Commentary: Reflections on Theory Building in Sport for Development and Peace

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the field of sport for development and peace (SDP) has received significant attention from practitioners and academics from all over the world. Sport-based programs have started to represent an increasingly important and established area in wider development work – at the local, regional, national and international levels. For example, sport projects are commonly found as strategic elements within UNICEF's endeavours to develop life skills for people in disadvantaged communities, or Human Rights Watch's mission of advancing the cause of human rights for all. Here, sport and physical activity complement social development initiatives; at the same time, socio-cultural aspects complement physical activity programs orchestrated by organizations such as the World Health Organization or Peace Players International.

Some SDP organizations and their stakeholders are overly optimistic, if not evangelical (Coalter, 2007), about the contributions of their programs to recipients, local communities and the wider society. With lofty goals and ambitions, SDP evangelists try to 'come to the rescue' by using the 'power of sport' as a force for positive social change, often in ways that are poorly equipped to facilitate complex changes that are meaningful to local communities. Instead, to make a realistic and beneficial difference to disadvantaged groups, SDP interventions must be properly conceptualized and theorized – and this is where this Special Issue intends to make a contribution.

Building on the limited yet important groundwork that has been laid in regard to the theoretical and conceptual underpinning of SDP (e.g. Coalter, 2007; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Misener & Schulenkorf, in press; Schulenkorf, 2012; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014), this Special Issue provides a starting point for exploring the opportunities and challenges of theory building in SDP. In particular, it examines how theory may be created, adapted, developed, or applied. The four papers in the Special Issue allow for critical engagement and

discussion of cross-cutting themes and issues – something that we endeavour to do in our reflective commentary.

Theory in SDP: Issues and Controversies

The importance of theory in SDP is nowadays well established. It is broadly accepted, for instance, that any SDP project needs to be underpinned by a robust theory of change: a comprehensive description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. The increased focus on theories of change has sparked discussion on causal mechanisms in recent research and analysis (e.g., Coalter, 2013; Van Eekeren et al., 2014). Given the breadth and diversity of SDP (whose objectives range from gender equity to peacebuilding; education to health; social inclusion to livelihoods) it is unrealistic to expect that one single SDP theory can encompass all relevant and potentially significant aspects of the field. Instead, much can and should be learnt from parent disciplines and other relevant fields of study that may contribute to a more comprehensive and multi-faceted theoretical understanding of how SDP operates and how and in which conditions SDP might achieve its desired (or unanticipated) effects. Looking beyond the boundaries of SDP and engaging with theories and insights from related fields including development studies, management, marketing, sociology, history, political science, cultural studies, anthropology, health promotion, medicine, economics, philosophy, urban planning, Indigenous studies and so on would allow for new expert knowledge and perspectives to be included into theory building and the development of SDP programs. Such collaboration and cross-fertilization should clearly extend to areas beyond sport, and SDP in particular, as noted by Darnell and Kaur (2016) and Massey et al. (2016) in this Special Issue.

With the opportunities that come with learning from and engaging with parent disciplines and relevant fields of study, there is also the danger of over-using or salami-slicing complex theoretical concepts. For example, a recently published review of SDP literature by Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe (in press) has found that the two concepts of 'positive youth development' and 'social capital' are being used, applied and interpreted in numerous SDP studies. Both concepts have rather vague definitions and malleable characteristics which allow researchers to tailor them 'to their liking' and develop new and sometimes contradictory theoretical interpretations. Social capital in particular has been criticized for being an ambiguous and over-used concept that "has come to mean so many different things to different researchers that it may border on the meaningless" (Bjørnskov & Sønderskov, 2013, p. 1226). Similarly, the tendency on the part of some researchers to 'forget

the priorities of economic life, and allow social relations to pretend to replace a more comprehensive social theory' (Loizos, 2000: 141) has attracted strong criticism (e.g. Fine, 2001). A major challenge for SDP researchers, then, is to develop and apply theory that is meaningful and revealing within the particular context under study, while refraining from over-using, recycling, or salami-slicing concepts for studies that add minimal theoretical or practical value.

