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Build a Culture of Peace, not a Culture of Winning, through Taekwondo Diplomacy

John A. Johnson

Southwestern College, United States

Corresponding author email: beowulf600@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

South and North Korea have utilized Taekwondo[1] demonstrations for soft diplomacy purposes for decades. Yet, there has been little discussion on the potential complications with using Taekwondo for diplomatic purposes. Despite their good intentions, the current Taekwondo governing bodies' proposals to hold competitions between their athletes ignores previous sport diplomacy theory, the organizations' successes, and hazards outlined in current sports diplomacy research. Moreover, there exists a possibly of increasing hostilities between the Korean peoples and possibly not influencing the target audience. This exploratory study discusses the complications currently existent in this strategy and offers a potential solution that focuses on Taekwondo's ultimate pedagogical goal: the building of peace. Sport diplomacy and peacebuilding both bring people together to create lasting relationships based on shared interests and values. The present study builds upon recent Taekwondo diplomacy research by suggesting Taekwondo actors adapt Galtung's (1973) conflict resolution theory (CRT) to avoid the pitfalls of sports diplomacy while building upon the successes of past Taekwondo cultural diplomacy efforts. CRT provides a framework in which Taekwondo can be practiced differently by South and North Korea with respect for the differences between their two peoples and cultures. It is suggested Taekwondo organizations adapt CRT from a practical peacebuilding concept to a theoretical framework for Taekwondo diplomacy to build upon their cultural diplomacy successes. As such, the present research intends to contribute to the broader debate on potential hazards that may harm inter-Korean relations.

INTRODUCTION

Background & Aim

No peace agreement has been signed between the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) since an armistice agreement was signed in 1953; as such, the two Koreas remain technically at war and deadly conflict between the two nations continues (Vergun, 2023). Despite denying involvement in numerous deadly incidents, the ROK, the United States, and other western governments have found evidence that the DPRK: bombed a ROK passenger jet in 1987, sent a submarine into ROK waters that eventually ran aground with over two dozen spies charged with assassinating the ROK president in 1996, sank the Cheonan ROK naval vessel in disputed waters in 2010, and shelled the ROK island Yeonpyeong in 2010 (British Broadcasting Company [BBC], 2013). Since coming into power in 2012, the present DPRK leader Kim Jong Un has heightened tensions even more with the "accelerated the development of a nuclear deterrent capability" (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2022). The US Department of Defense claims "U.S. forces and U.N. representatives are still in South Korea with the goal of preventing another war" (Vergun, 2023). There consequently exists a need to continue peacebuilding activities between the two Koreas. .

Despite espousing being a discipline for personal cultivation through practicing self-defense, Taekwondo,[1] the Korean martial art and now Olympic sport, possesses a short but convoluted history that has always focused on diplomacy and/or rapprochement efforts (Johnson, 2019). Taekwondo

Keywords: Peacebuilding, sports diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, martial arts, combat sports

developed first in the ROK under several martial art leaders and then later evolved into a combat sport there. Beginning in the 1950s, the ROK utilized army demonstrators to initially promulgate Taekwondo internationally to show their country as strong in the wake of a devastating war. ROK brigadier general (two-star) General Choi, Hong Hi is credited with developing and promoting Taekwondo in the ROK army. Also, he coined the Taekwondo name, was the first president of the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) and introduced his martial art-focused Taekwondo to the DPRK in the 1980s (Johnson, 2019; Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021). Since his forced exile to Canada, the ROK government has strongly supported the development of Taekwondo into an Olympic sport. These two Taekwondos have different pedagogies (i.e., a martial art and a combat sport); as such, they are essentially two different physical activities with the same name (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). Yet, this has not hampered the ROK and DPRK from using Taekwondo demonstrations for national image promotion and peacebuilding through various demonstrations around the globe. In almost all cases of joint demonstrations between World Taekwondo (WT, formerly the World Taekwondo Federation or WTF) and the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF), WT athletes represent the ROK whereas those on ITF teams represent the DPRK.

Allport (1954) stated in his contact hypothesis, also known as his Intergroup Contact Theory, that interpersonal contact is highly effective at reducing prejudice in certain circumstances. Sports as a form of diplomacy provides excellent conditions for this type of contact. Khan (2016) succinctly outlines how sport diplomacy works: it encompasses "diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, [and] public diplomacy" and "can be viewed as a set of formal and informal actions of the State, its diplomatic missions, sports officials, athletes, and coaches to implement the goals and objectives of foreign policy through sports [and] sports competitions" (pp. 33-34). "Acknowledgment of non-state actors, such as sports organizations, athletes, and fans, is growing," since they are "shaping international relations through actions and interactions" (Masood, 2023). This is possible, because "sport is a universal language" and "the values of sport competition, teamwork and fair play help build trust between countries and bring people together" (Masood, 2023, (p. 33). Here then sports provide the opportune contact between two conflicting groups: a set of widely recognized rules of behavior based on fairness (i.e., fair play) where no group has a clear advantage over the other. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis is utilized in sports diplomacy, because athletes who represent each side of a conflict come together in a shared passion as equals, allowing them and spectators to look beyond prejudices, stereotypes, and past animosities. As such, "[s]port

diplomacy may transcend cultural differences and [again] bring people together" (Khan, 2016, p. 33). Sport in general, and martial arts specifically, may "diminish conflicts, confrontations and transform [them] into diplomacy;" furthermore, "dialogue and development [could] be an ideal stage for universalism, brotherhood, friendship and above all shared values of hospitality, progress, virtue, struggle and survival" (Khan, 2016, p. 33). To be consistent and effective, sports diplomacy requires a solid theoretical framework within which decisions are made (Murray, Pigman, 2014; Murray, 2012).

International sporting "events offer opportunities to foster trust, stress international obligations, and promote a shared respect for sports" (Jarvie, Leaver, 2008). Moreover, sports transcend cultural differences" (Khan, 2016, p. 33) an ideal on which Galtung (1973, 2004, 2007) based his conflict resolution theory (CRT). Galtung's CRT is central to peacebuilding activities and was highly instrumental in the founding theories of Peace and Conflict Studies and Peace Education. According to the USIP and Galtung, peacebuilding should be based on empathy, non-violence, and equity (USIP, n.d.; Galtung, 2004). For Galtung (2004), "violence creates humans incapable of reconciliation and reunion, more fit for retaliation" (p. 78). Any resolution of any conflict, he felt, must prevent sowing the "seeds for future violence" (Galtung, 2007, p. 14).

Indeed, "[s]port raises mutual understanding and promotes peace in international relations," since international competition facilitates "a way to identify other states and their people, and furthermore, to overcome prejudice" (Khan, 2016, p. 37). Taekwondo has been a tool of diplomacy and peace for decades (Johnson, 2018; Masood, 2023) as it "fosters direct interactions, nurturing understanding among individuals from diverse nations" (Masood, 2023). Consequently, sport diplomacy and peacebuilding are two sides of the same coin as they work toward identical goals: bringing people together to create lasting relationships based on shared interests and values. Choi's Taekwondo as a martial art and the ROK's Taekwondo as an Olympic sport both encompass all these ideals in their pedagogical philosophies (Johnson, 2020a; 2020b), making the two Taekwondo styles ideal for peacebuilding between the ROK and DPRK.

Despite decades of joint demonstrations and intermittent negotiations, WT and the ITF are still in the peacebuilding process (Johnson, 2020a; Lewis & Johnson, 2024). There have been numerous unsuccessful discussions between the ROK and DPRK Taekwondo's governing bodies to unify the two styles of Taekwondo. Today, discussions are stalled, but seemingly still ongoing, due to the current

political climate between the two countries. The talks have shifted from holding joint demonstrations to organizing inter-organizational competitions (Johnson, 2020b); however, this new goal fails to build upon the ROK and DPRK's previous soft diplomatic successes. Notwithstanding their good intentions, the current proposals to hold competitions between their athletes ignores previous sport diplomacy theory, the organizations' successes, and warnings in current sports diplomacy research.

"[S]port diplomacy has a positive future as a key driver in globalization, integration, and international society," but "a frank appraisal of its limitations, weaknesses and controversies is vital" (Murray, 2018, p. 206). The majority of Taekwondo diplomacy/peacebuilding research has viewed Taekwondo diplomacy as a panacea, but a darker side to sports diplomacy exists: "[s]port *is…*, like diplomacy…good and bad, public and secret, brilliant and awful, moral and amoral, all at the same time" (Murray, 2018, p. 205). Sport diplomacy actors, like Dennis Rodman who returned from a DPRK trip espousing the kindness of the Kim, Jung Un regime, may be ignorant of diplomatic practices and easily duped by the pageantry involved (Murray, 2018). Indeed, there is no indication that WT or ITF officials are trained in peacebuilding practices.

Other Taekwondo actors may be demonstrating a stronger understanding of "Taekwondo" diplomacy. One Taekwondo instructor and entrepreneur born in the ROK, but who immigrated to the US, brought two DPRK Taekwondo teams to the US for nation-wide tours in 2007 and 2011 (Johnson, 2018). Here, we can see potential for Taekwondo diplomacy to work at the grassroots level even by an untrained diplomat, since the instructor sought to create understanding between members of the decades-old Korean War conflict by bringing them together through a shared, beloved activity. While this instructor may have "dedicated his life to promoting taekwondo and peace between the ROK, DPRK, and the United States" (Johnson, 2018, p. 1642), altruism is not guaranteed at any level of Taekwondo diplomacy. This is especially true for the national international levels, since "states are only interested in sport for selfish, national interests. Period" (Murray, 2018, p. 207). Numerous unanswered questions arise when we look at Taekwondo diplomacy at these, the highest, levels through what Murray (2018) called the *dark side* of sports diplomacy.

By moving away from joint demonstrations and pinning their cultural and sport diplomacy hopes on inter-organizational competitions, the two Taekwondo governing bodies could be building a culture of winning (i.e., forced confrontation) as opposed to a culture of peace between the two nations. Switching the WT (i.e., ROK) and ITF (i.e.,

DPRK) relationship from one that symbolizes mutual respect and a shared cultural background to one of competition comes with risks that have yet to be explored in martial arts/Taekwondo academic literature (Khan, 2016). The aim of this paper is to outline those complications that may exist in this strategy and offer a potential solution that focuses on Taekwondo's goal: peacebuilding

As such, the present exploratory study hopes to advance Taekwondo diplomacy efforts theoretically by emphasizing peacebuilding as a theory (i.e., building a culture of peace) rather than the proposed sport diplomacy (i.e., building a culture of winning). The present research thus contributes to the broader debate on potential hazards that may harm inter-Korean relations. The intended audience is the actors who create Taekwondo diplomacy and academicians who study sports diplomacy, peacebuilding, and soft diplomacy efforts, especially those with interests in Asia.

METHODOLOGY

Few researchers are investigating Taekwondo diplomacy's history and successes (Johnson & Vitale 2018; Masood, 2023). Some have written on the paradox of using Taekwondo–something that is inherently violent–for peacebuilding (Johnson, 2019). Most recently, Johnson (2020) discussed how to transcend complications surrounding WT/ITF competitions based on 1) Murray's (2012) research that showed competition can intensify grievances between nations, and 2) the ROK Taekwondo athletes' propensity to play unfairly in international competitions (Moenig, Cho, & Song, 2012). Johnson's (2020) study considered joint WT/ITF competitions potentially hazardous, but it found a possible solution that utilized Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and boxing rules for sparring and open-style tournaments for forms/pattern competitions. A cursory examination of the literature shows a limited number of researchers exploring Taekwondo diplomacy and peacebuilding. As such, there are limited perspectives in these fields. Also, most of the peer-reviewed articles in these areas are recent (i.e., in the last five years), indicating this is a burgeoning field of academic study. For that reason alone, there is more to be discussed on the dangers of inter-organizational Taekwondo competition. The present study intends to add to the growing research on Taekwondo diplomacy and peacebuilding.

A literature review was performed on Taekwondo diplomacy, Taekwondo philosophy, sports diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy to determine where these areas of study intersect. Keywords were entered into Google Scholar as well as the ROK academic databases RISS (Research Information Sharing Service) and KISS (Koreanstudies

Information Service System). The keywords searched were "World Taekwondo (WT)," "International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF)," "sports diplomacy," "sports diplomacy problems," "cultural diplomacy," "North Korean Taekwondo," and "Taekwondo demonstrations." Academic articles, theses, dissertations, websites, and periodical articles were identified and used to ascertain potential complications with using inter-organizational Taekwondo matches for sports diplomacy. Exclusion criteria were set at academic articles published in international journals, master's theses, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dissertations, and academic textbooks. Due to the peer review process these articles and publications underwent, these sources were deemed most credible to the present study.

Using the Google search engine, secondary sources on sports diplomacy, and Taekwondo diplomacy articles were identified on WT and ITF Taekwondo, international news, and Olympic websites. These articles reported on the non-sporting events that can be identified as "Taekwondo diplomacy" as defined by Johnson and Vitale (2018). Internet articles that included commentary or were published by Taekwondo organizations were excluded to eliminate potential reporting bias. Furthermore, online courses offered by the USIP were consulted to ascertain present Peace Studies theories and activities.

Korean language academic articles, theses, and dissertations written typically include an English abstract, and several of these appeared in our searches. The author possesses a working knowledge of Korean; nevertheless, the Google Translate and an independent translator were used to ensure comprehension of Korean language sources. The above exclusion criteria were also applied to these sources.

A documentary analysis was then conducted, since this type of analysis is often performed when human subjects are lacking and documents are the only source of information (Shaw, Elston, & Abbott, 2004). No empirical data on Taekwondo diplomacy or peacebuilding was found during the literature review. Although the ROK regularly uses Taekwondo for peacebuilding with the DPRK (Johnson, 2019), there is no way to study the effectiveness of these endeavors with the DPRK populous as researchers cannot engage in research inside North Korean (Cynarski & Johnson, 2020). Documentary analysis may accordingly afford an "interpretative analysis…when implied assumptions or underlying ideologies are identified and discussed" (Shaw, Elston, Abbott, 2004, p. 259). The present study's theoretical lens was peacebuilding; thus, documentary analysis permitted an accepted analysis of Taekwondo diplomacy documents that may not have been initially linked to peacebuilding.

Themes were identified and then codified through a peacebuilding theory lens. The themes identified were Korean sports diplomacy, Taekwondo diplomacy, and Korean cultural diplomacy. These themes were then analyzed and correlated to soft, and more specifically Taekwondo, diplomacy. These were then codified using the USIP's definitions of conflict and peacebuilding. Consequently, data on events such as international competitions, sport (i.e., Taekwondo) psychology, and Taekwondo biomechanical studies were excluded as these were identified as sporting events as opposed to endeavors intended to further peace between two conflicting parties.

Two theories were applied to discern martial arts, combat sports, and combat systems activities, which are often misconstrued as identical physical pursuits. First, Cynarski's General Theory of Fighting Arts traditiovation lens allowed for general understanding of the innumerable ways of and reasons for martial arts practice (Cynarski, 2017). Cynarski's (2017) theory conceptualizes and categorizes martial arts as "forms of psychophysical activity linked to a certain tradition of hand-to-hand fighting or using weapons, aimed at personal development and merging educational methods with improvement in the spiritual dimension" (Cynarski & Skowron, 2014, p. 53). Next, Johnson and Ha's (2015) delineation of combat systems, martial arts, and combat sports based on those activities' pedagogical aims facilitated an understanding of the two Taekwondos and how they are used by their governing bodies and the two Koreas to build peace. Combat systems, according to Johnson and Ha (2015), are used solely for self-protection. However, martial arts are for self-defense only and possess a philosophy, or Way (Kim & Bäck, 2020), for practitioners to use their martial knowledge to improve their lives or the lives of others (Johnson, 2019). Combat sports, such as MMA, Greco-Roman wrestling, fencing, and Olympic Taekwondo, are martial arts reimaged and practiced for the sake of sport, but they tend to lack clear a moral philosophy outside of fair play (Johnson & Ha 2015).

RESULTS

Contextualizing Peacebuilding

Precise definitions of peacebuilding concepts have yet to be agreed upon. To that end, the following terms must be defined. The USIP explicates conflict and peacebuilding terminology concisely. As a world leader in peacebuilding education and efforts, USIP definitions were adopted for this study.

According to the USIP (n.d.), conflict occurs when two or

more individuals or groups pursue mutually incompatible goals. Conflict is not inherently negative; rather, it can be the impetus for positive change when channeled correctly. It is also important to note that conflict has made different forms and occurs at various levels. Individuals, groups, nations, or even groups of nations can use intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, or international conflict to see potential for improvement.

For *violence*, a more nuanced concept, the USIP (n.d.) bases its definitions on Van Soest and Bryant's *Tri-Level Nature of Violence* (1995). Violence, however, has numerous definitions as it occurs in many ways, most of which are nonphysical in nature. *Individual violence*, for example, is what most individuals believe violence is in general: harm to a person or property. More complicated is *social violence*, which occurs when "oppressive social policies that obstruct the spontaneous unfolding of human potential (USIP, n.d.)." Moreover, *structural-cultural violence* is when harm to others through cultural or society norms is commonplace and normative. It is the mainstream denigration of different subcultures or cultures. Going beyond stereotypes, structural-cultural violence may not be seen as violent or harmful to the group being suppressed. Rather, the policies or bureaucracies are accepted as the "status quo" and are normalized over time (USIP, n.d.).

