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Editorial

Introduction to the Issue “Sport for Social Inclusion: Questioning Policy, Practice and Research”

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Abstract

An aspect of sport which is often highlighted is its capacity to alleviate processes of social exclusion that are experienced in different areas of life. Despite its acclaimed inclusionary nature, sport remains a site of multiple and diverse exclusionary processes (Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2014). To better understand sport’s wider inclusionary outcomes, Ekholm (2013) argued that we should problematize and critically expose the underlying assumptions, distinctions, ideologies, and research positions that constitute the conceptions surrounding sport as a means for social inclusion. If such problematizing and exposing is not empirically done, sport-based social inclusion policies and programs are likely to become inadequate in the face of the exclusionary forces which such schemes seek to combat (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015). It is precisely the aim of this thematic issue to scrutinize such issues in relation to sport and its acclaimed potential to facilitate social inclusion and combat processes of social exclusion. The issue brings together a unique collection of international articles, written by both rising and leading scholars in the field of social sport sciences. The articles cover a wide variety of themes, theoretical perspectives, and research methods in relation to social in-/exclusion and sport.

Keywords

critical pedagogy; sport; exclusion; inclusion; sport policy; sport research

Issue

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1. Introduction

An aspect of sport which is often highlighted is its capacity to alleviate processes of social exclusion that are experienced in different areas of life (Collins & Kay, 2014; Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2015; Kingsley & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2015). Despite its acclaimed inclusionary nature, sport remains a site of multiple and diverse exclusionary processes (Kingsley, Spencer, & Tink, 2017; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2014). To better understand sport’s wider inclusionary outcomes, Ekholm (2013) argued that we should problematize and critically expose the underlying assumptions, distinctions, ideologies, and research positions that constitute the conceptions surrounding sport as a means for social inclusion. If such problematizing and exposing is not empirically done,

sport-based social inclusion policies and programs are likely to become inadequate in the face of the exclusionary forces such schemes seek to combat (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015). It is precisely the aim of this thematic issue to scrutinize such issues in relation to sport and its acclaimed potential to facilitate social inclusion and combat processes of social exclusion.

2. Under-Examined Conceptual Slippage

Social inclusion is often defined in relation to social exclusion (and as such often remains undefined). However, social exclusion has been described as a contested, vague and elastic concept which lacks an agreed definition (e.g., Atkinson & Davoudi, 2000; Farrington, 2011; Rawal, 2008). Levitas et al. (2007) have defined social ex-

clusion as “a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas” (p. 9). Levitas et al. (2007) also refer to the notion of “deep exclusion”, when exclusion manifests itself across multiple dimensions of disadvantage, resulting in severely negative consequences for quality of life, well-being, and future life chances. Social inclusion and exclusion are often unproblematically used by policymakers and researchers as “diametrically opposed poles”, encouraging an attitude in which the solution to problems (and mechanisms) related to social exclusion are uncritically reframed into promoting the inclusion of the “socially excluded” (Macdonald, Pang, Knez, Nelson, & McCuaig, 2012; Spandler, 2007). In relation to this, Spandler (2007) argued that:

Just as the conceptual slippage from exclusion to inclusion has happened without much debate, the assumptions which underpin this shift have not been examined. Social inclusion initiatives which attempt to simultaneously fuse the identification of the socially excluded with attempts to incorporate them into the mainstream of society, confuse the identification and tackling of social exclusion with promoting inclusion. In doing so, such initiatives make a series of assumptions about the excluded, the society they are seen to be excluded from, and the solutions that are deemed necessary. (p. 3)

This conceptual “slippage” from exclusion to inclusion also seems to have happened “overnight”, and without much debate, in sport policy and research. This is problematic as the concept of social exclusion focuses on power dynamics and the ways in which our institutions and policies generate exclusionary practices leading to the marginalization and discrimination of groups in society. On the other hand, the—often ill-defined—concept of social inclusion largely ignores such power dynamics and unproblematically assumes that our societies—including sport provisions—are inherently and indisputably “good” for everyone. However, sport does not exist in a societal void and is, as such, often implicated in mechanisms of exclusion in society (MacPhail, 2012). It is important to note that, in Levitas et al.’s definition, social exclusion is a process, whereas social inclusion is often conceptualized as a desirable condition (i.e., an outcome) which can be managed and rectified by (sport-based) interventions through normalizing and changing the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of the “excluded”. This might be one of the main reasons why sport-for-social-inclusion policies, research, and practices are often framed within a deficit model (e.g., low aspiration, fatalism, lack of competences) (Coalter, 2015). In this context, Cameron (2006) has stated that because of an insufficient understanding of what social inclusion is, the

