectively adopt the same term (i.e., professionalisation), it is evident that they are referring to fundamentally different phenomenon at fundamentally different levels of analysis.

The second shortcoming, which closely links to the aforementioned shortcoming, is the conceptual discrepancy that exists between the extant sport management, sociological and managerial literatures (c.f., Vollmer & Mills, 1966; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). This apparent difference in conceptualisation can, in part, be explained by the lack of academic consensus surrounding the meaning of the concept more broadly. However, we contend that the by-product of this lack of definitional consensus has resulted in sport management scholars adopting the term professionalisation in a conceptually limited manner. It follows that if sport management scholars are to move professionalisation-related research forward and ultimately develop a more unified and complex explanation of professionalisation, then more should be done to clarify the meaning of the concept and explore these apparent conceptual and definitional discrepancies.

Thus, in recognition of these two shortcomings, the purpose of this review is twofold: to explore how the concept of professionalisation has been operationalised within the extant sport management literature and, in light of this initial purpose, to then begin to identify potential research gaps and future avenues of inquiry for those interested in examining the professionalisation of sport. In doing so, this review not only attempts to 'take stock' of professionalisation-related works within the sport management discipline, but it also draws upon the broader sociological and managerial professionalisation literature to provide greater insight into the way in which the concept has been employed within the context of sport. With such insight, only then will it be possible to answer more contemporary research questions regarding the ongoing professionalisation of sport.

Consistent with the twofold purpose, this review is divided into two substantive sections. The first section examines the professionalisation-related works across the broader managerial and sociological literature as well as the specific field of sport management. In doing so, the first half of this review highlights the above-mentioned differences within the extant literature pertaining to professionalisation by classifying it into three broad categorisations. The second section then, builds upon these initial insights by discussing potential knowledge gaps and future avenues of professionalisation-related research for sport management scholars. The review closes by combining the two abovementioned sections to provide our own stipulative definition of sport professionalisation.

2. Categorising professionalisation: a review of literature

In this section we provide an overview of the extant sociological, managerial, and sport management literature pertaining to professionalisation. At this point it is necessary to pre-empt the ensuing review with the following three caveats. First, as

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