Furthermore, the USIP defines *peace* as when parties formerly involved in a conflict actively work toward a new relationship dedicated to mutual benefit. Peace, then, is an active and continual effort to build mutually beneficial relationships in which all parties are working to establish trust from top-down and bottom-up approaches. As such, all parties within a conflict must remain heard and integral to this process to establish peace. Here, we should understand peace as an active state of working toward establishing a new relationship between conflicting parties whose goals are based on respect, the building of trust, and mutually beneficial goals (USIP, n.d).

Peacekeeping, on the other hand, are actions performed to maintain an established peace or to enforce an agreement to cease a conflict. It is paradoxical to say that force is at times required for peacebuilding to begin, but in large scale conflicts (i.e., war) force is sometimes crucial to establish safety for all involved. While peacekeeping does not address the underlying causes of a conflict, it may be necessary to create a framework to start the peacebuilding process (USIP, n.d).

Finally, *peacebuilding* is performed before a conflict starts or after it ends. It is preventive rather than reactive to a conflict. USIP defines peacebuilding as "a transformation

toward more manageable, peaceful relationships and governance structures—the long-term process of addressing root causes and effects, reconciling differences, normalizing relations, and building institutions that can manage conflict without resort to violence" (USIP, n.d.). Peacebuilding addresses the underlying causes of a conflict to discontinue intergroup conflict, building upon mutually beneficial goals that maintaining a relationship and prevent it from deteriorating into violence. While other definitions exist and add nuances to the USIP's understanding of peacebuilding, they mostly focus on the process of recreating relationships for the betterment of all (USIP, n.d.).

Taekwondo as a Peacebuilding Tool

ITF Taekwondo is a martial art focused on character building, while WT's Taekwondo is a combat sport (Johnson, 2019). When it is realized that the two Taekwondos have different fundamental techniques, sparring styles, and general training practices (Gillis, 2016; Johnson, 2019, 2020), it is evident they are identical in name only. This has, however, not impeded the cultural exchanges between ROK and DPRK Taekwondo teams for rapprochement purposes. These exchanges were possible since the two demonstration teams demonstrated side-by-side or one after another rather than directly together (Johnson & Vitale 2018; Johnson, 2019; Lewis & Johnson, 2024).

Na (2016) claims "Taekwondo promotes unity and understanding of various international organizations, practices sharing and volunteer work, contributes to peace and coexistence of human society, and enhances mutual understanding among nations," which sounds superfluous until the WT's humanitarian work (outlined below) is considered (Na, 2016, p. 2). Taekwondo can be "a practical philosophy that aims to restore humanity through harmony between body and mind, tradition and modernity, and our culture and foreign cultures" if practiced under an instructor with these ideals and learning objectives (Na, 2016, p. 12). Johnson (2019) supports and explains this ideal through his martial art pedagogy. Indeed, Taekwondo practitioners "may recognize that they are capable of having a unique orientation of life formed through Taekwondo practice if maieutic questioning is incorporated into their training regimes, and that constant practice can remind them that knowledge acquired from training is useful to their daily lives" (Mayen, Johnson, & Bosch, 2015, p. 24).

Nevertheless, the question remains of how it is possible to use a martial art turned combat sport for peace. Through the right instructor and guidance, students can learn to channel

their Taekwondo skills and knowledge into insights that guide them through their daily lives. It should be noted that this process is probably not inherent to Taekwondo/martial arts practice despite some instructors' best intentions. Instructors must emphasize the importance of using their martial skills for self-defense and creating a better world (Johnson, 2019). For WT athletes, this is possible through the adoption of Olympic values (i.e., Olympism). However, the literature review for the present study failed to identify an overt methodology for how Olympic Taekwondo may be used for peaceful purposes by WT.

While WT and other organizations related to Olympic Taekwondo promote the ideal of peace through sport, they have yet to provide a definitive method for doing so (Choue, 2023; Johnson, 2019). On the other hand, Choi required all ITF students to recite his Student Oath that starts with a promise to adhere to the Taekwondo tenets (courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit) (Choi, 1983). The last two lines of his oath are more explicit: "I shall be a champion of freedom and justice" and "I shall build a peaceful world" (Choi, 1983, p. 240). These lines encourage students to take their Taekwondo lessons beyond the physical. Indeed, they are to use them to improve their lives and those in their immediate and global societies, which other researchers have claimed to be the primary goals for Taekwondo practice (Johnson & Ha, 2015; Johnson, 2019; Kim & Bäck, 2020). Choi thusly provided ITF practitioners with a more discernable and direct methodology for using their Taekwondo abilities and knowledge to build peace.

Although no evidence of Choi aligning himself and his Taekwondo pedagogy with Peace Studies was found, concepts such as freedom, justice, and peace are all directly related to the USIP's concepts of peacebuilding (USIP, n.d.). Furthermore, Johnson and Lewis (2021) state "General Choi's educational peace philosophy seems to advocate *peace through strength,*" which is a peace strategy that "assumes human beings are inherently violent and that the world is a competitive place" (p. 53; USIP, n.d.). It should also be noted that while Choi did not specify his definition of peace, he firmly believed Taekwondo should be used as for Korean rapprochement and a means to unify his divided Korea (Choi, n.d.; Johnson & Vitale, 2018).

Taekwondo's Peacebuilding Endeavors

Taekwondo organizations have a long history of diplomatic work. To understand how Taekwondo's sport diplomacy efforts have assisted ROK and DPRK rapprochement efforts and thus how they have been utilized for peacebuilding work, these endeavors are presented in

chronological order with some historical context. ROK General Choi, Hong Hi was forced to leave his beloved military career but later served as ROK ambassador to Malaysia from 1962-1964 (Gillis, 2016). Although researchers have questioned General Choi's motives for leaving his home country, he claimed he was ostracized by the then-ROK President Park, Chung Hee for disagreeing with the dictatorial leader (Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021). He immigrated to Canada and dedicated his life to disseminating Taekwondo around the world (Choi, n.d., 2000; Gillis, 2016). Due to this split in Taekwondo leadership, WT's Taekwondo evolved into a combat sport in the ROK, while the ITF's Taekwondo continued its martial art path (Lewis & Johnson, 2024).

Nevertheless, Choi first introduced Taekwondo to the DPRK in 1980 (Gillis, 2016; Johnson & Vitale, 2018). In other words, he taught a means of self-defense that heavily encouraged practitioners to cultivate themselves into useful and productive members of society. While Choi was steadfast in his writings that Taekwondo should be free from government oversight and intervention (Choi, 2000), some researchers have found that he was politically motivated in that he wished Taekwondo to help unite the ROK and DPRK (Gillis, 2016; Johnson, 2019; 2020a; 2020b; Johnson & Lewis, 2020; 2021). This path nonetheless permitted Choi to begin introducing Taekwondo to countries with socialist and communist leaderships, such as the USSR and North Korea (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). In his later years, Choi believed Taekwondo could be a bridge to unite the ROK and DPRK (Choi, n.d.). Indeed, Taekwondo was listed as a possible type of inter-Korean social and cultural exchange in 2016 (ROK, 2016), but political tensions and the COVID pandemic have prevented such exchanges since at least 2020 (ROK, 2022).

Choi's peacebuilding goals can be considered threefold. First, at a grassroots level, he wished to spread knowledge of Korean culture and history among Taekwondo practitioners so that they were never eradicated as the Japanese attempted during the 1905-1945 occupation. He did this by naming his formal exercises known as *t'ŭl* after famous Korean military figures, culturally significant concepts, important dates, and important people in Korean history. Understanding and being educated about other cultures is a critical step to creating understanding and mutual respect during a conflict (USIP, n.d.).

General Choi also disseminated his personal peacebuilding philosophies through Taekwondo. Choi's educational goals for his students were more than mere physical skills. One of his beliefs, the abovementioned last line of his Student Oath, states unambiguously his belief that Taekwondo

could build peace. The ITF Student Oath "represents the way to apply the values of Taekwon-Do in everyday life" and "improve every aspect of" a Taekwondo student's life by providing "the necessary tools to take decisions based on moral principles" (Toure, 2019, p. 19; see also Johnson, 2019). With this, the Oath provides an immediate pedagogical goal for using strength to build peace (Johnson & Lewis, 2021). While Choi's peacebuilding goal is explicit, his path (or pedagogy) remains blurred, since students may interpret how to build peace whichever way their station permits or in whatever way is meaningful to them. Taekwondo was and continues to be intended to build people of high moral character and to serve a greater good; practitioners are expected to use their strength to protect the weak and build a better world for themselves and others (Choi, n.d.; Johnson, 2019).

Third, Choi tried at an international level to bolster the image of Korea by sending out ROK army demonstration teams around the world. These teams performed amazing physical feats (Gillis, 2016), which left little doubt as to the strength of the Korean people even after the devastating Korean War (Johnson, 2019). Of course, Choi also benefited from these tours by using them to introduce Taekwondo to these nations and thereby building his ITF. As above, respect is required between any two parties involved in a conflict. By demonstrating the personal strength of South Korean citizens performing impressive physical feats, Choi garnished international admiration for his people. By simple extrapolation, peoples from around the world could see South Koreans as more than just an impoverished people through ROK citizens performing self-defense techniques (Johnson, 2019). They could moreover see the necessary strength needed to recover and become a strong, democratic, and free ally.

After Choi's passing in 2002, his ITF fractured into several organizations, all of which claimed to be legitimate heirs of his legacy (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). One of these organizations is headquartered in Vienna, Austria but is operated and funded by DPRK citizens. It is this ITF with which the ROK engages its Taekwondo soft diplomacy activities. Choi's counterpart in the ROK was Kim, Un-Yong, a former ROK Central Intelligence Agency agent (Gillis, 2016). Initially, Kim spearheaded the three Taekwondo organizations in that country (Gillis, 2016), effectively establishing Taekwondo as a pseudo government-supported endeavor that aimed to use a sportified version of Taekwondo to further its international image (Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021). The meteoric rise of Taekwondo from 1956, when General Choi coined the name for the new Korean martial art, to 2000, when Taekwondo became an official Olympic event at the Sydney Olympic Games, is unprecedented in the sporting world.

The Olympic sport of Taekwondo, a rival to Choi's martial art orientated Taekwondo (Johnson, 2020; Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021), is sometimes referred to as Kukki Taekwondo in Taekwondo literature (see Moenig, Cho, & Song, 2012; Johnson & Lewis, 2020). The *Kukki* moniker means *national* in Korean and is derived from the Kukkiwon ("Institute of the National Sport") organization in the ROK. The Kukkiwon is the educational and testing center for Olympic Taekwondo, whereas WT is the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) International Federation (IF) for the Olympic sport of Taekwondo (Johnson, 2020). The ROK uses Olympic Taekwondo for multiple soft diplomacy and peacebuilding activities (Johnson, 2020). Nevertheless, WT is the Taekwondo organization that the ROK uses to engage the DPRK in Taekwondo sports and cultural diplomacy (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). The ROK/WT focuses on maintaining Taekwondo as a sport whilst the DPRK/ITF continues Choi's dream of using Taekwondo as a means of self-defense and self-cultivation (i.e., a martial art). However, this may be an oversimplification since the DPRK's ITF continues to evolve with modern sports protocols and trends (see Lloyd, 2023) and WT calls Taekwondo a martial art (Choue, 2023).

In a 2023 open letter commemorating the organization's 50th anniversary, WT President Choue, Chungwon outlined his peace initiatives and accomplishments. All of WT's initiatives, organizations, and programs are in line with IOC goals, and Choue (2023) stated bluntly that this Taekwondo organization's primary mission "is to maintain its Olympic status." One the other hand, the DPRK ITF's motivations for engaging in Taekwondo diplomacy are unclear. Although headquartered in Vienna, Austria, the ITF is staffed by DPRK citizens (Johnson, 2020a). There can be little doubt that the often impoverished, socialist DPRK would invest significant time and resources into activities that would not assist the state in some way. On the surface, the DPRK's ITF seems to follow General Choi's martial art philosophy of building peace. Yet, we can only speculate to the true reasons why the DPRK chooses to engage in Taekwondo diplomacy of any sort, because "dictatorial politicians have interest whatsoever in the notion of sports diplomacy as a tool to overcome international estrangement" (Murray, 2018, p. 209).

The ROK-supported WT has taken a very different peacebuilding path. Since 2008, it began dispatching Kukki Taekwondo instructors around the world in its Taekwondo Peace Corps. Now known as the World Taekwondo Peace

Corps Foundation, it has to date sent more than "2,500 volunteers to 123 countries" (Choue, 2023). It offers assistance and cultural exchanges through Taekwondo education programs designed to improve intercultural understanding (Yu et al., 2016). Soon, it will expand even further to become the Sport Peace Corps, which will promote several Olympic sports aimed at "developing nations and vulnerable populations…in cooperation with the United Nations and the IOC" (Choue, 2023).

WT also launched the Taekwondo Humanitarian Foundation (THF) in 2016. Choue, who is also the THF president, introduced "the THF at the U.N. headquarters in New York on Sept. 21, 2015, the U.N. International Day of Peace" (Choue, 2023). This sister organization to the WT "supports refugees and displaced persons worldwide by training them in the sport and martial art of taekwondo" and is now running Taekwondo camps in seven nations, including Jordan, Rwanda, Turkey, France, the Kingdom of Eswatini, and Mexico (Choue, 2023).

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DISCUSSION

As the results indicate, Taekwondo has been used for multiple peacebuilding activities from the grassroots through the international levels. First envisioned by Choi as a vehicle for personal and societal improvement, WT's Choue has grown Taekwondo peacebuilding activities to great heights. Although WT's work benefits those who practice Kukki Taekwondo, even Choue himself stated that these activities are designed to maintain Taekwondo's status as an Olympic event (Choue, 2023). Thus, while WT is promoting a better world through sport on a global scale, a concept Khan (2016) also advocates, its efforts are not altogether altruistic. More critically, there are pitfalls in the current goals in sport diplomacy utilizing Taekwondo, what Johnson and Vitale (2018) called Taekwondo diplomacy, that may have unintended grave repercussions.

Taekwondo Diplomacy and Potential Hazards

George Orwell famously stated that sport is "war minus the

shooting" (Orwell, 1970, p. 63), and this is readily apparent in the combat sport of Taekwondo. While researchers have addressed the paradox of Taekwondo organizations using the sport/martial art for peacebuilding almost ad nauseam (Gillis, 2016; Johnson, 2017; 2019; 2020a; 2020b; Johnson & Lewis, 2018; 2021; Kim & Bäck, 2020; Na, 2016), they have avoided one prickly issue about sports diplomacy: its potential for harming inter-Korean relations. Sport diplomacy has been highly effective, but its downside has yet to be discussed within Taekwondo literature. The example of Nazi Germany's use of the 1936 Olympics to advance its horrendous Aryan philosophy is exemplifies perfectly how sport can deliver an abhorrent and erroneous concept. Other complications exist within sport diplomacy as well. For instance, sports competition may "cause unevenness of international relations, foster negative image of international understanding, and are used as the means of enhancing colonization" (Chung & Baek, 2009, p. 210).

More specifically, our literature review revealed three potential hazards to Taekwondo diplomacy efforts if competition between WT and ITF teams occurs. The first hazard entails the finances of sport. Wealthier countries can invest in the best training, equipment, and scientific advances to extrapolate the best from their athletes in ways that lesser developed nations cannot. The winningest athletes from those countries can be interpreted as another example that their nation's financial 'might makes right,' and affluent nations can thereby further their political and financial dominance over less developed states. Although DPRK athletes certainly fare well in international competitions, their ROK counterparts typically do better across the sporting spectrum. ITF athletes representing the DPRK may have an economic disadvantage when preparing for inter-organization competitions. This unfair advantage possessed by ROK athletes, whether real or perceived, may cause strife between the two countries if WT athletes tend to win more (or vice versa). As such, inter-organizational competitions intended to spread goodwill and further a peaceful relationship between the ROK and DPRK may ultimately harm rapprochement efforts.

Secondly, researchers have long found that sport competitions have enhanced conflict (Kapuscinski, 1992; Norman, 2009; Kartakoullis & Loizou, 2009; Jackson, 2013). Orwell (1945) predicted this when he wrote sport "is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence." While somewhat hyperbolic, Orwell may have foretold an undesirable outcome in inter-Korean sporting diplomatic efforts in which millions of lives may be at risk. Supporting Orwell are Cuesta and Bohorquez (2011) who claim game-specific issues may result in a culture of violence in football

(soccer). Murray (2018) underscores sport this by stating sport is inseparably linked to violence; he singles out combat sports like MMA by stating they "are extraordinarily and intentionally bloody and vicious" (p. 233). While Olympic Taekwondo sparring tends not to be as gruesome thanks to numerous rules intended to protect athletes (Moenig, Cho, & Song, 2012), it is violent. This is particularly alarming for Taekwondo diplomacy efforts since Taekwondo sparring competition, the most common type of Taekwondo competition, requires contestants to punch and kick each other for points. The attempt to guide ROK (and presumably DPRK) spectators' hearts and minds toward reconciliation and rapprochement may backfire when contestants from either side of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (popularly known as the DMZ) compete in a manner that is inherently aggressive. As above, it can be difficult for an individual, athlete or spectator, unversed in martial arts philosophy and pedagogy to see this as 'peaceful.' Indeed, Galtung (2004) states people

can build their lives around their hatred. But this will never be a really rich and creative life. Every day we can hear, at the micro- and meso-levels, stories of violence from people forever marked by conflict and violence. They have become *offended*, and have built their lives around the injustice they feel they have suffered. (p. 78).