focus is often put on the problems and deficits of the “excluded”. In this sense, the notion of social inclusion provides fewer viable opportunities for transformative practices that can challenge social injustices and inequalities, but rather reproduces and legitimizes mechanisms of social exclusion in different life and policy domains, including sport. This may also explain why transformative and critical pedagogical approaches seem to be “nearly” impossible to implement in state-funded sport services in general, and in *sport for social inclusion* initiatives in particular (Coakley, 2016; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom & Nols, 2013; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Stenling, 2013). Hence, by uncritically reframing social exclusion as inclusion, the consequence is that only outcomes can be considered for improvement, leaving underlying causes of exclusion largely under-addressed (Farrington, 2011). Applied to sport this implies that sport-for-inclusion (and sport-for-all) policies and practices risk becoming limited to “merely” raising participation rates of specific target/problem groups (and fixing the presumed personal deficits of such groups), thereby leaving the exclusionary mechanisms of such policies and practices mainly unproblematicized and under-examined.

Spandler (2007) reminds us that we need to be mindful of (i) the contexts in which inclusion policies and (sport-based) interventions are implemented; (ii) the assumptions that lie, often implicitly, behind such policies and interventions; and (iii) the consequences of such policies and interventions. Collectively, the articles that are included in this thematic issue address the contexts in which sport for inclusion practices are implemented, the assumptions and discourses that underpin such policies and practices, and the experiences that those involved have (had) in such practices.

3. Structure of the Thematic Issue

This thematic issue brings together a unique collection of international articles, written by both rising and leading scholars in the field of social sport sciences. The articles included cover a wide variety of themes, theoretical perspectives, and research methods in relation to social in-/exclusion and sport. The articles are organized into 4 parts:

1. The use of sport as a means for the social inclusion of groups in society that are being confronted with processes of “deep social exclusion”, with a focus on refugees and people with disabilities.
2. Critical theoretical perspectives on sport and social in-/exclusion.
3. Investigating relations, contexts, experiences, and assumptions in relation to sport and young people who are at risk of social exclusion.
4. Wider organizational and policy issues regarding sport and social in-/exclusion.

The thematic issue is further augmented by a book review by Reinhard Haudenhuyse (Belgium) (2017), which investigates the potential implications of Putnam's recent book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* for the field of social sport sciences. The main themes in Putnam's *Our Kids* are class segregation and the widening "opportunity" gap between the "have" and "have-nots" in American society (Putnam, 2015).

3.1. Deep Social Exclusion: Refugees and People with Disabilities

In the first article, Karen Block and Lisa Gibbs (Australia) investigate different programs and strategies that organizations in various sectors have developed in order to address participation barriers experienced by refugee and migrant youth. The authors argue that in many cases these responses are ad hoc and under-theorized. Based on their findings, Block and Gibbs (2017) identify three distinct models of participation: (i) short term programs for refugee-background children; (ii) ongoing programs for refugee-background children and youth; and (iii) integration into mainstream clubs. In the second article, Darko Dukic, Brent McDonald, and Ramon Spaaij (Australia) also put the focus on refugees. More specifically, their research considers the ways in which playing in an asylum seeker football team, located in Melbourne, Australia, facilitated both inclusive and exclusive experiences for its participants. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, Dukic and colleagues (2017) show the importance of a sporting habitus and physical capital in individuals' experiences of playing football and how this can provide an important site for the development of "poly-cultural" capital. In the following article, Yuka Nakamura and Peter Donnelly (Canada) (2017) research the contribution of immigrants to the social and cultural life of Canada. Based on a living database of the Greater Toronto Area's physical cultural diversity, the study identifies the different trajectories of the lifecycle of activities that immigrants have introduced into the physical culture of the Greater Toronto Area.

Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Jennifer Thai, and Bethan Kingsley (Canada) forcefully state that sport opportunities for young people who experience disabilities are often inadequate and inequitable. Sport, as such, can present a site of exclusion for many people who experience disability, even within the context of a social inclusion program. Spencer-Cavaliere and colleagues (2017) explore the experiences of youth sport practitioners who teach and coach youth in primarily segregated settings. Their overall goal is to gain a better understanding of how sport practitioners think about disability and sport within the context of their practices. In their discussion, the authors highlight the need to question dominant assumptions underlying segregated sport. In the final article of the first part, Martino Corazza and Jen Dyer (UK) (2017) investigate the Mixed Ability Model as an innovative approach to inclusive sport by encouraging disabled

and non-disabled players to interact in a mainstream sport (rugby) club environment. From their data, the researchers argue that Mixed Ability Rugby has significant potential for achieving inclusionary outcomes. The mainstream setting is seen as one of the most important factors, while other aspects include a supportive club environment and the promotion of self-advocacy.