The papers in this Special Issue are diverse in their focus and approach. In making a case for theory building and program development, the articles illustrate the theoretical pluralism that characterizes the current SDP field. They also reveal some of the epistemological and ontological issues and controversies in the theoretical and methodological approaches that inform SDP projects and research. The articles by Darnell and Kaur (2016), Holmes, Banda and Chawansky (2016) and Massey et al. (2016) are all informed by an interpretivist or critical epistemology. The first two articles raise an important question in this regard: considering that most SDP activity takes place in the Global South, what relevance do Global North theories have for Global South contexts that often face qualitatively different economic, political and social realities (Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2013). Or, framed differently: how can knowledge produced in/by the Global South inform SDP, both theoretically and practically? These questions foreground the need to situate epistemic knowledge in its social context, yet they also relate to the fundamental critique that alternative, subaltern ways of thinking and knowing are marginalized in the social sciences (Connell, 2007). In SDP, this emergent issue has been gaining increased recognition (e.g. Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Nicholls, Sethna, & Giles, 2011) and the articles by Darnell and Kaur (2016) and Holmes et al. (2016) further this discussion as well as the debate on the need to decolonize SDP. Whereas Darnell and Kaur approach these issues by drawing on the foundational work of C.L.R. James, Holmes et al. take a more empirically-based approach to argue for a Global South-centered understanding of SDP.

Another key issue to be gleaned from the papers in this Special Issue is the link between micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis and attendant theorizing. Here again we see the theoretical pluralism of the SDP field reflected in the contributions. While Baker, Hudson Baker, Artwater and Andrews (2016) focus almost exclusively on SDP's impact on individual participants, Holmes et al. (2016) instead prioritize the meso level of corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes and SDP partnerships. In contrast, Darnell and Kaur's (2016) postcolonial analysis calls for greater appreciation of the broader historical and socio-cultural context within which many SDP initiatives and research projects take place. The

systems theory put forward by Massey, Whitley, Blom and Gerstein (2016) seeks to link these different levels of analysis into a comprehensive theoretical model that incorporates the micro, meso and macro. In doing so, they stress the need to move beyond "the linear, isolationist, individualistic planning, implementation, and evaluation" in the SDP field. To a degree, the efforts are reflective of the well-known micro-macro debate in sociology. Here, again, we believe that much can and should be learnt from parent disciplines and other relevant fields of study, to a greater extent that has thus far happened. The attempts by Massey et al. (2016) and Darnell and Kaur (2016) to move such theory building in SDP forward should therefore be welcomed.

Contextuality and Collaboration

In line with the aforementioned de-colonizing argument, there have been growing requests from SDP academics to value and respect the local program context and to include 'local voices' when designing development programs. Such requests result from critiques around western-centric and top-down management approaches where international NGOs or change agents dictate the structure and design of SDP projects and their monitoring and evaluation. Similar requests are now raised in regards to theory building and conceptual thinking that can underpin the implementation of sport-related development projects. Here, local voices are still rarely heard; in fact, a recent SDP literature highlighted that the engagement of local researchers in SDP studies was minimal (Schulenkorf et al., in press). While the majority of SDP work was being conducted in low- and middle-income countries, less than 10 percent of studies were (co-)authored by researchers located in developing nations. If academics are serious about reciprocal learning and the engagement of local voices in SDP, they should themselves consider much closer collaboration and engagement with researchers from respective countries. Their input will be invaluable and allow for much greater and much needed diversity in regards to research designs, indigenous methodologies, as well as research methods and techniques that are most relevant and meaningful to local communities. In this way, 'upskilling' may in fact be required for academics from high-income countries, both in their approach to research and their openness to collaborating with 'local' researchers.

From Theory to Praxis – or Tensions between Theory and Practice

All four articles in this Special Issue highlight tensions between SDP theory and practice. In some cases, these tensions refer to the different stakeholders involved in sport-related development programs and their contrasting backgrounds. Further tensions relate to program