The frequent skirmishes between the ROK and DPRK along their border, the common firing of their naval vessels at each other, the occasional bombing of an island, the sinking of the ROK Cheonan naval ship, and the ever-present threat of nuclear attacks on the South are just a few violent aspects Korean citizens live with. Due to a lack of reporting from the DPRK, it is near impossible to tell what aggressions, if any, have been perpetrated by the South. Still, the DPRK's state-run media promotes fear and loathing of the ROK and its other enemies. Thus, it would be all too easy for a ROK or DPRK Taekwondo audience to slip from considering an opponent from the other Korea as a friendly competitor to a hated enemy.

The third hazard that may not be readily apparent outside of diplomatic circles is that fans may not wish their sports to be used as tools of diplomacy (Murray, 2018). Sport purists, and especially those who identify a significant part of their personality with a sport or sports teams, may see sports diplomatic efforts as "a sham, a photo-op, or a political gimmick" and the politicians who do so as hijackers (Murray, 2012, p. 577). At stake for these fans is the integrity of the sport, the value of competition, and/or what the sport itself represents to them. To them, the playing of the sport for any other purpose other than enjoyment is

almost heresy (Murray, 2018). The WT and ITF Taekwondos are often taught as a Way of life (Kim & Bäck, 2020), and their practitioners could be considered sports purists even if they do not follow or participate in Taekwondo competitions. WT and ITF Taekwondo practitioners, many of whom have spent decades learning and practicing their sport and/or art, may view WT/ITF competitions as forced and as a cheapening of their years of devotion to a Taekwondo life.

Moreover, there is little empirical evidence that sports diplomacy like what WT and the ITF wish to engage in actually shapes the minds of spectators. Blomqvist and Hansson (2021) state combat "sports fans have not actively engaged in the competition and therefore may not be as eligible for reconciliation" when these events are used for diplomatic purposes (p. 53). They claim the athletes may be more inclined to be influenced by these events, since they "might share a psychological connection [to the Other] due to the actual competition" (Blomqvist and Hansson, 2021, p. 53). This research suggests that inter-organizational competitions such as those proposed between WT and ITF players would most likely only benefit the players themselves rather than promote peace among the peoples of the organizations' respective countries. If one goal for Taekwondo diplomacy is to affect a positive change in the minds and hearts of Korean citizens and those of the concerned people around the world toward Korean rapprochement, then the target audience of inter-organization Taekwondo competitions would likely be missed through WT/ITF inter-organizational competitions (Johnson, 2019).

Taekwondo Diplomacy, Korean Culture, and Peacebuilding

Korean culture has a long history of game playing and competition. However, this can create a culture in which winning is valued more than a culture of peace within the modern Taekwondo diplomacy context. President Choue's slogan "Peace is more precious than triumph" (Johnson & Lewis, 2021, p. 20) indicates that Taekwondo organizations may be aware of this, but the proposal to have inter-organizational competitions comes with concerns. Furthermore, a mainstay policy within ROK unification policies is cultural diplomacy with Taekwondo playing a central role (Johnson, 2020). Taekwondo diplomacy thusly projects the perception that the two Koreas are willing to work together. One evolution of the joint Taekwondo demonstrations shows this may already be happening. The first WT/ITF demonstrations in 2018 in the ROK had little to no planned interactions between the two teams. As more

and more demonstrations occurred, sometimes the WT team captain would hold boards for his ITF counterpart to break, which further underpinned the fact that ROK and DPRK citizens can help each other. These simple yet profound moments of sharing the demonstration stage and helping each other perform their Way of life (Kim & Bäck, 2020) could not be more symbolic for a peaceful future on the Korean Peninsula. It also interactively provides the "adaptive and iterative" peacebuilding process needed in Taekwondo diplomacy (Johnson, 2020, p. 1999).

WT/ITF Taekwondo competitions seem to be willfully ignoring this by forcing a winner/loser situation in which their player athletes, or pseudo-ambassadors, attempt to defeat each other through simulated combat. Current combat sports research indicates that inter-competitions may miss their intended peacebuilding mark (Blomqvist & Hansson, 2021). If WT and ITF athletes square off in competition, a slippery slope could be created. Taekwondo diplomacy might be transformed from cultural diplomacy, which has been successful for decades (Johnson, 2019), to a form of sports diplomacy, which presents the aforementioned hazards.

Building peace, it is worth repeating, is the purpose of Taekwondo diplomacy. To do that, all sides of a conflict must come together without a goal of winning or defeating the Other. Inter-organizational competitions might transform the current culture of peace between the WT and ITF into a culture of winners and losers. A culture of winning is the antithesis of peacebuilding. All parties engaged in a conflict must work together to build a new relationship based on establishing and maintaining peace together, not one in which one side is superior to the other (Galtung 2004; 2007). If there is a risk of harming or even a slight possibility of reversing all of the good work the IOC, WT, the ITF, and their athletes and administrators have accomplished, why push for competition? Why not create innovative ways to build upon the existing relationship and the peaceful practices that seem to work? Why not, indeed.

CONCLUSION

Taekwondo diplomacy has gone through numerous changes over the decades, and a recent proposal wishes for it to evolve from an act of cultural diplomacy to that of sports diplomacy. Maybe that is due to the IOC, ROK and DPRK political goals, or just the Korean desire to compete. The results of this exploratory study did not uncover why the DPRK's ITF engages in Taekwondo diplomacy, but reveal WT engages in Taekwondo peacebuilding desires to maintain its Olympic status. The present study also suggests that WT and the ITF have yet to implement a peacebuilding

theoretical framework for their sports diplomacy endeavors. This then is the *dark side* (Murray, 2018) of Taekwondo diplomacy: neither WT nor ITF may have a clear peacebuilding plan nor training in how to create one outside of hosting competitions between the two organizations' athletes.

The concept of evolving from a cultural diplomacy model to a sport diplomacy one also comes with significant risks. For one, a winning, 'might makes right' scenario could derail any peace efforts by creating a real or perceived advantage for one side. A second hazard is the very real possibility of exacerbating, rather than relieving, tensions between the ROK and DPRK. There also exists the prospect of failing to influence the target audience, the citizens of both Koreas, to embrace the idea of rapprochement. The question, and quest, that lay ahead for WT and ITF leaders remains the same: how do we continue to build peace through Taekwondo? The answer is, for once, relatively simple. Taekwondo actors should keep doing what has seemingly worked until now with one slight modification.

Galtung's (1973, 2004, 2007) CRT could provide a theoretical framework for future Taekwondo diplomatic efforts between the two Koreas. CRT has already been suggested as a model for WT/ITF competitions (Johnson, 2020), and it is more applicable to peacebuilding efforts than competition. Although it seems counterintuitive to use one of the world's most popular martial arts and combat sports diplomatically without athletes engaging in any competition, CRT provides a theoretical framework in which Taekwondo can be practiced differently by ROK and DPRK athletes while maintaining respect for each culture's differences (see also Galtung, 1973, 2004, 2007).

Accordingly, this study recommends WT and the ITF adapt CRT as a theoretical framework for their Taekwondo diplomacy work. A theoretical peacebuilding framework based on Galtung's (1973, 2004, 2007) CRT could guide WT and the ITF away from competition (sports diplomacy) and continue evolving joint demonstrations (cultural diplomacy). If done, the Taekwondo organizations could build upon their cultural diplomacy successes, avoid likely pitfalls of sports diplomacy, and continue their peacebuilding endeavors within an accepted theoretical framework. Additionally, WT and ITF leaders should work with Peace Study experts using Galtung's (1973, 2004, 2007) CRT framework to create a policy that adheres to the sports diplomacy efforts undertaken by the WT, the ITF's martial arts philosophies, and previous successful peacebuilding initiatives. Modifying their current strategy

so it includes a CRT lens could eliminate the hazards that seem to be inherent in using Taekwondo as a form of sports diplomacy. As such, WT and ITF diplomacy/peacebuilding endeavors would likely stand a stronger likelihood of success.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study is the lack of empirical research on the effect of Taekwondo diplomacy on the ROK and DPRK Korean populaces. The majority of literature reporting on Taekwondo diplomacy is positive but nonacademic. Researchers have yet to present empirical evidence proving Taekwondo diplomatic efforts have furthered peace. Future quantitative research would shed light on the Taekwondo diplomacy's efficacy, which would in turn guide future Taekwondo studies and diplomatic policies and decisions. One foreseeable complication with this future line of study is the lack of accessibility to DPRK citizens by outside researchers. We must therefore depend on successive interactions with the DPRK/ITF Taekwondo organization as signs of Taekwondo peacebuilding successes.

The results of the literature review also revealed no empirical evidence of Taekwondo diplomacy or peacebuilding efficacy. Researchers could perform innumerable studies in this area, including the effect televised joint demonstrations may have on the ROK populace, which would indicate their willingness to support future Taekwondo diplomacy/peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, empirical studies are needed to validate the investment of the WT and ITF resources.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Footnotes

[1]Following previous research on Taekwondo as a sport and martial art (Johnson, 2020; Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021), this paper presents Korean terms in the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system. Authors have Romanized 태권도 (T'aegwŏn-do) over the years in numerous ways, so the term is presented herein as Taekwondo, now a loan word from Korean, to avoid confusion. The sole exception to this is General Choi, Hong Hi's preferred spelling of "Taekwon-Do," which is only used in proper names of the organization he presided over until his passing. Korean names are presented in the Asian tradition with the surname first and rendered in the person's preferred Romanization for easier reference.

Original Research

A Delphi study exploring physical and emotional safe spaces within sport for development projects targeting mental health

Jamie Marshall[1] and Russell Martindale[1]

[1]The School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland

Corresponding author email: j.marshall4@napier.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Sport for Development (SFD) offers a promising vehicle for intervention in the battle against the global mental health crisis. Sport on its own is not enough to support positive mental health and requires additional structuring to achieve such aims. One established 'plus' element to SFD is the concept of safe spaces, yet there has been limited robust exploration into the key aspects of safe spaces and their implementation. This study aimed to build consensus on key aspects of safe space facilitation through the use of the Delphi method. Coaches ($n = 26$) from varied SFD programs around the world ($n = 12$) were remotely and anonymously surveyed through initial open-ended questions. This was followed by three rounds of collaborative refinement of statements to build consensus. In total consensus was reached on 75 statements relating to the characteristics of safe spaces within SFD targeting mental health. These consensus statements have pragmatic implications for the implementation of safe spaces within SFD, while providing the starting point for further research and the development of targeted evaluation tools. Crucially the findings also highlight the complexity of safe spaces, and the degree of intentional planning, preparation, and effort they require within a SFD context.

A Delphi study exploring physical and emotional safe spaces within sport for development projects targeting mental health

Mental health represents a considerable challenge with recent research identifying that every year an estimated one in eight people globally experience one or more mental disorders (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2020). Nearly one in three people meet the criteria for a common mental health disorder over the course of their life (Steel et al., 2014). Poor mental health appears to have been further exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic for both adult (Nochaiwong, 2021) and youth (Racine et al., 2021) populations. Evidence suggests a higher prevalence of negative mental health in high-income countries, however, the high levels of negative stigma that exists in low-income countries is likely leading to under reporting in this context (World Health Organization, 2022). The universal need for innovative approaches to mental health support is clear both in terms of overstretched acute mental health services in high-income countries (Oxtoby, 2022), and in low-income settings where determinants such as conflict or lack of investment have led to a broadly lacking mental health infrastructure (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

This universal need must be framed within contextual understandings of mental distress which remain poorly represented in epidemiological studies (Kohrt et al., 2014). Negative mental health has been shown to be tied to a range of contextual correlates, for example, those exposed to conflict and war, experience much higher prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) (Priebe et al., 2010). Similarly, a global review of adolescent suicidal ideation found an average global prevalence of 14%, rising to 21% in an African context, with gender, socioeconomic status, peer conflict, loneliness, and isolation, associated with a greater risk of suicidal ideation (Biswas et al., 2020). Homelessness and its

Keywords: Mental Health, Sport for Development, Qualitative Research, Safe Spaces, Intervention Design, Delphi

associated challenges have been linked with significantly higher levels of suicidal ideation than the general population in a recent meta-analysis of work from mainly high income countries (18 of 20) (Ayano et al., 2019). Given the social and environmental nature of these correlates within a broad range of contexts, this study explores the wider need for targeted mental health interventions that focus on intentional utilization of protective community based factors to better support positive mental health.

One protective factor that is well established in supporting positive mental health is physical activity, even at low doses (Teychenne et al., 2020) and has been identified as a key priority for promoting mental health on a global scale (World Health Organization, 2022). This positive relationship is apparent across a range of populations and sociodemographic factors including youth (Biddle et al., 2019), the elderly (Cunningham et al., 2020), gender (Halliday et al., 2019), and education (Goodwin, 2003. Despite broad positive associations between physical activity and mental health, such robust outcomes are not mirrored consistently within literature exploring the Sport for Development (SfD) paradigm. Four systematic reviews on the topic have been undertaken in the last 10 years with three finding limited evidence for SfD's impact on mental health (Hamilton et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2019a; Whitley et al., 2019b). The most recent review found a small positive effect on youth mental health in relation to organized sporting activities (Boelens et al., 2022). However, due to low quality methodology used within much of the work reviewed, authors across all reviews recommend caution (Boelens et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2019a; Whitley et al., 2019b).

All four reviews highlighted a need for better understanding around mechanisms within SfD, reaffirming an established critique that SFD practice often relies upon a 'romanticized' notion that sport is inherently able to heal or have a positive impact (Coalter, 2007). This is clearly expounded within a randomized controlled trial carried out in post-conflict Uganda that highlighted how a football based SFD intervention had a significant negative impact on participants' mental health (Richards et al., 2014). The research team carried out comprehensive process evaluation that enabled them to identify that while the football component of the intervention was well developed and delivered, it was highly competitive, while the peace building elements were neglected (Richards & Foster, 2013). In combination these two features may account for the negative mental health findings. The importance of 'plus' elements, that is the elements integrated within SFD that target key outcomes, is a clear theme within SFD

literature (Coalter, 2007). This is echoed in recent physical activity literature that stressed the importance of the quality of physical activity including activity types that promote enjoyment and autonomy, facilitator/coach manner and style, positive social environments and pleasant physical environments (Vella et al., 2023). Indeed, where these 'plus' elements and the quality of their delivery are clearly prioritized, individual SFD evaluations have been associated with positive outcomes in relation to mental health (Marshall et al., 2021; Sherry & May, 2013).

Understanding the 'plus' elements, processes, and theoretical mechanisms within SFD has been identified as a key priority for future research (Boelens et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2019a; Whitley et al., 2019b). One element that consistently appears within SFD research and practice is the concept of a safe space, a concept that also exists in wider mental health literature (Bell et al., 2018). It should be noted that there exists no consensus on a single definition around safe spaces in relation to mental health. This is true in SFD and social science literature where it has been described as a 'catch all' term that remains 'contested and underdeveloped' (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p.634), and in clinical paradigms where comparable elements continue to prove difficult to define (Hartley et al., 2020). The highlighted underdevelopment of safe spaces within the literature emphasizes the clear need for robust interrogation of the concept, especially as an important 'plus' element within SFD targeting mental health.

The aim of this research was to explore and build consensus upon the key characteristics of safe spaces as delivered by SFD organizations in a range of different contexts. The research also sought to explore and, where possible, build consensus around the pragmatic steps to their implementation. The focus of the research was on safe spaces as an integral mediator or 'plus' element in SFD, but the study also explored perceived benefits to safe spaces to better understand their role with wider SFD program theory. While the aim was to build consensus, the research was carried out with awareness of the fundamentally contextual and community based nature of safe spaces and their delivery (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to best investigate safe spaces within SFD, a thorough literature review on the topic was carried out. Safe spaces have been attributed a range of characteristics within SFD contexts to ensure they are inclusive, secure, welcoming, supportive, patient, and challenging of stigma (Brady, 2005; Coalter & Theeboom, 2022; Marshall et al.,

2020). The most in depth and targeted exploration of safe spaces within SFD was carried out by Spaaij and Schulenkorf (2014). Like previous work, they highlighted that safe spaces are not inherent within SFD but required significant intentional planning and work. The research identified that safe spaces have physical (safety from physical harm and security), psychological/affective (protection from psychological or emotional harm), sociocultural (based on familiarity, recognition, and acceptance to feel comfortable), political (an environment based on open dialogue, collaborative learning, and respect for difference), and experimental (concerned with the risk-taking and experimentation) dimensions to them. The study identified this multidimensional description within examples from SFD in Sri Lanka, Israel, and Brazil, and provided a framework for future research. While the discussion around the concept of safe spaces has been initiated within the literature, and broad domains have been identified, there remains a lack of clear, rigorous definition of safe spaces within SFD, especially in terms of linking to the pragmatic steps required to facilitate them. Such research, grounded in real world experiences, would be especially valuable given the importance of safes spaces as a key 'plus' element with SFD (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014), and their alignment with global priorities around interventions targeting key protective factors for mental health (World Health Organization, 2022).

