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Jonathan Grix, Iain Lindsey, Veerle De Bosscher & Daniel Bloyce

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## INTRODUCTION



# Theory and methods in sport policy and politics research

Jonathan Grix, Iain Lindsey, Veerle De Bosscher and Daniel Bloyce

The study of sport policy and politics is still dominated by academics working in disciplines other than political science, public administration, policy studies and International Relations (IR). In fact, there are only a handful of scholars contributing to sport policy and politics research who reside in the afore-mentioned traditional, disciplinary departments. The majority of work published in the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics is undertaken by sociologists, historians, management and tourism experts and those broadly termed ‘sports studies’ scholars. This is one of the reasons why Houlihan (2005, p. 163) suggested that ‘there is remarkably little analysis of sport policy that utilizes the major models and frameworks for analysis widely adopted in other policy areas’. Thirteen years on from this and it remains the case that there is still a lack of academic research ‘by the very people one would assume would be at the forefront of sport politics [and policy] analyses: political scientists and international relations scholars’ (Grix 2016, p. 22).

It is rare, therefore, that work in the sub-field of sport policy and politics extensively or explicitly reflects on the value and use of particular mainstream theories and even rarer still for such research to contribute to the wider development of theories within policy and politics disciplines. This chimes with the aspiration to make ‘theoretical contributions to analyses of the policy process for sport which draw upon and develop current macro- and meso-level theories and analytic frameworks’ (Houlihan *et al.* 2009, p. 2) which was the first of the initial aims outlined 10 years ago in the opening editorial of the International Journal of Sport Policy (changed in 2011 to include ‘and Politics’ to broaden the journal’s appeal; IJSPPP). It is fair to say that this aim has only partially been realised and that only a few scholars working in the area of sport policy and politics have had an impact on key developments in mainstream disciplines. The second substantial aim of the IJSPPP was to encourage the development of robust, evidence-based empirical research on the impact of sport policy and the last 10 Volumes of IJSPPP has gone some way to achieve this.

Similar issues arise when considering methodologies utilised for the study of sport policy and politics. There has been limited application of innovative methodologies to the study of sport policy and politics and few articles have contributed to broader methodological debates. Instead, much of the research in the IJSPPP has adopted well-used qualitative methods, often drawing on the paradigms of critical realism, constructivism or pragmatism. These complement the traditional quantitative research strategies that are well established, for example, in sport management studies. However, the use of mixed methods research (MMR) has been limited in both sport policy and sport management, as shown in Table 1 (De Bosscher 2018). MMR make up just over 6% of articles in IJSPPP, in contrast to the mainstream journals, for example, in sociology (36%), social psychology (27%) and management and organisational behaviour (23%) (Bryman 2006). These research designs offer scope for future agenda setting in sport policy research, as MMR is useful when studying complex social phenomena because they draw from the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both singular (quantitative or qualitative) research studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). However, in the few cases where MMR is currently used, the design is often poorly legitimised (van der Roest *et al.* 2015).

**Table 1.** Prevalence of Mixed Methods Research (MMR) articles in the IJSPM exemplary compared to selected sport management journals (Adapted from De Bosscher, 2018b).

Journal	MMR articles	% Total	Non MMR	duplicates	Total (n)
<i>International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics</i>	10	6.21%	190	56	207
European Sport Management Quarterly	17	8.21%	220	31	239
Sport Management Review	19	7.95%	241	34	257
Journal of Sport Management	16	6.23%	151	25	161
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7.18%</b>	<b>802</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>684</b>

Note: Data retrieved August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018 from EBSCO, Sportdiscus, Scopus, Web of knowledge, Proquest<sup>1</sup>

While this Special Issue does not fully address all of the issues touched on above, it is a good starting point to assess the trends in sport policy and politics scholarship. For example, there does seem to be a burgeoning number of papers focusing on evidence or evaluation that is indicative of the growing importance and methodological interest in this area within sport and policy analysis more widely. As we discuss below, a number of papers in this Special Issue are orientated towards a realist evaluation approach, which offer particular strengths for sport policy evaluation. We introduce twelve contributions on such diverse topics as comparative analysis, discourse analysis, power and theory from international relations, organisational studies and sociology, an indication of the rich diversity of studies being undertaken in our field.