3.2. Critical Theoretical Perspectives

In his commentary, Fred Coalter (Ireland, UK) (2017) reflects on his experience of compiling the *Value of Sport Monitor*, an online resource of policy-relevant research on the social impacts of sport. The article critically evaluates the assumption that social science research in sport is cumulative. Coalter also explores sports interest groups' varying attitudes to the nature of evidence. The commentary proposes theory-based evaluation as a way for research to contribute to policy and practice. In the second article, Naofumi Suzuki (Japan) proposes a conceptual framework based on Amartya Sen's capability approach as a way of bringing more conceptual clarity to the issue of how sport can promote social inclusion and contribute to transforming the exclusive nature of social structures. Suzuki (2017) argues that more research needs to be done at the meso and macro levels, as both levels are concerned with the ultimate potential of sport to facilitate structural transformation towards a more socially inclusive society. In the final article of part two, Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Nathan Kalman-Lamb (Canada, USA) (2017) discuss the work of Angela Davis on intersectional theory and look at the potential implications for social sport sciences. The authors suggest that research on sport and social inclusion would do well to consider the work of Davis in forming a more complex reading of what it means to include women and girls in sport.

3.3. Relations, Contexts, Experiences and Assumptions

Hebe Schailleé, Marc Theeboom, and Jelle Van Cauwenberg (Belgium) (2017) examine the relationships between perceived coach- and peer-created climates and reported developmental gains among disadvantaged girls participating in sports programs. Their analysis reveals that a mastery-oriented coach climate is a strong predictor of perceived Positive Youth Development. However the observed interaction effects did not show that disadvantaged girls necessarily gain more from their involvement in the sport programs. This raises fundamental questions about the broader social inclusionary potential of such sport-based programs. In their article on sport volunteering and its contribution to human capital development of young people in disadvantaged situations, Evi Buelens, Marc Theeboom, Jikkemien Vertonghen, and Kristine De Martelaer (Belgium) (2017) analyze the conditions necessary to develop human capital. Their findings show that although the researched pro-

grams made use of a more critical pedagogical approach to youth development, critical youth empowerment was not achieved in the majority of programs. Through interviewing young people in socially vulnerable situations who play sport at a local sports club, Sabina Super, Carlijn Wentink, Kirsten Verkooijen, and Maria Koelen (The Netherlands) (2017) focus on the question of whether such clubs can offer a setting for positive youth development. Findings from their study reveal that sports coaches played an important role in installing and maintaining a supportive environment in which the youths could have meaningful sports experiences. However, Super and colleagues conclude that it is not self-evident that young people in socially vulnerable positions can have positive and supporting experiences through their sport involvement. In the final article of this part, Zeno Nols, Reinhard Haudenhuyse, and Marc Theeboom (Belgium) (2017) scrutinize the dominant “deficit model” assumption underlying many sport-for-development and sport-for-inclusion policies and programs: that young people from disadvantaged areas are uniformly deficient and in need of development. Their research data refute the supposition that young people are unvaryingly in need of more perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem (the household concepts in many sport inclusionary and developmental policies and practices) and furthermore show that there is no simple and predictable change in participants’ “development”.

3.4. Wider Organizational and Policy-Related Issues

In their article Holly Collison, Simon Darnell, Richard Giulianiotti, and David Howe (UK, Canada) focus their attention on the “who” of sport-for-development policies and program. Drawing on extensive research conducted in Jamaica, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka, Collison and colleagues (2017) critically investigate the idea of sport-for-development as an inclusionary practice. They critically argue that, while sport-for-development may “give voice” to participants, the extent to which this creates social contexts that are inclusive remains open to discussion. David Ekholm and Magnus Dahlstedt (Sweden) analyse a sports-based social intervention carried out in a “socially vulnerable” area in Sweden. Ekholm and Dahlstedt (2017) analyse how sport (i.e., football) is highlighted and used as a means of fostering citizens according to specific ideals of solidarity and inclusion. They conclude that inclusion seems to be possible as long as the “excluded” adapt to the dominant norms. In this sense, as the authors argue, sports-based interventions often maintain rather than reform the social order that creates these very tensions. In the final article of this part, Jacob Bustad and David Andrews (USA) explore the relationship between public recreation policy and planning, and the transformation of urban governance in the context of the Police Athletic League centers in Baltimore, Maryland. Through their case study, Bustad and Andrews (2017) illustrate the social and political rationales mobi-

lized in order to justify recreation policy and programming, the framing of sport and physical activity as preventative measures towards crime and juvenile delinquency, and the precariousness of such initiatives.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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