Given the limited exploration of safe spaces within SFD targeted research, it is necessary to interrogate wider paradigms and their associated literature on the topic. It is notable that discussion of safe spaces can be identified within traditional cultural practices serving a community well-being function. The traditional Zimbabwean concept of Nhanga involves women of different ages coming together to discuss shared emotional experiences in an open, trusting, and collaborative space that intentionally subvert existing power structures and dynamics (Gumbonzvanda et al., 2021). Such an approach highlights the long standing value that community safe spaces hold within non-western traditional practices and offer insight not available within western dominated mental health research. Another example of insight from within community contexts would be the identification of beauty salons in the US as a space where Black women felt comfortable to relax, let their guard down, discuss shared experiences, and seek role models around the topic of racial inequality (Battle, 2021).

Research into organized positive youth development in Canada further builds on characteristics of community based safe spaces, highlighting that they should be based on being respectful, supportive and enabling open discussion to impact positively on youth well-being (Ramey et al.,

2023). These interpersonal elements to safe spaces are echoed and developed in research focused on supporting the well-being of HIV health professionals, in the face of frequent exposure to secondary trauma (Wills, 2020). To best support such workers in avoiding burnout and poor mental health the importance of vulnerability (open to sharing one's own experiences with others), authenticity, and judgement free peer support was highlighted. Structural elements were also stressed, especially the need for regular checking in (Wills, 2020). Other structural elements such as who is facilitating safe spaces have been explored in refugee contexts. The utilization of refugee staff has been identified as foundational to providing a safe space for health care provision through such staff proving a bridge to patients, their ability to be culturally sensitive and develop deeply trusting relationships (Özvarış & Hricak, 2019). Research into UK social service day centers have further highlighted structural elements such as normalizing and non-pathologized topics, using stealth approach to health, and offering services with stability and consistency (Tucker, 2010). Research in a similar paradigm echoed this while prioritizing the need for mental health day centers to be developed collaboratively to feel like refuge for users (Bryant et al., 2011). One further structural element that, perhaps surprisingly, is not explicitly explored in a lot of research is the importance of ensuring physical safety when delivering safe spaces for mental well-being, especially for participants at risk of abuse, persecution, or stigma such as LGBTQIA+ populations (Ramey et al., 2023). Existing research into community led safe spaces offers valuable insight into the nature of safe spaces and their key characteristics. The broad range of areas touched upon further highlights the multidimensional and complicated nature of safe spaces as highlighted within SFD literature (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014).

Alongside community contexts, clinical settings offer important insight into implementation of safe spaces for mental health and well-being. In exploring alternative provision to the emergency departments for mental health patients, Andrew et al. (2023) highlighted the need for non-pathologized spaces, that are collaborative and targeted for population needs, and promote inclusivity and a sense of belonging. Alongside research into explicit clinical safe spaces, insight can be garnered from the body of research exploring the therapeutic alliance, the nature of the relationship between clinician and patient. It should be noted as in safe spaces, the difficulty in defining therapeutic alliance has been discussed at length in medical literature (Hartley et al., 2020). Research in mental health nursing has emphasized a range of key characteristics for effective therapeutic alliance that could translate into safe space provision. Such elements include empathy, being non-judgmental, collaborative decision making, consistency and

availability, being focused and expert on population needs, building trust, and being authentic (Dziopa & Ahern, 2009; Hartley et al., 2020; Kirsh & Tate, 2006; Moreno-Poyato & Rodríguez-Nogueira, 2021. The multidimensional and complex nature of safe spaces implementation is once again recognized within clinical paradigms, and despite their apparent importance there is little evidence for interventions with fidelity that effectively promote or develop the concept of therapeutic alliance (Hartley et al., 2020).

This literature review into research exploring safes spaces, or comparable constructs, within SFD, community and clinical settings, has highlighted a range of potentially important elements that may contribute to the implementation of effective safe spaces. There exists no clear consensus within any paradigms on the definition of a safe space (Hartley et al., 2020; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014), and this might be in part due to the multidimensional, complicated, and highly contextual nature identified within reviewed literature. For the purposes of this study, and based on the surveyed literature, safe spaces are defined as implemented physical, psychosocial, and structural frameworks that support participants to feel physically and emotionally safe, and best engage with mental health targeted SFD. This definition is not intended for wider adoption, but to assist in determining the proposed scope of this study.

METHODS

Given building consensus on items within a specific sector or paradigm was the primary aim of the study, a classical Delphi framework was deemed the most appropriate. The Delphi technique was developed at the outset of the Cold War to predict the impact of technology on warfare (Custer et al., 1999). The development of the Delphi technique was guided by the premise that combined individual anonymous predictions were stronger than unstructured group predictions (Kaplan et al., 1950). The process is used to build consensus around a topic through the systematic surveying of a panel of experts on the topic of interest. A Delphi panel consists of a group of subject experts who can offer insight, and in this study work towards consensus of recommendations around the nature and pragmatic implementation of safe spaces within SFD contexts. The number of participants required for a Delphi panel is not set, though a minimum between 10-18 has been previously suggested (Paliwoda, 1983). The panel receives and responds to multiple rounds of questionnaires, the responses of which are analyzed, consolidated, and presented back to the panel for further feedback. This is often done through presenting back statements for participants to rate their agreement on. This process continues until a, usually

predefined, consensus is reached. The first stage of any Delphi process is the recruitment of an expert panel on the topic in question.

Panel Selection

As the focus of this research is establishing consensus on safe spaces within SFD in a pragmatic sense, it was deemed important to bring together a panel with extensive experience in the facilitation of SFD in the real world. SFD coaches were deemed the most appropriate participants to fulfil this role and to maximize the pragmatic implications of the study. The initial stage of panel recruitment was focused on targeting SFD organizations with a track record of targeted mental health programming, ideally with evaluations to evidence their work. Organizations were also surveyed for indicators of safe space delivery (as described in existing literature) within their work. Examples of such indicators included structures to support physical safety in response to contextual threats, elements focused on trust building or empathy, collaborative approaches to intervention development and delivery, and evidence of dismantling of negative social power structures.

A purposive approach was used to identify and contact a range of SFD gatekeepers such as academics, umbrella organizations, and sector awards programs to elicit recommendations for organizations to invite to the study. An online search was also carried out with a specific focus on SFD targeting mental health with robust grey literature, ideally utilizing validated measures, and supporting outcomes. An initial 63 organizations were identified via preliminary searches/recommendations, and this was refined to 20 following more in-depth surveying of safe space indicators and to ensure diversity of sports modality. At this point potential bias was noted in the lead author's exposure to multiple surfing programs in previous work. A limit to the number of surfing programs involved was set (3) to ensure diversity of sport modalities within the study. Surfing projects with the most developed safe space indicators from available evidence were approached for inclusion.

When identified for possible involvement, organizations were contacted with a brief about the project to confirm a) their availability and willingness to be involved, and b) that the organizations themselves agreed that they fit the scope of the project. Projects were given the option to include between 1-3 coaches in the study, prioritizing those with the most experience facilitating safe spaces. This allowed organizations to suggest participants based on their scale/capacity and to include, where possible, diversity of perspectives on safe spaces within the same SFD

organizations. At the conclusion of this process, 12 organizations were identified and a breakdown of their characteristics, and number of coaches who volunteered to participate in the study can be viewed in Table 1, including their respective websites for more information.

coaches who took part the average age was 31.62 (*SD* = 9.39) and the gender breakdown 54% male and 46% female.

Table 1

SFD Organizations Participating in the Study

Organization	Location	Sport Modality	No. of Coach Participants	Website
ClimbAID	Lebanon	Rock Climbing	1	https://climbaid.org/
Elman Peace	Somalia	Multisport	2	http://elmanpeace.org/
HIV Free Generation	Kenya	Surfing	2	https://www.hivfreegeneration.org/
Lost Boyz Inc	USA	Baseball	3	https://www.lostboyzinc.org/
Maitryana	India	Netball	3	https://maitrayana.in/
Moving the Goalposts	Kenya	Soccer	3	https://www.mtgk.org/
Skateistan	South Africa	Skateboarding	2	https://skateistan.org/
School of Hard Knocks	United Kingdom	Rugby	2	https://www.schoolofhardknocks.org.uk/
Street Soccer Scotland	United Kingdom	Soccer	2	https://streetsoccerscotland.org/
Waves for Change	South Africa	Surfing	2	https://waves-for-change.org/
Waves for Hope	Trinidad	Surfing & Skateboarding	2	https://www.waves-for-hope.org/
Watford FC Community Trust	United Kingdom	Soccer	2	https://www.watfordfccsetrust.com/

A deliberately broad range of organizations were targeted for the study to offer different perspectives on safe spaces within different contexts. An example of this breadth of context can be seen in the contrast between Elman Peace and Street Soccer Scotland. More specifically, Elman Peace works in Somalia supporting young people who have experienced trauma, including children associated with armed groups. Street Soccer Scotland on the other hand support individuals in the United Kingdom facing social isolation and homelessness. The sample also included variety in terms of the types of sports projects utilized for mental health objectives which allowed for consideration of pragmatic elements of delivering safe spaces within different sporting frameworks (for example team vs individual sports). While the sample was not designed to be directly representative, the most represented sport was soccer with 35% of participating coaches being involved in interventions that utilize soccer. This aligns with soccer being previously identified as the most common sport for SFD delivery (Svensson & Woods, 2017). For the 26
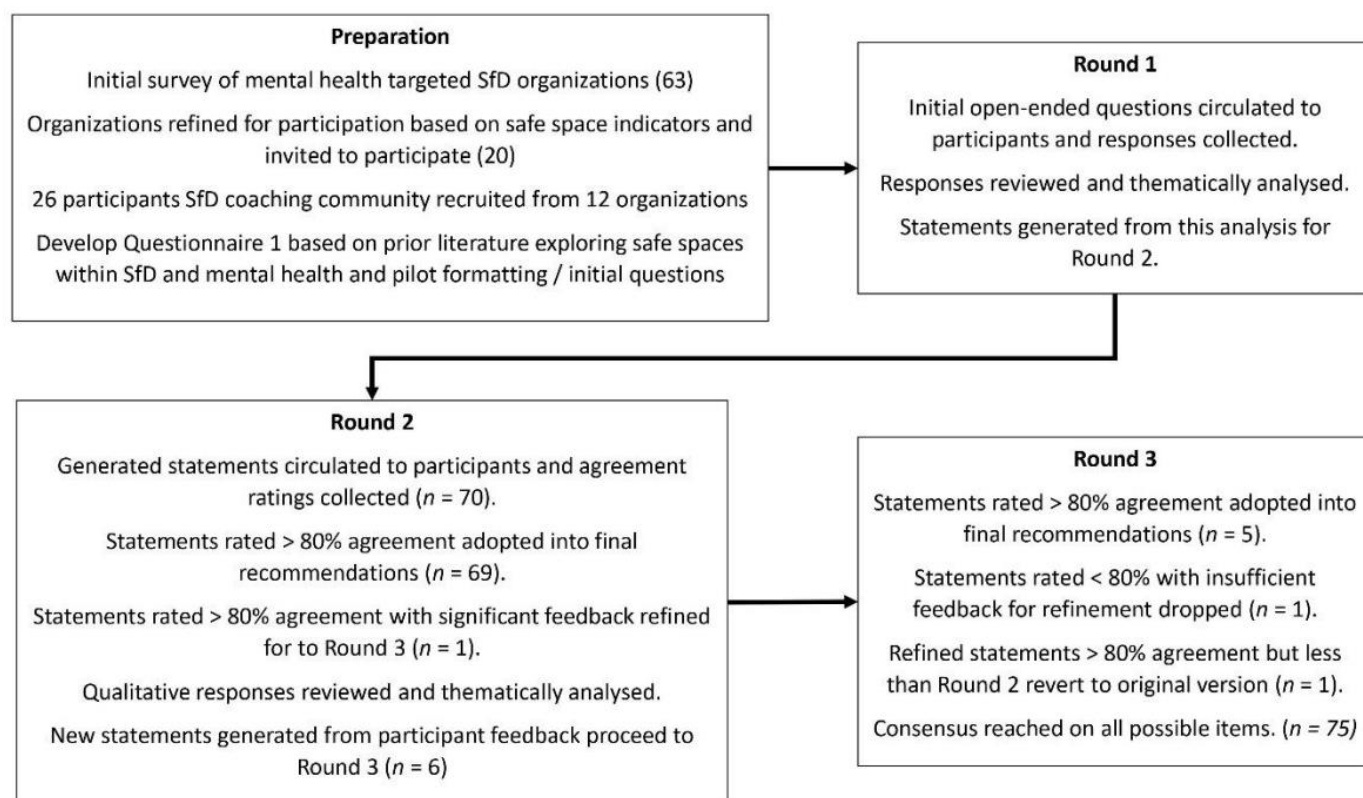
Procedures

The first important step within a Delphi process is to define consensus a priori (Diamond et al., 2014). For this study, a suitable consensus was defined as at least 80% of participants scoring 4 or 5 (agree/strongly agree) on a 5-point Likert Scale (Diamond et al., 2014). This Likert Scale offered multiple levels to differentiate strength of view for agreement and disagreement while also offering a neutral opinion. The length of time each round was open for was set a priori at four weeks, though extensions were allowed for based upon respondent rate, and a response rate of at least 80% was preferred prior to moving on to the next round of the Delphi. A further priority throughout the whole process was the anonymization of participants at all stages. This was deemed important not only as part of established Delphi processes, but also so participants felt they could respond freely and honestly without fear of any repercussions related to their employment. An online platform (Qualtrics) was deemed most appropriate to

maintain anonymity, to minimize disruption for participants, and to accommodate the global spread of participants. In total three rounds of questionnaires were carried out before consensus was reached on all items. Response rates were high throughout the study (Round 1:100%, Round 2: 92%, Round 3: 96%). Ethical approval was granted by the Edinburgh Napier School of Applied Sciences Ethics Committee on 03/03/2022 (Reference Code: 2850475). This ethics process involved in-depth discussion of research protocols with a committee independent of the study and piloting of questions and processes. The chief ethical priority, as already highlighted, was always maintaining participant anonymity.

concepts, implementation structure, population expertise, and interpersonal power dynamics all considered. After an initial open-ended question about what participants perceived as the most important elements for safe spaces in SFD, these dimensions allowed for a systematic questioning of the broader topic. Given the breadth of the topic, all initial questions were designed to be as open ended as possible to allow space for novel insight as well as non-leading exploration of existing concepts. All questions also asked for reflections about the pragmatic elements of implementation that coaches' expertise could illuminate. This broadly consisted of asking participants for the practical steps they would recommend to implement the concepts and ideas raised within open ended questioning.

Figure 1

Delphi on Safe Spaces in SFD Research Process

Round 1 Question Development

An initial round of open-ended questions was developed in line with classical Delphi procedures. These initial questions were based upon a review of current literature exploring safe spaces within SFD and wider literature. The conducted literature review highlighted that safe spaces are multidimensional in nature and identified a range of key characteristics relating to physical safety, psychosocial

Initial analysis and statement development

Responses to open ended questions in Round 1 were initially explored through process coding, before codes were mapped, categorized, and tabulated to explore key themes from within the data (Saldaña, 2021). These themes provided the basis for initial statements presented back to participants from Round 2 to explore consensus. In

subsequent rounds (2, 3), participants received feedback around responses from the previous round and were given the opportunity to offer further comment or make modifications to statements. Participants were requested to specifically offer qualitative insight on statements they disagreed with to enable statement refinement. Qualitative feedback was coded and analyzed within the same framework as Round 1 (process coding, mapping, categorization, and tabulation). This process led to new or modified statements in the subsequent round. Where significant new themes emerged within qualitative feedback, new statements were generated and included within subsequent rounds. Some qualitative feedback was deemed to offer improved wording on items that consensus had already been reached upon (agreement > 80%). Where this was the case refinements were made and presented back to the participants and if a higher agreement rating was achieved, the refinements were kept. If the agreement was less than the previous round the refinements were reversed. This is a deviation from a classical Delphi method but was deemed to allow for further refinement without compromising a priori agreement procedures. At the culmination of Round 3, consensus had been reached around all items resulting in a list of recommendations for future intervention design and implementation. Items that did not reach a prior consensus (agreement rating < 80%) and that did not have sufficient qualitative feedback to refine were dropped. The full research process has been surmised and visualized within Figure 1.

