

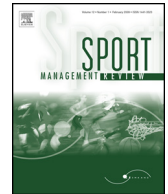


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Participatory research in sport-for-development: Complexities, experiences and (missed) opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors examine how participatory research can be conceptualized and fostered in sport-for-development (SfD). The authors offer a conceptualization of participatory research that centers on the interplay between three dimensions: participation, power, and reflexivity. Drawing on variegated experiences with SfD research across different geographical locations, the authors scrutinize the conceptual and empirical linkages between these dimensions, and how these linkages are influenced by structures of authority. Findings suggest that most SfD research falls short with regard to the critical challenge of embracing and delivering high degrees of participation, power shifting, and reflexivity. More specifically, SfD researchers typically fail to relinquish power and control over the research process. The SfD research community would likely benefit from greater inclusivity and collaboration when designing creative ways to improve this state of affairs. The authors conclude by reflecting on the implications and by suggesting ways to promote participatory and activist research in SfD contexts.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the sport-for-development (SfD) sector has been one of the fastest growing aspects of the globalization of sport (Giulianotti, 2016) and a major driver of the belief that sport has the potential to contribute to community development and positive social change (Kidd, 2008; Levermore, 2008; Schulenkorf, 2012). In short, SfD represents the intentional “use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution” (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). This definition highlights that, from a SfD perspective, sport is a conduit to achieving wider development outcomes for marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged communities and their individual members, rather than an end in itself. As such, SfD has at its center an ambition to alter existing systems and structures of inequity.

Around the world, belief in the potentially beneficial outcomes resulting from SfD has led to the creation of hundreds of development initiatives supported and/or implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government

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departments, sport associations, aid agencies, and corporate actors.¹ The promises, achievements, and pitfalls of the SfD sector have been subject to vigorous academic debate (e.g., in books including: [Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014](#); [Young & Okada, 2014](#)). On the one hand, scholars and evaluators alike seek to theorize, identify, test, and measure the impacts and outcomes of SfD initiatives, as well as the conditions and mechanisms that facilitate or produce development across a wide range of geographical and program contexts ([Coalter, 2013](#); [Coalter & Taylor, 2010](#); [Cronin, 2011](#); [Van Eekeren, ter Horst, Fictorie, 2013](#)). On the other hand, critical research problematizes commonly-held assumptions, discourses, and practices in SfD ([Darnell, 2012](#); [Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011](#); [Donnelly, Atkinson, Boyle, & Szto, 2011](#); [Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013](#)).

Much of this debate has centered on the design and delivery of SfD programs and the wider political, social, cultural, and economic contexts within which they operate. Far less attention has been paid to the critical role of research and evaluation in these processes, despite the fact that, as [Kay \(2009, 2012\)](#) notes, research and evaluation are centrally implicated in the power/knowledge nexus in SfD. Specifically, [Kay \(2009\)](#) calls for “reflexive forms of research [that] provide a mechanism for the expression of local understandings and knowledge that are crucial to the assessment of the ‘social impact’ of sport in development contexts” (p. 1190). While some of these issues have long been considered in other areas of development and health research (e.g., [Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995](#)), to date they do not fully inform research and evaluation in the field of SfD. For example, a recent review of SfD literature shows that although the majority of SfD programs are carried out in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 90 percent of SfD authors are based in North America, Europe, and Australia ([Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016](#)). Only eight percent of SfD studies have contributors from the countries in which the programs are delivered ([Schulenkorf et al., 2016](#)). It appears that SfD research has thus far failed to fully engage with the wealth and diversity of local knowledge, experience, and expertise. The SfD research community, we argue, needs to be more inclusive and collaborative in designing creative ways to improve this state of affairs.

In this paper, we articulate conceptual and methodological foundations for altering this status quo. In particular, we recognize that SfD initiatives are often underpinned by social justice objectives and may seek to alter dominant power relations. Challenging these power inequities has not necessarily been a central focus within SfD research, and importantly, research approaches have often done little to transform existing power relations. This paper addresses the following question: how can participatory research in SfD be conceptualized and fostered? Through both conceptual and empirical analysis of this question, we seek to contribute to the promotion of high-quality reflexive research on SfD.

Our analysis unfolds as follows. In the next section, we develop a novel conceptualization of participatory SfD research centered on the interplay between three key dimensions: participation, power, and reflexivity. We scrutinize these dimensions by drawing on our own variegated experiences with SfD research across different geographical locations and by relating these experiences to current debates in the SfD literature. While existing scholarship in SfD and community sport contexts has addressed the notions of participation, power, and reflexivity individually, we make a conceptual contribution to this field of research by linking the three concepts, by exploring how they are influenced by structures and relationships of authority, and by actualizing their linkages through a critical analysis of research conducted by the authors in five SfD projects. Finally, we draw together our main findings and reflect on implications for future research, policy, and practice in the SfD sector.

2. Conceptualizing participatory research in SfD

Recent reviews of SfD research foreground issues of problem definition, knowledge generation, and knowledge use within broader discussions on how to improve research quality and impact ([Cronin, 2011](#); [Darnell, Chawansky et al., 2016](#); [Darnell, Whitley et al., 2016](#)). These issues are at the core of participatory research approaches. Participatory research is differentiated from conventional research methodologies “not in methods but in the attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted” ([Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995](#)). Participatory research is not a unified approach, and much research that claims to be participatory falls short in practice. Moreover, conventional research itself involves varying degrees of participation, such as gaining access to the field. In this context, [Collison, Giulianotti, Howe and Darnell, \(2016\)](#) stress “the importance of building strong relationships with skilled, experienced and informed locals in order to collect accurate and valuable data in unfamiliar locations” (p. 422). Yet, as shown in the following space, this kind of research approach does not necessarily qualify as participatory because it tends to privilege the interests of researchers and maintain their primary control over problem identification, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

What, then, makes research participatory? The alignment of power and control within the research process is critical in this regard. Participatory research focuses attention on the key issues of power and control, and thus involves more than simply taking part. As [Cornwall and Jewkes \(1995\)](#) note, the most striking difference between participatory and conventional methodologies lies in “who defines research problems and who generates, analyzes, represents, owns and acts on the information which is sought” (p. 1668). These issues affect all phases of the research process: from the development of research questions through to the communication of the results for action ([Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005](#)). Participatory research thus positions local people, who may be recipients or stakeholders of SfD projects, as knowledgeable actors. In the

¹ See the Sport and Development platform (<http://www.sportanddev.org>) of the Swiss Academy for Development for a detailed overview of SfD initiatives from around the world.

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