## Introduction to the special issue

The following briefly introduces the contributions accepted to our Special Issue on 'Theory and Methods'. The first thing to note is the encouraging number of 'emerging' scholars as first authors on the papers we accepted. Roughly, two-thirds fall into this category and this augurs well for the future of the field. There is, however, a restricted geographical spread in this Special Issue with 8 of the 12 (first) authors stemming from UK institutions with 3 Norwegians and 1 US contributor making up the rest. The second point to make is that it is not possible to have a crystal clear distinction between papers dealing with 'theory' and those focusing on 'methods', as, necessarily, there are cross-overs between the two and the awkward, unregulated language of research methodology. For example, Whigham and Bairner introduce 'discourse analysis', which is understood as both a 'method' of data collection, but also a 'methodology' and even a 'theory' by some (see Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, also Grix 2018, for the difference between these concepts). Thus, we present the papers for this Special Issue in an order that we feel makes logical sense. We begin with a piece that draws on concepts from organisational studies and political science.

In our first article, Strittmatter, Stenling, Fahlen and Skille collectively offer a theoretical framework to aid exploration of legitimacy and legitimisation across sport policy processes. Their framework is initially derived from conceptualisations in the organisational studies literature which allows differentiation of six constituent elements of legitimisation. The authors then proceed to consider the relevance of this framework by reviewing preceding articles that have, respectively, examined problem definition and agenda setting, policy formulation, policy implementation and policy evaluation. From doing so, Strittmatter et al. establish the importance of legitimising acts in each of these different policy phases and, more importantly, the interlinked

<sup>1</sup>Search key terms used: "mixed method\*" OR "multi\$method\*" OR triangulation OR (quantitative AND qualitative) OR (survey\* AND interview\*) OR (survey\* AND "focus group\*") OR (survey\* AND "participant observation") OR (survey\* AND "document analys?s") OR (survey\* AND "discourse analys?s") OR (questionnaire\* AND interview\*) OR (questionnaire\* AND "focus group\*") OR (questionnaire\* AND "participant observation") OR (questionnaire\* AND "document analys?s") OR (questionnaire\* AND "discourse analys?s") (adapted from van der Roest, Spaaij, and van Bottenburg, 2015) Inclusion/exclusion criteria: accepted IF TITLE-ABS-KEY explicitly used the term mixed method design/approach/research; used quantitative and qualitative collection or analysis; consists of key words: ...followed up..., 'follow-up', ...supplemented by..., combination of one or more specific quantitative and qualitative methods; • Rejected IF only either quantitative or qualitative method design was used; no primary data collection (e.g., review papers, editorial paper)

ways in which issues of legitimisation have consequences across different sport policy processes. Overall, the article demonstrates the benefits that can be drawn from fusing concepts and literature from sport policy and organisational studies and provides an initial framework for legitimacy in sport policy that can be beneficially applied and refined through further empirical studies.

The next article in this Special Issue is by Jedlicka who makes a distinctive contribution to the literature on sport and international relations by theorising the sources of authority of the private, transnational bodies that govern global sport. His analysis begins by drawing on Jessica Green's work on global environmental governance through which she offered a theoretical account of how private transnational bodies acquire global legitimacy and authority from nation states. Jedlicka adds a conceptualisation of 'appropriate authority' to Green's theorisation through arguing that the role of transnational bodies in governing global sport has come about not only because states accept their legitimacy, but also because they offer a low- or no-cost system by which they can seek benefits from engagement in global sport. Jedlicka concludes by questioning whether sport may offer an exceptional case of transnational governance and in so doing he sets a future research agenda that may be followed by sport scholars and which can also importantly contribute to wider debates on global governance.