After receiving Round 1 data a slight alteration was made to processes relating to barriers to safe space implementation. The initial responses included a range of highly contextual examples that could be lost in any form of consensus building exercise. For example, items around firearms would be much less relevant in contexts where firearms are less prevalent (e.g., UK based SFD programs). The research team deemed collecting a full list of examples of barriers with contextual nuances would be more valuable than abstract consensus items. As such a list of barriers was collected from Round 1 ($n = 21$) and presented back in Round 2 with an explanation of the change in process and the opportunity for participants to add any further barriers they believed were missing. Participants included a further 3 barriers in Round 2.

RESULTS

Having completed 3 rounds of the Delphi, consensus was reached upon 75 statements relating to the characteristics, implementation, and benefits of safe spaces in SFD targeting mental health and can be viewed in Table 2 and 3 below. Of the 75 statements, 70 were generated in round 1

and reached a priori threshold for consensus (>80%) in round 2. Of these consensus statements 60% achieved 100% agreement from participants. A further 5 items (36, 37, 63, 74, 75 and italicized in tables for clarity) were generated based upon round 2 feedback and all subsequently reached consensus threshold in round 3. One statement (20) achieved threshold for consensus in round 2 but was refined based on significant participant feedback. When presented back to participants in round 3 the statement again achieved consensus, however it was at a lower percentage than round 2 and so the original version of the statement was retained in the study results.

Emergent consensus statements describing safe spaces and how to deliver them (statements 1-63) were labelled as either conceptual Safe Space Characteristics, or within pragmatic implementation groupings such as Structural Elements of Safe Spaces or Coach Behaviors for Safe Spaces. These groupings emerged in the initial round of analysis of open ended responses and were maintained throughout the process as they were deemed to support pragmatic aims of the study with conceptual characteristics grouped for discussion within wider literature, structural elements grouped together to aid intervention design and management, and coach behaviors grouped to support coach training and practice. These groupings were also utilized to structure a pragmatic resource to accompany this research and best inform SFD practitioners of key findings.

Table 2

Consensus Statements on Safe Spaces in SFD: Characteristics, Structural Elements, and Coach Behaviours - (Round 2 - normal text, Round 3 - italicized)

Statement Number	Safe Spaces in SFD Statements - (Round 2 - normal text, Round 3 - *italicized*)	Round 2 Agreement	Round 3 Agreement
	Safe Space Characteristics (safe spaces should be…)		
1	Free from judgement	100%	NA
2	Empathetic	100%	NA
3	Respectful	100%	NA
4	Trusting	100%	NA
5	Patient	100%	NA
6	Inclusive and accepting	96%	NA
7	Supportive	100%	NA
8	Encouraging	100%	NA
9	Caring	92%	NA
10	Consistent and reliable	92%	NA
11	Authentic and honest	100%	NA
12	Collaborative	100%	NA
13	Equitable (participants and facilitators held to same standards)	100%	NA
	Structural Elements for Safe Spaces		
14	Projects should be aware of, and mitigate for, contextual potential reprisals against or negative repercussions for participants engaging with the project.	100%	NA
15	The project must carry out thorough risk assessment of activities, including where possible removing hazards present in activity locations and weather planning.	100%	NA
16	The project must be delivered in a secure location that provides a barrier, as much as is possible, to external contextual threats to the safe space.	100%	NA
17	The project must provide activity based first aid cover.	100%	NA
18	The project must provide appropriate and sufficiently maintained equipment.	100%	NA
19	Projects should always manage hydration appropriately.	92%	NA
20	Where feasible and appropriate projects would replace energy lost through activities through feeding elements. This is especially true for populations facing challenges associated with food insecurity. *	85%*	84%*
21	The project should provide regular training for facilitators, focused on up to date mental health and project specific practices.	100%	NA
22	Facilitators should be appropriately qualified for their context; it must be noted the nature of these qualifications will vary around the world.	100%	NA
23	Where possible and feasible facilitators should have access to clinical/professional support for their own mental health.	100%	NA

24	Projects should maintain contextually/project appropriate rules for participants.	100%	NA
25	Where appropriate, possible and feasible facilitators should signpost participants to further clinical/professional support for their mental health.	100%	NA
26	The project must have contextually developed and targeted child protection policies.	100%	NA
27	Where feasible and appropriate, facilitators should be recruited from within the community and/or the population served by the project.	88%	NA
28	The project must be grounded in expert knowledge of the target population.	92%	NA
29	The project must have appropriate feedback mechanisms and be open to feedback provided.	100%	NA
30	Projects should, as much as is possible, provide access to coaches of appropriate genders for participants.	100%	NA
31	Projects should, as much as is possible, provide gender appropriate changing/toilet facilities. Where impossible structures to mitigate for this, such as staggered changing, individual changing etc, should be put in place.	100%	NA
32	The project must be up front and transparent around its goals and intentions.	100%	NA
33	Safe spaces are a collaborative process, where possible, participants should be engaged in setting project structures around safe spaces (for example collaborative approaches to rule/goal setting).	100%	NA
34	The project must remain aware of changing circumstances in local context or community that could impact on its delivery.	96%	NA
35	Projects should be aligned on purpose and implementation of activities, there should not be dissonance between management and facilitators.	96%	NA
36	*Programs should plan to appropriately manage pre-existing social relationships between coaches and participants within the community.*	*NA*	*92%*
37	*Programs should structure activities to encourage participants to take part at their own pace, and plan for participants taking part at different paces.*	*NA*	*96%*
	Coach Behaviours for Safe Spaces		
38	Coaches should maintain appropriate physical boundaries.	100%	NA
39	Coaches should appropriately manage competitive elements of activities to ensure they do not undermine safe space provision.	96%	NA
40	Coaches should be patient with participants, understanding where they have come from and offering no judgement.	96%	NA
41	Coaches should never over promise on things that they cannot deliver.	100%	NA
42	Coaches must be intentional in their use of language and share this with participants.	100%	NA
43	Coaches must be aware of, and able to implement all child protection policies.	100%	NA

44	Coaches should always be aware of their own tone and body language when facilitating.	100%	NA
45	Coaches should offer an appropriate degree of vulnerability to build trust with participants, such as sharing examples from their own lives.	96%	NA
46	Coaches must never show favouritism.	100%	NA
47	Coaches should endeavour to include all participants within all activities, as much as is possible.	96%	NA
48	Coaches should utilise real world examples within discussions of mental health.	96%	NA
49	Coaches must not tolerate bullying or harassment of any kind.	100%	NA
50	Coaches should actively and intentionally listen to participants within group discussion/activities.	100%	NA
51	Coaches should role model behaviours relating to safe spaces and project aims.	100%	NA
52	Coaches should plan for potential difficult conversations and/or topics that may come up.	100%	NA
53	Coaches must always be aware of and remove wherever possible, perceived and actual contextual barriers to participation.	100%	NA
54	Coaches must be experts in the population targeted.	92%	NA
55	Coaches should appropriately challenge negative stereotypes/judgements that arise within activities.	100%	NA
56	Coaches should especially challenge gender stereotypes around sport participation. Where possible the local community should also be engaged with this discussion.	100%	NA
57	Coaches should be held to the same standards of behaviour as participants.	100%	NA
58	Coaches should always facilitate with an awareness of wider context and what is going on in the community.	100%	NA
59	Coaches must be aware of biases and/or stigma they may hold, and that may be prevalent within the local context.	100%	NA
60	Coaches should intentionally provide time/space for reflection on activities/learnings.	100%	NA
61	Coaches should allow for mistakes and, wherever possible, reframe examples of failure as learning opportunities.	100%	NA
62	Coaches must be open to questions that emerge from activities.	100%	NA
63	*Coaches should encourage and support participants to take part at their own pace.*	*NA*	*96%*

Note. Item 20 was reworded based significant on feedback despite reaching consensus. The edited version also reached consensus in Round 3, but less so than Round 2. As such the Round 2 statement was adopted.

The study also explored consensus statements on coach perceptions of the benefits of safe spaces within a SFD context and are displayed in Table 3 (statements 63-75). While impact is ideally explored from a participant perspective, consensus statements generated by coaches still hold significant value given coaches exist as experts delivering safe spaces in SFD in real world situations. These perceived benefits include factors such as respite, mental health nurturing, developing coping skills, relationship building, provision of learning and challenge opportunities, and community benefits.

As described previously, the process exploring barriers was adapted to be more inclusive of contextual nuance of the different SFD organizations participating. A full list of the barriers that participants described in implementing safe spaces for SFD is presented below in Table 4 with items in italics generated in Round 2. These included factors related to environmental and personal safety, equipment, nutrition, weather, inclusive spaces and facilities, negative community influences or challenges, and coach behaviors.

Table 3

Consensus Statements on Perceived Safe Space Benefits in SFD - (Round 2 - normal text, Round 3 - italicized)

Statement Number	Statements - (Round 1 - normal text, Round 2 - *italicized*)	Round 2 Agreement	Round 3 Agreement
64	Safe spaces are sanctuaries that provide participants with respite from wider challenges face away from projects.	96%	NA
65	Safe spaces allow participants to enjoy activities away from pervading stigma and/or stereotypes.	100%	NA
66	Safe spaces can in and of themselves nurture mental health.	100%	NA
67	Safe spaces allow participants to get advice about mental health free from judgment/stigma.	100%	NA
68	Safe spaces are ideal for learning about and developing coping/resilience mental health skills.	100%	NA
69	Safe spaces provide an opportunity for developing new and positive relationships.	100%	NA
70	Safe spaces allow participants to share how they are feeling openly, something they may not otherwise have access to on a regular basis.	100%	NA
71	Safe spaces allow participants to be themselves.	100%	NA
72	Safe spaces optimise learning experiences and activities.	100%	NA
73	Safe spaces can promote the inclusion of similar behaviours/spaces within the local context/community away from the project.	96%	NA
74	*Safe spaces allow youth participants a space to be children and play, in contrast to adultification (premature exposure to adult stressors and responsibilities) they may face in wider lives.*	*NA*	*96%*
75	*Safe spaces allow participants to challenge themselves and take on new responsibilities.*	*NA*	*92%*

Table 4

Barriers to Implementing Safe Spaces in SFD - (Round 1 - normal text, Round 2 - italicized)

Barriers to Implementing Safe Spaces in SFD (Round 1 - normal text, *Round 2 - italicized*)
Rubbish/trash at the activity site   Dangerous objects in and around activity site (e.g. munitions, firearms, landmines, broken glass, drug paraphernalia, other sharp items)
Inappropriate equipment
Poorly maintained equipment
Lack of nutritional support
Poor/dangerous weather conditions
Lack of private and gender appropriate spaces (especially for changing)
Lack of suitable toilet facilities   Inappropriate behaviours of non-programme individuals in proximity of activity site (e.g. drinking, drug taking, immodesty)   Intrusion of non-programme individuals (e.g. heckling, shouting, trying to join in, using equipment)
Interference of negative community groups (e.g. armed groups, criminal groups, gangs)   Participants not being allowed to attend by third parties (e.g. family, peers, teachers, gangs, probation personnel)
Poorly managed participant behaviour
Harmful traditional beliefs within the community
Negative stereotypes within the community
Reluctance to allow female participation
Community hostility and/or suspicion of programme
Reprisals against participants for involvement
Tensions between different local communities
Political/religious/tribal divisions
Lack of local child protection knowledge and infrastructure   *Inappropriate behaviour of coaches (not being positive role models by e.g. not taking care of equipment, not being motivated, not being prepared etc.).*
Working alongside difficult to access and/or isolated communities
The implications of trauma upon participants

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This Delphi study aimed to build consensus on key characteristics, components, and perceived benefits of safe spaces from across a wide range of SFD projects targeting mental health. One of the priorities of this study was to identify if there were universal concepts, and pragmatic steps present within the delivery of safe spaces in SFD from across a broad range of contexts. The large number of consensus statements achieved, and the high agreement ratings that were present across all results suggests shared elements exist within safe space facilitation despite the lack to consensus apparent within existing literature both SFD focused (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014) and comparable clinical paradigms (Hartley et al., 2020). The robust consensus on characteristics of safe spaces within SFD (items 1-13) could provide the foundation for better definition of the term in a manner that has so far proved elusive. Further research, especially considering participant perspectives, could help to realize this goal.

The multidimensional nature of statements generated in this research highlights the complexity of implementing safe spaces and is mirrored in wider literature across multiple paradigms (Andrew et al., 2023; Gumbonzvanda et al 2021; Özvarış & Hricak, 2019; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014; Vella et al., 2023). This complexity highlights how plus elements should not be ignored or taken lightly by SFD practitioners, and further challenges prevalent romanticized notions of sport as inherently good (Coalter, 2007). This complexity is further highlighted by the fact that many consensus statements taken in isolation do not offer insight into the nature of safe spaces. For example, statement 10 focuses on consistency and reliability, an element that was highlighted in the review of existing clinical literature (Dziopa & Ahern, 2009; Kirsh & Tate, 2006). While this statement appeared regularly within initial coach responses and achieved a 92% agreement rating, consistency on its own is not sufficient in the development of a safe space. Consistency supports and is related to other identified safe space elements such as consistency of positive coach behaviors such as patience and role modelling (statements 5, 40, 51), or structural considerations such as programmatic transparency (statement 32). It is important that the concept of safe spaces within SFD is not oversimplified down to individual components which could in turn potentially damage or inhibit subsequent implementation.

Such oversimplification has previously been identified as a key risk within SFD especially in terms of insufficient training, mentoring and ongoing support for SFD practitioners (Coalter, 2010), and highlights the need for

monitoring and process evaluations around theoretical components of safe spaces in SFD. The nature of the Delphi process did not allow for in-depth exploration of directionality in how different consensus statements related to each other but further contributes to the ongoing process of developing program theory around safe space implementation (Vogel, 2012). Despite this complexity and the need to view findings in their totality, this study offers clear and pragmatic insight into steps organizations and coaches can take to optimize the implementation of safes spaces within SFD. The study findings are also surmised within a freely accessible pragmatic resource that will hopefully prove of use to SFD organizations (https://napier-repository.worktribe.com/output/3708533). The pack has already been shared with organizations that contributed to the study and pragmatic uses have already been reported such as use of the barriers to safe spaces section to develop a pragmatic checklist for intervention site monitoring, and use of the coach behaviors section within coach training optimization.

The concept of empathy and trust building was identified prior to this study as a key element within safe space implementation across a range of paradigms (Dzipa & Ahern, 2009; Özvarış & Hricak, 2019; Moreno-Poyato & Rodirigez-Noguieria, 2020; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). These concepts were confirmed as important characteristics within coach consensus on safe space characteristics (statements 2 and 4). Furthermore, several potentially related statements outlined clear steps to achieve these characteristics that mirrored examples from existing research. The use of real world examples when discussing mental health (statement 48) and the importance of active listening (statement 50), represent practices identified as foundational in community mental health nursing research (Kirsh & Tate, 2006). Statement 45 describes how coaches should utilize an appropriate level of vulnerability, such as sharing examples from their own lives, to build trust with participants with a high level of consensus amongst coaches (96%). This element of trust building is especially interesting as while it is highlighted as important within recent research into surfing based SFD (Marshall et al., 2023), clinician peer support (Wills, 2020) and Australian emergency mental health provision (Andrew et al., 2023). The topic of facilitator vulnerability remains controversial and requires further robust exploration (Oates et al., 2017). Concerns about appropriateness and duty of care to practitioners (community and clinical) are valid but the strong consensus established by SFD coaches across a broad range of contexts seems to suggest it is a highly valued tool within safe space implementation.

The notion of shared experiences and population/contextual expertise enabling trust building was frequently reported in

wider literature around safe spaces including SFD literature (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014), community-based settings (Battle 2021; Gumbonzvanda et al., 2021; Özvarış & Hricak, 2019), and clinical paradigms (Andrew et al., 2023; Kirsh & Tate, 2006). This approach was reflected in several consensus statements on the topic, such as the project and the coaches needing to be grounded in expertise about the target population (statements 28 & 54). One of the most obvious structural manifestations of this point was statement 27: "Where feasible and appropriate, facilitators should be recruited from within the community and/or the population served by the project." Multiple SFD organizations who took part in this study had clear pathways and examples of former participants going on to become coaches/facilitators. This was also highlighted as an extremely valuable structure to incorporate where possible in comparable literature such as Özvarış and Hricak's (2019) research into the use of refugees as healthcare staff within a refugee focused project. There may be situations where this approach is not directly possible due to limited access to members of the target population with the appropriate skills, or no capability to offer the required training. Given the consensus around this item and its triangulation with wider research, prioritizing the development and hiring of coaches from within target populations seems a worthwhile long-term goal to optimize the facilitation of safe space provision within SFD.