design (see Holmes et al., 2016), while other challenges are ideologically driven and relate to a difference between the 'theoretical ideal' of SDP academics and the 'practical realities' of SDP implementers. For example, in their article on promoting sustainable change, Massey et al. (2016) critically reflect on the role of external change agents in SDP. They argue that *ideally*, external change agents from high-income countries would not be involved in running SDP programs in low- and middle-income countries. *In practice*, however, they have to admit that many projects would never get off the ground without external support. Moreover, exercises such as systems analyses or the inclusion of theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings would remain a distant reality, given the limited time, resources and managerial capacities of many disadvantaged communities that are the beneficiaries of SDP projects. What matters therefore – as illustrated by Massey and colleagues (2016) through the Sport for Social Change campaign in Tajikistan – is the specific approach that change agents take to allow for learning and development to prosper. Only if change agents have the long-term benefit for communities and the sustainability of projects at heart, SDP has a chance to be successful. And even then, strong commitment, partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders is a precondition for success – as outlined in the Systems Approach advocated by Massey et al. (2016). Importantly, in any given scenario SDP organisers need to find out if systemic change is indeed a desired outcome *for all*, or if individual interests, political power games and greed from certain groups such as 'SDP entrepreneurs' may prevent theoretical dreams from becoming a practical reality.

The four articles in this Special Issue address three more overlapping SDP project themes: viability, sustainability, and local ownership. These themes seem closely related, yet different approaches and pathways are presented to achieve their realization. For example, Holmes et al. (2016) describe how certain SDP initiatives use a 'parachute approach' to partnerships to generate an immediate response. Similarly, previous studies have provided examples of one-off events that are staged with the intention of creating 'hype' or increased awareness around a particular development topic (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012; Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpries, & Cohen, 2015) . Depending on the desired outcome of such initiatives, such a one-off, short-term approach may be considered viable by organisers – although any potential long-term impacts are questionable. On the other hand, regular participatory small-scale development programs or school sessions seem much more rooted in the respective communities; they secure ongoing support from stakeholders and have better chances of being sustainable and locally owned. However, they are unlikely to generate the same 'hype' that events and festivals can create. It is not our intention to judge one approach

over the other; instead, we argue that the opportunities and limitations of the different approaches need to be clarified and communicated openly in both theory and practice. If this can be achieved, decision-makers will be able to judge more clearly which approach fits their aspirations.

Finally, we suppose that the actual *integration* between sport events and SDP initiatives should be investigated and analyzed to a much greater extent. This seems timely given the requirement of large-scale and mega-events such as the Olympic Games or the Football or Rugby World Cups to address aspects of sustainability and legacy in their bid documents and planning process. SDP can manoeuvre itself into pole position in order to secure financial, managerial and infrastructure benefits from legacy initiatives and/or newly announced sustainable development funds.

Future Directions

Building on the important theory building work that has been conducted in SDP, we suggest a number of areas that warrant further research engagement. First, research and practice in the SDP field tends to follow a deficit model of development, where practitioners and evaluators try to identify and fix problems and solve issues for disadvantaged communities (Coalter, 2007, 2013). Asset-based development – where communities design programs around their own strengths and (tangible as well as intangible) resources – would provide a refreshing shift of focus. Such an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach is well established in related disciplines such as social work and community development (see e.g. Mathie & Cunningham, 2013); however, it has yet to gain traction in sport management. While the first theoretical groundwork has been laid (see Misener & Schulenkorf, in press), more investigations are needed to better understand and refine the ABCD concept in both theory and practice.

Finally, to make positive change happen SDP academics are required to work much more closely with local communities and researchers. This means that academics will have to learn, use and apply locally acceptable, relevant, and innovative research approaches; in other words, they need to develop new theoretical and empirical insights based on culturally and contextually appropriate research methodologies. A good example for an SDP program that is underpinned by a locally accepted theory and methodology is provided by Mwaanga and Mwansa (2014) in their study of indigenous discourses in SDP. Here, the Ubuntu cultural philosophy underpins much of the SDP programming and theoretical design at projects in Zambia. Interestingly, the study provides some subtle evidence of research hybridity where

the particular SDP program was influenced by both Ubuntu and Christian philosophies. This suggests that there may be space for more inter-cultural and even inter-faith engagements in certain SDP settings, which would open up new opportunities for SDP planning, management, and evaluation. In short, we argue that Indigenous approaches to research and evaluation need to be considered and taken more seriously when developing new SDP concepts and theories – particularly by the large group of academics from high-income countries that dominate the SDP research scene. If true reciprocal engagement can be achieved, many taken-for-granted assumptions in both theory and practice will be challenged and fresh views can emerge.

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