One of the central themes of political science is 'power'. Yet, studies of sport policy and politics rarely deal directly with this concept, except in terms of the growing literature on 'soft power' and sports governance (See Bloyce and Smith 2009 for an exception). Bergsgard, in his contribution entitled 'Power and Domination in Sport Policy and Politics', introduces the conception of 'power' put forward by two heavy-weights in this area, Pierre Bourdieu and Steven Lukes, and applies this to the study of sport policy. By combining Bourdieu's field analysis with Lukes' three-dimensional view on power, Bergsgard offers a new approach to studying sport policy. This is brought to life through a case study of the development of sport policy in Norway. Such an analysis sensitises sports studies scholars to the need to think about power and its role in sport policy; it is also useful for introducing the work of two of the key thinkers on power to those unfamiliar with it.

Seippel's contribution to this Special Issue is also about power, but with a different focus. Seippel is interested in finding out how and why certain issues in sport become political and introduces six contentious cases in sport to interrogate this. By drawing on the well-established theoretical approach of political opportunity structures – used widely to study social movements – Seippel unpicks the societal factors, the key actors and the opportunity structures that come together to mobilise certain issues in sport to become political. All of the cases presented are certainly contentious – and have attracted a great deal of academic attention – including gender, sexuality, doping, extreme wages, boxing/violence and failed talent development. The extent to which an issue is politicised is, however, according to Seippel, due to the 'cultural framing' of it in a given society. The cultural context of a case – which is relevant for Bergsgard's contribution on Norway too – is crucial for understanding the processes of power, where it emanates from and which actors are involved.

Dowling, Brown, Legg and Grix provide a valuable stock-take of existing literature that compares high-performance sport policy across different nations and also raise a series of methodological issues that require consideration in the future comparative sport policy research. They recognise that, while the expansion in comparative sport policy analysis has generated important insights, there are ongoing limitations and constraints within this body of work that present a number of challenges for future research. As a result, a framework for comparative sport policy analysis is presented which suggests how studies may clarify their philosophical assumptions and purposes, their approach to determining units of analysis and selection of countries, their data collection strategies and instruments, and their analysis and dissemination approaches. Dowling et al. suggest that further clarity across these dimensions is likely to bring incremental benefits within existing traditions of comparative sport policy analysis. More fundamentally, however, they argue that the framework should be

utilised to support a greater diversity of methodological approaches that may help to better understand the various, complex ways that country contexts influence sport policies and systems.

Linking to the philosophical aspect of Dowling et al.'s framework, Lusted demonstrates the potential of adopting a critical realist ontology and epistemology for sport policy research. Roy Bhaskar's and Margaret Archer's philosophical elucidations of critical realism, including the latter's morphogenetic approach, have had significant influence in the social sciences but has not yet generated the same interest within sport studies. Lusted, therefore, begins by offering an explanation of key facets and methodological implications of the critical realist ontology and epistemology. The article then moves on to illustrate the utility of the critical realist approach by exploring its application through Lusted's research on the implementation of the Football Association's Ethics and Sport Equity Strategy within grassroots football in England. Critical realism and the morphogenetic approach particularly encouraged and enabled Lusted to recognise how responses by implementing agencies to the equity strategy were structured by historical ideologies and traditions of grassroots sport which led to policy resistance, unintended outcomes and the reproduction of existing structural conditions. Researchers from across sport studies would be advised to look to Lusted's contribution and critical realism, more generally, to enable them to bring to the fore, ground and deepen causal explanations of the interactions between structure and agency in sport policy processes.

Whigham and Bairner's piece on utilising critical and political discourse analysis and narrative analysis introduces a timely method for researchers working in an era of post-truth. Studying the public utterances of political actors in (primary) interviews, speeches, policy documents, press releases and political manifestos allows an insight into the manner in which public discourse is given shape by key actors. Whigham and Bairner's approach – synthesising two methodological approaches – allows a closer reading and understanding of recurrent discursive forms in political dialogue and coherent narratives as they pertain to the Scottish Referendum and the political leveraging of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games. It is easy to see how such a close reading and analysis of sport policy documents would bear fruit for sport studies scholars. An analytical reading of government sport policy documents offers any unprecedented insight into the ideological ebbs and flows of a state's sport policy.