Consensus statements within this study also align with wider discussions around the continued deinstitutionalization of mental health, and recognition of the community as a positive location for mental health work as part of a more broad, coherent system (Andrew et al., 2023; Bryant et al., 2011; Tucker, 2010). Locating mental health work in the community can also avoid pervading stigma for participants around accessing mental health or social support in what has previously been described as a 'stealth' approach within SFD (Marshall et al., 2023) and in clinical settings (Andrew et al., 2023). It is important to stress that there continues to be an important role for clinical approaches and deinstitutionalization is not about replacing them, but about improving access and supporting/supplementing them through effective integration with community assets (Andrew et al., 2023; Erulkar & Medhin, 2017; Tucker, 2010). Participating coaches' agreement with this concept is demonstrated by the 100% consensus on the importance of effective signposting in statement 25. The community as a location for mental health does however bring its own challenges including a range of negative biases, stigma, and discrimination. These negative community elements, which are well represented in barriers to safe spaces discussed by coaches, need to be managed appropriately within effective

safe space implementation. Interventions maintaining awareness of changing circumstances in local context or community that could impact on its delivery (statement 34) or coaches reflecting on biases and/or stigma they may hold, and that may be prevalent within the local context (statement 59) provide example strategies for this.

One theme that clearly emerged across a range of consensus statements was the collaborative nature of developing safe spaces for intervention participants. Indeed, being collaborative was identified as a key characteristic of safe spaces (statement 12) and an important consideration for intervention structuring (statement 33), with both of these statements achieving 100% consensus amongst participants. Similar importance was placed on equitable relationships between coaches and participants (statements 13 and 57).

One of the participating organizations, Waves for Change offered a clear example of such a collaborative approach in grounding exercises that set the culture for their sessions. At initial sessions coaches explore together with participants how they want to feel at programs, followed by collaboratively aligning participants on behaviors and rules to support this (Waves for Change, 2022, p.16-17). This process allows for the setting of meaningful and intentional structure around safe spaces within sessions, that mirrors the prioritizing of collaboration in wider research within community (Bryant et al., 2011; Gumbonzvanda et al 2021) and within clinical settings (Andrew et al., 2023; Dzipa & Ahern, 2009; Moreno-Poyato & Rodirigez-Noguieria, 2020). Another benefit of such collaborative approaches are they address negative participant/practitioner or other negative social power dynamics in a manner that has been identified as important within wider mental health research (Andrew et al., 2023; Gumbonzvanda et al., 2021; Özvarış & Hricak, 2019). The organic development of the traditional Nhanga practice as a space that intentionally separates itself from and subverts existing power dynamics to support young Zimbabwean women's well-being highlights the long understood value of such an approach (Gumbonzvanda et al., 2021). The kind of collaborative approaches highlighted in this research appear to be integral in enhancing safe space implementation, and mitigating negative elements related to contextual power dynamics.

When the approaches explored in this study are delivered effectively, safe spaces can become a 'refuge' from negative elements that are prevalent in participants' wider lives (Battle, 2021; Bryant et al., 2011; Jost & Janicka, 2020). The importance of such a refuge, the like of which may not be easily accessible in participants' wider lives, may account for coach perceptions around the benefits safe spaces offer on their own. Examples of this would include

coaches describing safe spaces as sanctuaries providing respite (statement 64), a place where participants can avoid stigma/stereotyping (statement 65), and where young participants can be children countering contextually induced adultification (statement 74). It is notable that coach perceptions of these benefits are associated with the facilitation of safe spaces, prior to other SFD plus elements such as psychoeducation and socialization. This may be especially true within contexts where stressors are prevalent and formalized mental health support is lacking, severely damaged, and/or absent. The importance of safe spaces within refugee response settings has been previously highlighted (Özvarış & Hricak, 2019) and SFD has been identified as a cost-effective approach to development and peace (Beutler, 2008). Effective safe spaces of the kind discussed in this research, could prove a valuable, immediate, and rapidly deployable response to challenging contexts where the development of more complex mental health infrastructure is impossible or still at its initial stage.

As already highlighted, when important 'plus' elements, such as safe spaces, are not appropriately implemented SFD can be ineffective and even harmful to mental health outcomes (Richards et al., 2014). To better protect from such outcomes, process evaluation can offer pragmatic insight into whether 'plus' elements are being implemented effectively within SFD, alongside offering understanding around intervention feasibility, scaling, optimization, and bolstering impact claims (Moore et al., 2015). Development of a pragmatic tool to assess safe space implementation could be useful within the SFD paradigm, enabling earlier and better understanding of whether this key 'plus' element is being delivered. Such a tool would also enable an evaluation of the association between safe space implementation and outcome strength. This would be of especial use for new pilots or existing SFD models/frameworks being trialed within new contexts and may have considerations for a range of areas outside SFD. For example, clinical literature has highlighted the lack of robust measurement around the effectiveness of interventions aimed at boosting therapeutic alliance within mental healthcare (Hartley et al., 2020). The identification of key components and attributes of safe spaces in SFD within this Delphi study provides a valuable starting point for initial item development for such a tool with consensus statements providing a starting place for item development. The development of such a 'Safe Spaces in SFD Scale' would be a valuable and pragmatic addition to the SFD paradigm, subject to a robust process of trialing and validation.

LIMITATIONS

The Delphi method has been established as a useful method in the development of best practice guidelines, including for mental health related paradigms (Bisson et al., 2020; McMaster et al., 2020) which made it an ideal method for the aims of this study. One limitation of the Delphi as run in this study is that it did not allow for robust exploration of directionality or relationships between the different elements of safe spaces that were identified. Given the multidimensionality and complexity of safe space implementation that is well established within this paper and wider research (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014), the lack of prioritization of the different concepts presents a challenge to new SFD organizations, especially those with limited funding. Further research to map directionality and understand priorities within safe space frameworks to address these limitations should be a priority.

Given the aims of this study, SFD coaches were identified as best positioned to fulfil the role of an expert panel for this Delphi approach on safe space implementation. One limitation of this study is that it does not consider the perspectives of SFD participants, although multiple findings do align with research exploring SFD participant experiences (Erulkar & Medhin, 2017; Marshall et al., 2020; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). To further bolster the findings of this study in terms of their pragmatic use for SFD practitioners, confirmatory research utilizing SFD participant perspectives would be beneficial. This could also form a valuable component within the item development and validation process for a safe space scale as has been suggested.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this Delphi study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the key characteristics, components, barriers, and benefits of safe space implementation within SFD. The findings highlight the importance of safe spaces as a 'plus' element in SFD targeting mental health, along with their complexity and the amount of intentional work that is required for successful implementation. The consensus statements generated offer pragmatic guidance for use in the field, along with jumping off points for future research or the development of a safe space measurement tool. Continued interrogation of safe spaces as a foundational mediator for both SFD and other community based mental health remains a priority.

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Original Research

View from the grassroots: Sport for Development and gender in the Pacific Islands

Katherine Raw[1], Emma Sherry[2], Ryan Lucas[3], Olivia Bramley[2]

[1]Swinburne University of Technology, Australia
[2]RMIT University, Australia
[3]Monash University, Australia

Corresponding author email: kraw@swin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Alongside the progression of sport-for-development (SFD) internationally, there has been an increase in research into how sport can contribute to gender equity outcomes. However, within this body of literature, only a small number of studies have specifically explored SFD initiatives targeting gender focused outcomes in the Pacific Islands. Further, few have managed to explore perspectives of program beneficiaries or broader, processes to achieve long-term outcomes. As such, we aim to explore participant perspectives on initiatives throughout Pacific Island nations, with a focus upon the contribution of SFD towards supporting gender equity.

Data were gathered over a six-year period and examined SFD programs across nine Pacific Island nations. These initiatives were funded by an Australian Government program – Team Up – which aims to foster inclusion and create opportunities for women. Local program leaders and staff collected data from program participants via a story-based evaluative method. Findings highlighted program impacts, including confidence, self-belief, and achieving goals; challenging gender norms; and employment pathways, skills, networks, and agency. By focusing upon locally collected data that elevates participants' experiences and voices, we enhance practical and empirical understandings of the longer-term outcomes of SFD programs, particularly those focusing upon gender equity in the Pacific Islands.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, academic interest in the field of sport-for-development (SFD) has burgeoned (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Existing research has sought to explore the relationship between sport and the achievement of a wide range of development outcomes, including poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS education and prevention, and conflict resolution, amongst a host of other social policy and development outcomes (Welty Peachey et al., 2019). Sport has also been used widely by practitioners and policy makers as a vehicle to promote gender equity in low- to middle-income contexts, where programming seeks to challenge and reshape repressive gender norms that constrain the lives of women and girls. Reflecting the rise of SFD research more broadly, studies into sport's contribution to outcomes associated with gender equity have also increased, such as women's social inclusion, education, and health promotion (Hancock et al., 2013). Whilst research to date has broadly focused on the potential for SFD to contribute to gender equity, only a small number of studies have explored the contribution of sport to gender equity outcomes and associated concepts throughout the Pacific (Khoo et al., 2014; Uperesa et al., 2023; Sherry et al., 2017b), with local Pasifika voices of program beneficiaries and providers thought to be particularly lacking (Henne & Pape, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Mach, 2019). In addition, while some scholars have provided evidence of some short-term SFD gender-focused outcomes in the Pacific, others have questioned the enduring nature of these impacts (Schulenkorf et al., 2022; Siefken et al., 2015). Therefore, the aim of our research was to explore participant perspectives on initiatives throughout Pacific Island nations, with a focus upon the contribution of SFD towards achieving gender equity. Specifically, we draw upon six years' worth of secondary data provided to us, the research team, by Team Up, a multi-national and multi-program SFD initiative funded by the Australian Federal government and delivered across the Pacific.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and SFD

According to de Soysa and Zipp (2019), the launch of the Millennium Development Goals, with the inclusion of gender equality and empowerment, allowed actors in the emerging field of SFD to focus on gender and pursue funding relevant to the achievement of outcomes related to this. Continuing in the expansion of the Sustainable Development Goals, the pursuit of gender equity outcomes provided further opportunities for SFD organizations to promote initiatives for girls and women. As the field of SFD has continued to develop, key themes for gender and development have emerged including the increasing use of sport, by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a tool to achieve sustainable development goal gender objectives and the emergence of the 'girling' effect of development (Hayhurst, 2014a; Nauright & Zipp, 2018). The 'Girl Effect' positions girls and women as actors in society, that, given agency and empowered can influence and develop their communities, countries, and nations (Hayhurst, 2014a; Zipp et al., 2019). Through this effect, SFD programs assume that investing in girls through access to sport opportunities, leads to empowerment and emancipation of girls and women's oppression, which in turn can provide economic and social growth (Hayhurst, 2011). This trend has emerged from assertions that sport may serve as a transformative force for empowering women, challenging existing gender norms, whilst also promoting health, well-being, self-esteem, and leadership qualities (Hayhurst, 2014a; Saavedra, 2009; Szto, 2015). Additional outcomes attributed to the role of sport in achieving gender equity have included opportunities to resist gendered domestic labour, improve social networks, advance communication, and display greater autonomy (Hayhurst, 2011).

As with SFD more broadly, researchers have remained cautious about advocating for the potential for sport to contribute to such wide-ranging outcomes and highlight critical issues of the 'girling' effect. de Soysa and Zipp (2019) have asserted that "research on exactly how SFD plays a role in improving the lives for these girls and women is still lacking, with critical researchers calling for more in-depth and larger-scale studies" (p. 1790). To address this call, researchers need to consider the challenges associated with current concepts and approaches. While the 'girling' effect has been associated with positive outcomes, there are several criticisms of this concept. Firstly, in this way, SFD assumes girls and women have an innate deficit or weakness and when interjected with neoliberal ideological narratives, it situates poor often non-white people in need of help from the West (Zipp et al., 2019).

This inadvertently neglects the consideration of local contexts, where externally defined approaches to empowerment may not align with local cultures and norms. In one example exploring the danger that women's empowerment may pose in social contexts where this is not seen as the norm, a woman football player was gang raped and murdered for becoming too 'empowered' and not conforming to dominant gender norms in her community (Meier & Saavedra, 2009).

Further, it is questioned whether positioning girls and women as "shy, quiet, and lacking self-esteem" (Forde & Frisby, 2015 p. 882) may contribute to reinforcing harmful gender norms (Naughtright & Zipp, 2018; Oxford, 2017; Zipp et al., 2019). Alongside the assumption that empowerment results in girls and women becoming assertive vocal leaders with the ability to bring about positive changes (Forde & Frisby, 2015), this neglects deeper structural issues, whilst denying the necessity of systematic changes to achieve gender equity. Too much emphasis on fixing SFD participants neglects consideration of larger economic, social, and political structures and power dynamics that have and continue to generate inequalities (Zipp et al., 2023). Under neo-liberalism, gender initiatives in SFD adopt individualized approaches to behavior modification, whilst failing to acknowledge and address systematic and structural inequalities that contribute to women's oppression (de Soysa & Zipp, 2019; Forde & Frisby, 2015; Hayhurst, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

The examples provided highlight some of the tensions inherent in the use of SFD to promote gender equity. SFD must consider gender as a fundamental aspect of inequalities within development, rather than a strict binary construct with girls and women as targets (Zipp et al., 2019). Gender dimensions and gender SFD initiatives require an understanding of cultural, social, and political processes, power structures, and cultural norms (Collison et al., 2017).

In response, we have drawn upon the Capabilities Approach (Zipp et al., 2019) to better understand how initiatives are experienced by girls and women. Our research provides emphasis on how a SFD initiative is experienced and seeks to understand associated processes as opposed to outcomes of whether a program is effective or not. The Capabilities Approach can allow room for understanding how gender is experienced in SFD (Zipp et al., 2019). Considering the Capabilities Approach can provide a more balanced and realistic understanding of the role of sport for gender equity, by providing consideration to how SFD programs can contribute to meaningful choices and emancipation of girls and women to pursue and

accomplish goals (Svensson & Levine, 2017). For SFD to address these challenges, we recognize that girls and women do not experience programs in the same way. Researchers have challenged the construction of gender and heteronormativity of SFD initiatives, arguing that existing research demonstrates a lack of consideration for diverse gender and sexual identities within initiatives seeking to empower girls and women in low- to middle-income countries (Carney & Chawansky, 2014; Chawansky, 2011). Intersectionality of other social positions such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, race, nationality, disability, and religion are also important to consider when examining the outcomes of SFD programs. Intersectionality might work to constrain, repress, and disempower girls and women in development contexts (Shehu, 2015). To address these challenges, research methodologies that capture the complexity of individual experiences and more thoughtful engagement with research participants is necessary (Sherry et al., 2023). Although SFD case studies have provided a foundation to understand the role and potential for SFD programs for girls and women to effect change and challenge norms (Jeanes & Magee, 2013), in-depth studies are lacking (de Soysa and Zip, 2019). Our wide-scaled study, through the use of storytelling, intends to address the need to clarify if and how SFD programs contribute to gender equity and girls and women's development (Hancock et al., 2013). Gathering the perspectives of program recipients is crucial to understand these specific experiences.

SFD, Pacific Island nations, and Gender Equity

Whilst research investigating the perspectives of participants and providers on the contribution of SFD to promoting gender equity is limited, this is particularly the case in the Pacific context, despite outcomes related to gender equity being at the forefront of aid policy throughout the Pacific (Henne & Pape, 2018). The Pacific Island nations represent 23 small island states spread across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean (Schulenkorf & Siefken, 2018), excluding the larger nations of Australia and New Zealand. The region includes clusters of islands, nations, and peoples making up Micronesia (e.g., Guam, Kiribati), Polynesia (e.g. Tonga, Samoa), and Melanesia (e.g. Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu). Much of this region has a long history of colonization by European nations including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the United States of America. Mirroring the rise of SFD globally, sport has increasingly been viewed as a vehicle for the promotion of development outcomes throughout Pacific Island nations. Despite this growth, there has been limited academic attention investigating SFD in the Pacific (Sherry et al., 2017a). Except for SFD research in Papua New Guinea

(Seal & Sherry, 2018), Vanuatu (Siefken et al., 2013; Siefken et al., 2015), Fiji (Sugden et al., 2019), and Samoa (Khoo et al., 2014). In Fiji, Sugden et al. (2019) sought to map intergroup relations between rugby union and football (soccer) players according to their identity, ethnicity and chosen sport, finding sport to affect intergroup relations positively and negatively. In Samoa, researchers sought to investigate the use of sport as an alternative pathway to schooling for young Samoan men who were deemed to be 'at-risk' or 'academically unfit'. Findings indicated that whilst this approach served to teach skills that were useful to future employment opportunities, it also had the potential to de-skill young men in other areas, thereby reinforcing their marginalized social position (Kwauk, 2016). These findings demonstrate that SFD programs may lead to unintended outcomes. It is important to recognize that sport itself may not result directly in positive development outcomes; instead, management of programs and engagement with local communities to design and implement them are key factors (Schulenkorf, 2017). These studies are also focused on men, neglecting the influences of SFD on gender equity, girls, and women, not atypical in sport-focused research agendas (Sherry et al., 2013). Gender is complex within a social context but is further complicated in the field of SFD due to cultural and historical contexts that have constrained girls' and women's participation in sport (Zipp et al., 2019). Women and girls often face gender-based barriers and discrimination. In SFD research, it is important to shed light on these inequalities by examining programs inclusive of women, to inform policy, challenge practices that hinder women's participation and development, as well as to align with the Sustainable Development Goals to achieve more gender equity.

Chong et al. (2022) presented 15 SFD studies designed to achieve gender equality and/or women empowerment, and only one study investigated a Pacific region (Seal & Sherry, 2018). Seal and Sherry (2018) explored experiences of women involved in a cricket program with focus on empowerment. The authors found the cricket program to be positive for micro factors by improving wellbeing, self-efficacy, motivation, and for the development of social support and networks. Macro benefits reported included disruption to traditional gendered relations and challenging public perceptions. When considering these processes, one cannot assume that a sport program can transform complex hierarchical and gendered structures. SFD must recognize its potential to leverage opportunities for women, men, and organizations negotiating these structures. Paramount is the involvement of local communities' members and organizers to codesign program and the involvement of female staff to build capacity and operations (Seal & Sherry, 2018).

Similarly, research undertaken by Siefken and colleagues (2013, 2015), investigated the impact of a walking program on exercise and eating behaviors of women in Vanuatu. Whilst the authors noted a short-term change in participant behavior, it was unclear how these changes would be sustained in the longer-term, and whether this would have a demonstrable impact on the rates of non-communicable diseases.

Further, Henne and Pape (2018) noted that initiatives intended to empower women and promote better health outcomes were increasingly part of the policy apparatus of funding agencies such as the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Other research has highlighted the multi-layered challenges related to achieving gender outcomes through SFD programming (Sherry et al., 2017a). These authors highlighted that throughout their research, they experienced "negative attitudes toward women's participation in sport and physical activity, particularly in rural village locations where women are expected to engage in domestic tasks or focus on traditional arts and crafts for recreation, rather than pursue sport and physical activities" (p. 309). In another example, research conducted into the contribution of cricket to promote gender equity, asserted that whilst cricket had been successful in providing women the same opportunities to participate as men at all levels of the game, at the administrative level this equity was not reflected, which mirrored the dominant trend throughout Samoan society of an overrepresentation of men in employment (Khoo et al., 2014).

Participant Perspectives of Gender Equity in SFD

Whilst the contribution of sport to promoting gender equity has received concerted attention throughout the SFD literature, relatively few studies have directly captured the perspectives of program recipients (Mach, 2019). A review of existing literature highlights some examples exploring the perspectives of participants regarding the contribution of sport towards gender equity. Through an evaluation of a basketball program seeking to impact participant attitudes towards gender equity amongst Senegalese youth and coaches, findings demonstrated that after one year of involvement in the program, there was a significant positive shift in the attitudes of program participants, though no noticeable difference was seen in those of program delivery staff (Meyer & Roche, 2017). In addition, an examination of adolescent girls in St Lucia found that the perspectives of the young women involved in SFD initiatives supported broader claims within the research, particularly that sport possessed the ability to "challenge gender norms and support girls' empowerment, improve perceived self-efficacy and foster positive peer and mentor relationships"

(Zipp, 2017, p. 1928). In an exploration of gender identities and sexuality amongst women in Fiji, rugby was thought to provide a medium for performing alternative gender identities (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). This research found that the expression of masculine attributes through rugby provided a context through which women could challenge dominant discourses that positioned them as passive and inferior. Finally, through an exploration of the perspective of young women involved in an SFD initiative promoting women's empowerment in Delhi, India, researchers found that the "young women's narratives describe in detail how the program impacted positively on their own behavior and self-perception, and also affected how others viewed and treated them" (Kay, 2009, p. 1187-1188).

Whilst robust claims within the existing literature base suggest that SFD may contribute to promoting feelings of empowerment amongst program participants, the strongest critique is that this often fails to challenge structural barriers within the broader societal context. Through an exploration of a SFD program based in Columbia, Oxford and Spaaij (2019) captured participant perspectives, who expressed that despite local powers that constrained their lives, participation in sport allowed them to escape violence, challenge social norms that reinforced restrictive gender roles (such as the division of domestic labour), and challenged the stigma attached to women's participation in sport (an arena traditionally reserved for men). Even so, the authors treated these narratives cautiously, arguing that this represented a "false sense of agency" that highlighted the range of oppressions that impacted their lives (p. 68). In an exploration of football programming targeting young women in Zambia, researchers sought to examine whether football provided a vehicle for promoting gender equity and women's empowerment through an exploration of the experiences of program participants (Jeanes & Magee, 2013). Their research suggested that whilst young women involved in football programming experienced feelings of personal empowerment and an increased sense of control over their own lives, there was limited evidence of these impacts translating beyond the sporting context. The researchers also found that the young women involved did not necessarily believe that participation in football would lead to the programs' stated outcomes, which included "challenging gender stereotypes, reducing violence against women and increasing opportunities for themselves outside of the home" (p. 148).

Overall, the literature reviewed to date has demonstrated that whilst program participants and providers may perceive a range of positive outcomes derived from SFD initiatives that promote gender equity, the evidence of this impacting the broader power structures that contribute to the

the subjugation of women largely remain unchallenged. Whilst some studies have sought to examine SFD and gender equity initiatives in the Pacific more broadly, there is a significant shortage of research examining the local perspectives of program participants towards the achievement of these outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

Our research focuses upon the experiences of participants engaged in SFD initiatives that are designed and implemented by Australian non-profit NSOs in partnership with over 30 regional sport organizations and NGOs across the Pacific (Team Up, 2022). Specifically, SFD initiatives that were administratively coordinated by 'Team Up' and situated across nine Pacific nations: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu. Team Up (formerly known as the Australian Sports Partnership Program) is an Australian Government program which supports Pacific SFD initiatives in their goal of bringing people together, fostering social inclusion and creating opportunities, particularly for women and people with disabilities (Team Up, 2022). Multiple inter-organizational partnerships are involved in the design and delivery of these SFD initiatives, with Australian and New Zealand-based national sport organizations (NSOs) employing staff to manage these programs and deliver them in partnership with Pacific NSOs and local developmental organizations (Raw et al., 2021). Through examining this research context, we aim to explore participant perspectives on initiatives throughout Pacific Island nations, with a focus upon the contribution of SFD towards achieving gender equity.

For the purpose of this paper, gender equity is focused on women and girls. The understanding of gender in many Pacific Island contexts is complex for several reasons. In many Pacific Island nations, there is a cultural context of a third gender (e.g. *fafafine* in Samoa), and those people would not identify as transgender or non-binary in a Western understanding of gender. As such, for SFD program delivery and related research, work that focuses on women and girls in this setting may and does often include people outside of the traditional gender binary. To further complicate this issue, many of these nations are also very religious and/or conservative, therefore although socio-culturally people of a third gender may exist and be accepted in their communities, there would be no formal record of gender differences. As such, when we refer to women and girls, it should be understood that there may be gender differences within the participant cohort but would not be identified as such in the data collected.

Research Team Positionality

Two members of the research team had an established relationship via the Team Up program as research and evaluation partners for several Pacific Island sport programs delivered under the auspice of the Team Up program (e.g., Raw et al., 2021; Sherry et al., 2017a; 2017b). Specifically, Raw and Sherry, had been involved in monitoring and evaluation efforts across multiple projects and Pacific locations since 2015. As such, they both had prior experience working with local staff, SFD initiatives, organizations; and as a result, were mindful of government funding processes and reporting requirements, cultural practices and sensitivities (particularly regarding gender norms), and broader contextual factors such as international relations. Despite this experience, however, this project was the first overarching piece of work undertaken as a research team with the Team Up program overall. Both primary team members were involved in the project concept and design, with one author working with the Team Up program to collate and prepare the data, and the other undertaking the first round of data analysis. All authors engaged in discussions around the findings of the analysis and worked together in the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Collection

Qualitative data from Team Up's monitoring and evaluation efforts of SFD programs over a six-year period (2015-2021) functioned as the data set for this research. Local program leaders and staff who were involved in the implementation and delivery of programs also oversaw data collection with program beneficiaries via a 'most significant change' story-based evaluative method (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005). Also known as 'stories of change', this method has been adopted by many international development programs as a flexible and simple tool that can be implemented by local stakeholders (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005). In this instance, stories of change functioned as a reporting requirement of the funded programs (Sherry et al., 2017b). This evaluative approach was developed and implemented due to its flexible nature and its capacity to empirically capture the voices and perspectives of children, many of which are primary school aged. All program leaders and staff had appropriate child protection compliance and training. The method used has been highlighted as particularly appropriate for the Pacific context, in that local staff and stakeholders were involved in data collection, and doing so, this method aligns well with local community values and cultural traditions around storytelling for the purposes of knowledge sharing and education (Sherry et al., 2017b). Such collaborative approaches to evaluating programs have been encouraged

by scholars, as they can help bridge different works that researchers and local stakeholders tend to inhabit and can assist with navigating potential socio-cultural boundaries (Spaaij & Schaillée, 2022).

In terms of the implementation of this method, local capacity and access to technology varied greatly, with some program staff capturing stories of change via video recordings on their phones or iPads (which were then transcribed verbatim), others enabling program beneficiaries to type directly into Microsoft Word documents on a computer, or in some instances, responses were handwritten onto paper and then photographed. The questions asked of participants were also wide-ranging, but in essence all centered around program beneficiaries sharing their story of participation in programs. This exercise was built into the final program delivery day as a reflective exercise. The exact prompts to capture the stories were adapted organically by the in-country staff who collected these, depending on who they were talking. For instance, one program leader asked multiple questions, including "When did you first become involved with [sport location]?", "Why or how did you get involved?", "What has changed for you and / or your family, community, team, organization, since you became involved? Please tell me about the changes in your situation (life) 'before' you became involved and your situation (life) 'now'.", and "Of all changes you have told me, what do you think was the most important change? Why was this change important?". Alternatively, other program staff simply asked participants to tell them a story about their time in the SFD program. All responses were either completed in English or were completed in local languages and then translated into English by local staff before being provided to Team Up. In total, between 2015 and 2021, Team Up received 466 stories of change from fourteen NSOs, which implemented SFD programs across the nine aforementioned nations using the following sports: athletics, Australian rules football, badminton, basketball, cricket, gymnastics, hockey, netball, rugby league, rugby union, soccer, swimming, table tennis, and volleyball. After gaining university ethics approval (BLINDED UNIVERSITY + ethics approval number), Team Up provided this data set to the research team before secondary qualitative data analysis methods were implemented.

Data Analysis

Drawing upon suggested methods for qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2016) and secondary analysis of stories of change data (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005), data were interpreted and sorted into common themes. Davies and Dart (2005) explained that in the

context of stories of change "Secondary analysis involves the examination, classification and analysis of the content (or themes) across a set of SC [significant change] stories… [secondary analysis] is generally done in a less participatory way, often by the person in charge of monitoring and evaluation, or a specialist" (p. 39). However, in some instances, secondary analysis can occur in a more participatory manner, whereby program stakeholders help to sense check analysis procedures and thematic codes (Davies & Dart, 2005). The latter approach was deemed as the most appropriate for our research, in that two members of the research team are academics with expertise in monitoring and evaluation, and the third member being a program stakeholder. Hence, we had one member of the research team undertake the bulk of the following data analysis procedures, whilst also sense checking procedures with the other two members along the way. As many of the respondents were children and/or English as a second language speakers, the researchers ensured that they represented the data as clearly as possible, whilst considering the socio-cultural context of the data being collected.

As suggested by Davies and Dart (2005), we undertook thematic analysis of the data set and searched all stories for different kinds of change and programmatic impacts, both intended and unintended. The first step in the process was to form an overarching database within qualitative analysis software (Saldaña, 2016), NVivo 12. Following this, we undertook the first cycle of data analysis, where data were initially generally coded which led to the development of multiple recurrent themes (Saldaña, 2016), with attention to capabilities and gender experiences. Multiple data analysis cycles then followed this, with the development of common codes patterns (Saldaña, 2016). Afterward, we worked together as a research team to identify common themes and narratives, from which we interpreted research findings, which forms the basis of this paper (Saldaña, 2016). In doing so, we worked together via self-reflexive methods, examining codes and themes collectively and in an in-depth manner to piece together narratives, and recognizing our thought processes and biases along the way (Tracy, 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes and data illustrate stories told by the beneficiaries regarding their experiences and perspective of initiatives throughout the Pacific Island nations, in relation to gender equity. As the focus of the question prompt for the story was individually focused, the majority of responses reflect individual experiences and functioning. We present three main themes that reflect the capabilities and functions of participating in a SFD program:

'Confidence, Self-Belief, and Achieving Goals'; 'Challenging Gender Norms'; 'Employment Pathways, Skills, Networks, and Agency'. The first theme highlights the individual capabilities achieved through participation, which provided foundations for functional outcomes and influences on gender norms and employment.

Confidence, Self-Belief, and Achieving Goals

Participants highlighted how their engagement in SFD had assisted in developing confidence in themselves, a sense of achievement and self-belief: "[Development Officer] was looking for women to fill the team, and sent me down to the foreshore to start training… I never thought I would be capable of making the team...For the first time in my life, when I played AFL, I challenged myself to step outside my comfort zone and challenge myself to a different style of training; to train to be one of the best and be part of a team… It's an honor" (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji). Similarly, to research conducted by Kay (2009), these accounts highlight how SFD programs can positively impact participant behaviors and self-perception.

One participant explained how participating in an all-abilities programs enhanced her confidence in her physical abilities and improved her willingness to try new things: "The game became more than just a game it became the very vehicle of developmental changes inside of my physicality, mentality, and emotions. I discovered new physical abilities, and it gave me a boost of confidence in my personal independence. I was taken out of my isolation to meet new people, and this inspired and motivated me to try out new things and live life" (Woman Program Participant, Table Tennis, Fiji). A sense of self awareness, belief and support in these environments helped to motivate participants to work towards their goals: "My teammates motivate me, and I know that I can take another step to train hard, so I can wear the white jumper and represent my country. I believe that if you get to believe in yourself and work hard then you can definitely achieve anything" (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji). Similarly, another participant described how their self-belief had developed as they progressed from being a participant in programs to a coach: "Since become involved my interest in water sports has grown and I feel like I have a purpose everyday...I never thought that I would become a swimming and volleyball teacher and it has helped me achieve things I thought I never would be able to. I need to be a good example to others all the time as I am in a position where people look up to me and respect me" (Woman Coach, Swimming and Volleyball, Vanuatu). Scholars have pointed to the importance of participants' agency and self-awareness of personal development when working towards

empowerment and gender equity in SFD (Samie et al., 2015). In this context, confidence and self-belief appeared to be a relatively common but important outcome for many participants, laying the foundation for broader community outcomes, such as challenging gender norms, as we discuss in the next section.

Challenging Gender Norms

In line with SFD research conducted in St Lucia (Zipp, 2017), our research findings demonstrated how sport can help to challenge gender norms. For instance, one participant explained how her engagement in SFD programming helped to challenge the traditional notions of domestic labor: "The most important change for me is that I have been able to continue my sport, even after having my baby. Traditionally in our culture, once children came along the mother is expected to give up any sporting involvement and stay at home. The success of our volleyball women has helped change the expectations and this has allowed me with the support of my family to still be actively engaged" (Woman Program Participant, Volleyball, Vanuatu). Research has highlighted how sport can help to work towards gender equity by resisting typical gendered notions tied to domestic labour and helping participants in displaying greater autonomy (Hayhurst, 2011). Similarly, Oxford and Spaaij (2019) demonstrated how sport enabled participants to challenge social norms, like women's participation in sport, and gender roles, like the division of domestic labor. However, the authors were cautious and noted that there were a range of oppressive socio-cultural norms that still impacted participants. In fact, multiple researchers have highlighted how SFD initiatives tend to reinforce neo-liberal and individualized approaches within programming, whilst failing to address the broader structural and socio-cultural barriers that continue to oppress women (de Soysa & Zipp, 2019; Forde & Frisby, 2015; Hayhurst, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

Participants often had to overcome several external obstacles within their community so that they could play sport. Family support was highlighted as one such barrier, with participants explaining its importance when engaging in SFD initiatives. One participant described how initiatives provided a safe space in which women could play sport with the support of their family, and in which men could also play traditionally feminine sports: "I think the social order of responsibilities of women and men have slightly changed right now … what I have seen in netball, I've seen families come in, the father plays with men's team, then you've got the mother playing … and then you've got the kids somewhere enjoying themselves, and helping out. That's what is becoming very common in the netball courts.

And it's a change, and it's a positive change that I think is good for netball, that we've got men involved, not just the boys in the school, but we've got men who are involved, generally involved in netball. Their interest in netball has grown and they would like to participate even more. So, in terms gender roles, I think it has changed slightly and change we can see is through netball, there are more participating now, the men … sometimes you'll find the fathers just bringing their daughters and then they play prior to their daughters …" (Woman Development Officer and Coach, Netball, Samoa). Likewise, family support was also considered important if participants were women and playing a sport that was traditionally masculine: "My family didn't support me initially, as AFL was seen as a male dominant sport, and it's not lady-like, but I saw it as an opportunity to train as hard as the men, and to not see gender barriers that exist in sporting culture. AFL provided the opportunity to develop my confidence and sporting ability to be as strong and independent as the men. To make my own decisions in society as a woman. My voice can be heard as much as the men" (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji).