Chen's contribution is the first of series of papers that are framed by debates about evidence-based policy and that consider how the impacts of sport may be evaluated and measured. She provides a much-needed overview of different approaches to evaluation identified in the wider literature and reviews their potential utility in the context of sport. Experimental and constructivist approaches are diametrically opposite in the extent to which they identify contextual and other factors that influence outcomes, but similar challenges of feasibility are identified with both. Pragmatic, utilisation-focused evaluation approaches eschew particular methodologies in order that they may be most useful to policymakers, but in so doing may lack generalisability and be vulnerable to bias. Such limitations lead Chen to argue for the use of theory-driven and, specifically, realist evaluation approaches. While demonstrating the value of realist evaluation through its application to a specific Olympic legacy programme, Chen does, however, raise further issues of feasibility given the potential resource requirements to undertake theory-based evaluation.

It is beneficial then that the practical utilisation of theory-based evaluation approaches is then considered, in different ways, in the following three articles. Bolton, Martin, Grace and Harris report on work undertaken with 11 projects funded through Sport Wales' 'Calls for Action' programme which sought to increase participation amongst traditionally hard to reach groups. They focus on the process of collaborative development of logic models for the programme and individual projects, which was found to help key stakeholders consider their desired objectives with more specificity and unpack assumptions about how these objectives may be overcome. For subsequent evaluation purposes, however, Bolton et al. recognise that logic models may be unable to capture the 'messiness' of implementation in changing social and economic contexts and limit identification of unexpected outcomes.

Daniels, Bell and Horrocks' article reflects on a specific realist evaluation which was also undertaken with different interventions that comprised an overarching sport and physical activity strategy within an English local authority area. The various evaluation data collected were analysed to identify, what are termed, Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations. For Daniels et al., the greater focus on the context in realist evaluation helped to develop an understanding of the interconnections between different interventions in what were again described as 'messy' contexts. However, the authors also recognise the importance of academic expertise working with practitioners and participants to undertake realist evaluation and concludes by questioning whether skills and capacity within the sport sector are sufficient to undertake this approach more widely.

In responding to this issue, Harris' article reflects on an innovative and in-depth training programme designed to develop the capacity of 'student sport development practitioners' to undertake realist evaluation as they delivered their own projects in local communities. Harris categorises the student practitioners' development through this training into four groups that he, respectively, labels as new and emerging evaluators, polished problem solvers, passive passengers, and proficient yet sceptical. As the labels suggest, there was differential understanding of, and engagement with, the complexities of realist evaluation principles across the groups. Nevertheless, Harris remains positive about the potential of realist evaluation and similar training programmes given that they enabled all groups to better appreciate both the working and outcomes of their own projects.

Finally, Mansfield, Testoni and Dolan make a distinctive case for using people's reports of subjective well-being to assess the value of sport to broader policy goals. Their article reviews different conceptualisations of well-being to argue for the importance of measuring individuals' reports of their own subjective well-being, that is 'how they feel'. The article moves on to review some emergent literature that suggests that sport may bring positive benefits for immediate experiences of subjective well-being, with this potentially being a more effective measure of impacts of sport engagement than more overarching and time-independent evaluations of life-satisfaction. The authors recognise notable challenges of measuring experiences of subjective well-being but make a persuasive case that this emergent approach deserves continued and greater consideration by sport policymakers and researchers.

The following Special Issue adds to a growing number of theoretically informed papers dealing with issues in sport policy and politics. It is clear, however, that there is still a predominance of qualitative research strategies in the field and that work adopting a mixed methods approach is needed if we are to see the plurality of studies in more mature sub-disciplines. It can be argued that scholars in a relatively new and minor sub-discipline face more constraints to undertaking mixed methods research as they are likely to have fewer possibilities to work in teams with sufficient expertise, skills, and resources to conduct such research (van der Roest *et al.* 2015).

Equally, it is true that the majority of work published in our field continues to draw insights, methods and theories from an established academic discipline and then applies them to the sub-field of sport policy and politics. For the study of sport policy and politics to have more impact, we argue, scholars ought to use 'sport' as a case through which to contribute to key debates, theoretical developments and refining methods in mainstream disciplines. We believe that these limitations are likely to be addressed in IJPP's next ten volumes, as the study of sport policy and politics matures.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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