Scholars have pointed to the importance of challenging gender and heteronormativity in SFD, particularly when considering initiatives that target women in the low- to middle-income countries (Carney & Chawansky, 2014; Chawanksy, 2011). Research into the participation of women in sport in Fiji demonstrated how playing rugby enabled women participants to contest gendered notions that often position them as inferior or submissive (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). Conversely, scholars have questioned the integration of women into masculine sporting norms, in that it implies women can only be empowered if they express masculine traits and conform to heteronormative ideals, and thereby inadvertently reinforce existing boundaries associated with sport (Zipp & Nauright, 2018). Additionally, this approach risks positioning women and girls as lacking self-esteem (Forde & Frisby, 2015), or struggling under the patriarchy, and implies that they can only become empowered by pursuing sport or fitness and transforming themselves into assertive leaders (Henne & Pape, 2018). Furthermore, by interpreting gender equity in this manner, and implementing programs in accordance with funding requirements, we continue to reinforce existing Australian policy discourses in the Pacific context (see Henne & Pape, 2018). That is, we continue to largely interpret gender equity through the lens of privileged Australian policy makers, rather than through the lens of the most important stakeholder group in SFD, program beneficiaries, or in this case, local women. Consequently, we, as researchers and policy makers must prioritize the involvement of local women in the design and

implementation of these policies and programs. Team Up has demonstrated progress in this space over recent years, with efforts made to establish a local field office in Fiji that employs local staff to support and collaborate with regional, sub- regional and national stakeholders (Team Up, 2021). Further, Team Up encourages local sporting organizations and stakeholders to employ local staff to implement and evaluate programs, many of whom were originally program beneficiaries themselves. We explore participants' experiences in association with this in the following section.

Employment Pathways, Skills, Networks, and Agency

In addition to challenging gender norms, there were multiple programs that emphasized pathways for participants and the employment of local staff: "I was given a job opportunity from Cook Islands Football and became the first female project manager for Just Play in the Pacific" (Woman Program Manager, Soccer, Cook Islands). Alongside employment, professional development opportunities helped to improve local capacity, skills and had a flow-on effect upon programming and pathways: "I had the opportunity to go and represent Samoa in a coaching program that the Oceania Federation organized...So when I got back with the input from the facilitators of the workshop, I was able to design a framework, adapted from the New Zealand pathway, where you identify the pathway of a coach...I think this training has really opened up our eyes in saying, okay, put us on the right pathway, we can go there and of course, we can get there" (Woman Development Officer, Netball, Samoa). SFD scholars have consistently pointed to the importance of local capacity building in these contexts (Hayhurst, 2014a; Henne & Paper, 2018; Khoo, et al., 2014) because women's representation within the administrative level of sport is an important step in fostering gender equity within Pacific contexts that typically have an overrepresentation of men in employment (Khoo, et al., 2014). In addition, research into SFD for women in the Pacific highlighted how programs were more stable if they relied upon the capacity and knowledge of local women (Henne & Pape, 2018). Overall, fostering self-belief and leadership skills among participants is not only important in promoting gender equity, but these impacts have the potential to ripple beyond the individual level and help to improve the sustainability of organizations via enhanced funding prospects and local employability (Hayhurst, 2014a).

In addition to employment and vocational skills, participants described how they progressed from being a participant in programs themselves, to then becoming employed and involved in implementing programs, and thereby becoming a role model to other participants: "I

never thought that I would become a swimming and water polo teacher and it has helped me achieve things I thought I never would be able to. I need to be a good example to others all the time as I am in a position where people look up to me and respect me" (Woman Coach, Swimming, Vanuatu). Program participants also reflected this, highlighting how their engagement in sport helped them to meet new people and engage with role models that they could look up to: "The AFL Fiji Development Coordinator has always been my role model…if the Development Coordinator can balance her studies, work and training than so can I" (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji). These improvements in peer and mentor relationships (Zipp, 2017), as well as overall social networks are important steppingstones when working towards gender equity (Hayhurst, 2011).

In addition to social networks, those involved in the implementation of programs described how it enhanced their personal development and gave them a sense of agency in working towards gender equity in their community: "I think for me personally this course has helped me grow as a player, a coach and as a woman who is able to stand up and promote gender equality and fight injustices done to women and children..." (Woman Coach, Rugby Union, Fiji). For some, this sense of agency was vital in improving their own personal circumstances. One local development officer highlighted one instance where a fellow development officer had been through personal difficulties and became homeless after her partner removed her from her children and the family home:

behind the humor and bubbly personality lies a life story that would be considered a nightmare to a lot of people. Before she became involved with [cricket] she was not sure where her life was heading. She was living with her partner and children at her village until one day she found herself kicked out of the family and without a place to go…her hardship went beyond anything you can imagine. It was during those difficult times that she discovered the [sport] and according to her, making the decision to join was life changing. (Woman Development Officer 1, Cricket, Vanuatu)

This individual was interviewed by local staff and described how her employment in SFD had helped her overcome these challenges:

Joining as the island cricket ambassador is a blessing for me. It provided me with a job and now that I have a full-time job at the VCA I am able to get back on my feet. Having a full-time job is helping me financially to start over again and create a new home for myself. (Woman Development Officer 2, Cricket, Vanuatu)

Economic empowerment has been viewed as a key component in fostering gender equity and combating cycles of domestic violence (Hayhurst, 2014a). Research into SFD in Columbia demonstrated how sport can help women to challenge restrictive gender norms and flee domestic violence (Oxford & Spaaij, 2019). If designed appropriately, programs can help participants and staff to develop confidence and skills that can assist in preventing gender-based violence (Hayhurst, 2014a, 2014b). However, this can be a dangerous proposition in some contexts, in that women can risk their personal safety if they are considered to be too empowered or assertive (Meier & Saavedra, 2009). Further, as noted earlier, scholars have suggested that these programs often also struggle to challenge the broader societal barriers that underpin many of these issues (Hayhurst, et al.,, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019).

Consequently, SFD managers, policy makers and researchers must continue to work with local community stakeholders, particularly women, to understand these socio-cultural and systematic barriers and address them in a culturally appropriate way. However, we must note that programming that empowers women via the use of sport has been unwelcome in some contexts, particularly in rural locations or male-dominated local sporting organizations (Khoo et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2017a). Further, realistic expectations need to be placed upon SFD and what they can achieve. That is, how far can the SFD ripple effect go (see Sugden, 2014), if it is not welcome locally? This is not to suggest that such programming should not occur, rather, we must continue to pose questions around culturally appropriate and co-designed programs, safe and welcoming environments, and most importantly, focus upon the needs and desires of local women and girls. These questions are particularly pertinent to those SFD initiatives targeting women in low- to middle-countries, but also funded, designed and or implemented by those in high income contexts.

CONCLUSION

Practical and Theoretical Implications

From a practical perspective, our research demonstrated the importance of confidence and self-belief as individual oriented outcomes in women focused SFD. While arguably self-evident, these outcomes lay the foundation for broader, structural outcomes, such as challenging gender norms and employment. With regard to challenging gender norms, our findings indicated the value of providing safe spaces for women to play traditionally masculine sports, like football or rugby, as well as facilitating program environments in which men could play traditionally feminine sports, like netball. While we note that scholars have questioned

whether these approaches reinforce or challenge gender norms and heteronormative ideals (Zipp & Nauright, 2018), we also point to the fact that local participants believed that they benefitted, and gender norms were challenged by participating in SFD designed and implemented in this manner. Although different programs identified different mechanisms of change (e.g. in school vs. community), the common characteristic across all programs was the co-design with community and local program managers and delivery staff. The communities were engaged from the outset of designing and initiating the programs, which led to the program successes in their various forms across the delivery modes and locations. To that end, SFD policy makers and researchers should implement co-design programs and continue to prioritize the voices and needs of local women in low- to middle-income countries. In doing so, the cultural appropriateness of certain programs and sports in some locations should be discussed with local stakeholders. These considerations are particularly important when programming is funded by and or overseen by organizations or governments based in high-income contexts. Specifically, the needs of local women should be prioritized before the needs of international funders. This may occur through more flexible funding mechanisms and trust-based philanthropy. While this might be idealistic given the nature of international SFD, if considered appropriately, in partnership with local staff designing and implementing programs, they will be better placed to deliver upon gender outcomes such as the ones described in this paper.

Theoretically, while there has been an increase in research into SFD programming focused on women and girls, there have only been a small number of studies that have specifically explored sport's potential to foster gender equity outcomes in the Pacific (Khoo et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2017a). Not only does our research help address this, but it also assists in addressing calls for a greater focus upon the voices of local program beneficiaries in low- to middle-income contexts (Khoo et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2017a; 2017b). Specifically, we have done so by drawing upon secondary data provided by Team Up and collected locally by staff and stakeholders of programs. Given scholars have questioned the enduring nature of SFD impacts (Schulenkorf et al., 2022; Siefken et al., 2015), this broad data set provides empirical evidence of programming conducted over a six-year period and demonstrates gender equity outcomes over the course of this time. Methodologically, this is a large set of participant-focused and locally collected data, an important feat given the ongoing calls for more local capacity in the delivery and administration of international SFD (Hayhurst, 2014a; Henne & Paper, 2018; Khoo, et al., 2014). In doing so,

these data collection methods have arguably reduced the visible presence of international academic researchers. This is significant in this context when considering the impacts of post-colonialism and associated issues of power and control.

Limitations and Future Directions

The size and locally driven nature of the data set we explored in this paper is fundamentally a strength of this research; however, it also posed difficulties as the quality of data varied greatly depending upon local capacity, technological access, and language barriers. An additional limitation is the possibility of self-selection bias in the sample of those participants willing to tell their story, as it may be those who are most engaged and most happy with the programs and outcomes who are prepared to have their stories recorded. Further, this large data set posed issues regarding the research team being able to untangle the data set and demonstrate clear touch points and participant journeys across the six-year period. While some positivist researchers may argue this is not methodologically sound in an academic sense, as SFD researchers we posit that the benefits of locally driven data collection in international contexts outweigh the drawbacks or challenges that were faced. That is, these methods offer a culturally safe platform for program beneficiaries and staff and can help to leverage local voices and uncover insights that might otherwise have gone unseen. Further, building upon our experiences, we acknowledge the practical reality of researching in SFD internationally can be challenging, but would suggest that future research efforts work to collect information on the demographic make-up of participants and look for innovative solutions that help to map out participants' touch points in SFD over time. In addition, we suggest that scholars work to involve Indigenous and or Global South researchers in their projects moving forward, both in terms of inclusion within research teams and within reviews of literature where possible. Overall, we would encourage future research that builds upon methods of participant focused and driven monitoring and evaluation methods, as they help to adopt contextually and culturally appropriate data collection practices and help to move towards improvements in post-colonialism.

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Original Research

Value of Sport for Development and Peace initiative for citizens: An examination using the Contingent Valuation Method

Hanae Endo[1] and Narumi Fujioka[2]

[1]Doshisha University, Japan
[2]Hosei University, Japan

Corresponding author email: hendo@mail.doshisha.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

Research surrounding Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) has examined the fund procurement for supporting sustainable activities. Even as importance is placed on sustainable SDP operation and the acquisition of financial resources for achieving the goals of a project, there is an emerging trend towards funding from the general public, who are not direct recipients of the SDP. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the evaluation of SDP projects from the perspective of citizens. We decided to apply Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) in this study, which enables evaluation including non-utilization values. The project subjected to a value estimation using CVM was a long-term project implemented in the city of Maebashi, Gunma Prefecture, which accepted athletes from South Sudan. The mean willingness to pay (WTP) with a certain degree of validity was calculated to be JPY 2,485, which we used to calculate the aggregate WTP for the study population (JPY [Japanese yen] 490 million). The fact that the funds collected for the implementation of this program was approximately 20 million yen per year suggests the possibility that more than ten times that amount in socio-psychological benefit was experienced by the citizens of the municipality.

Introduction

Since 2000, the use of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) has been increasing globally, attracting widespread academic attention. Research surrounding SDP has examined not only the effectiveness of sports activities at locations where it is implemented, but also fund procurement (funding) for supporting sustainable activities

(Svensson et al., 2017). Clutterbuck and Doherty (2019) identified the following factors related to the operational success of SDP organizations: success in procuring funds, obtaining subsidies, increased clarification of financial responsibilities, and sustainability of funding. Revenue generation, funding, fiscal management, and the creation of sustainable funding models have also been identified as important factors (Svensson et al., 2017). While it is considered important to obtain financial resources for the sustainable operation or achievement of the SDP, there have been cases of fundraising from the general public, who are not direct recipients of the SDP.

One of the examples is a project known as Jake's Farewell Gift to His School, where a nine-year-old student, who was blind due to a genetic condition, raised money by running a full marathon through the gofundme.com platform. The funds raised through this effort totaled US$ 10,100, which were used to provide opportunities to other deaf or blind children to participate in sports. On the youcaring.com platform in 2015, a group raised US$ 10,660 for an activity called Free to Run in New Zealand. They used the money to fund an activity that provided opportunities to adolescent girls and young women to advance their leadership and wellness through running in conflict areas.

While crowdfunding and other forms of support by people who do not directly participate in the activities are being explored for the SDP, no verification of the social value gained through the support of SDP has been conducted. In particular, the characteristic features of international cooperation through sports in Japan include the fact that the public sector (e.g., government development assistance) plays a leading role and that volunteers help in its

Keywords: Sport for Development and Peace/ Contingent Valuation Method/ International Cooperation/ Social Value

implementation (Suzuki & Okada, 2015). Although Sports Global Strategy by Japan Sports Agency describes multiple benefits that the Japanese public can enjoy, such as increasing Japan's international presence and strengthening international relations (Japan Sports Agency, 2018), there is no empirical discussion on the appropriateness of public funding for SDP in practice. The concept of using the social value of projects to ensure accountability for public projects, which rely on taxpayer input, is not limited solely to SDP initiatives. It extends to the organization of mega-sport events and the formulation of elite sports policies (Bakhsh et al., 2023). Therefore, exploring the social value of SDP projects from the perspective of citizens, who are not direct recipients of SDP, will provide a basis for discussing the justification for investing public funds and new strategies for obtaining funds. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the evaluation of SDP projects from the perspective of citizens, who are not direct recipients of the SDP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Methodology for Evaluating the Social Value Brought by Sports

Social value is defined as the exchange between the economic investment in a project and the social impact it generates, or alternatively, as the disparity between social impact and economic investment (Bakhsh et al., 2023). Studies have been conducted to quantitatively evaluate the social value of sports, such as the significance of holding sporting events, the existence value of professional sports clubs, and the appropriateness of public funding for elite sports (Wicker et al., 2012). Unlike the case of valuing the benefits that accompany direct consumer use, the social value of sports has been considered difficult to measure because of its character as a non-market good for which no market exists to trade the value.

Bakhsh et al. (2023) also observed that research on social value in the field of sports management frequently dissects social mechanisms and economic mechanisms independently. This approach results in a fragmented understanding that fails to capture the complete social value derived from the project under examination. To accurately calculate the social value of a project, it is essential to measure it using the same unit of analysis as the economic investment and to validate both the economic and social mechanisms through this process. To solve these problems, cost-benefit analysis, which uses the concept of "benefit" to evaluate social value by converting the effect of cost input on a certain good or service into money as consumer surplus or utility, has come into use (Bakhsh et al., 2023).

According to Hidano (1999), social benefits in cost-benefit analysis are defined as the utility to members of society brought about by government services. Various types of cost-benefit analysis have been utilized to the present date, depending on the type of beneficiary and the type of sport project to be measured (Orlowski & Wicker, 2019).

There are two major types of cost-benefit analysis: the revealed preference method is a method of evaluation based on data concerning people's economic behavior, and the stated preference is a method of directly asking people about the value of an object (Hidano, 1999). The revealed preference method is a method of evaluation based on data on people's economic behavior, while the stated preference is a method of directly asking people about the value of an object.

Typical examples of revealed preference methods include the travel cost method (TCM), the Hedonic pricing (HP) and the opportunity cost approach (OCA).

The TCM can be categorized into two types: one that assesses the value of visiting a destination indirectly by examining the relationship between the cost of travel to the destination and the number of visits, and another that estimates value by considering the presumed intention of the user to visit the destination. The HP approach operates on the principle that the price of a commodity (e.g., land) is influenced by its function and characteristics. However, these methods have limitations as they presuppose that the subject must be deemed "worth visiting" or linked to a "specific location."

The OCA is a method used to compare individual expenditures, such as travel expenses or the cost of time, with the private and public benefits acquired (consumer surplus), by converting them into monetary value. However, since the focus is primarily on costs such as time and money associated with the targeted projects, a drawback arises: not all social benefits can be fully captured (Orlowski & Wicker, 2019).

Therefore, output-oriented methods such as the Contingent valuation method (CVM), a beneficiary-focused social benefit approach (Salamon et al., 2011), are needed. The CVM is one of examples of the stated preference. The CVM is used to evaluate non-market goods and services and cost-benefit analyses and policy assessments, such as environmental impact analyses (Hidano, 1999). The CVM presents to consumers a virtual market of items that does not exist in conventional markets, such as urban parks and theaters. Specifically, the CVM presents respondents with virtual scenarios in which the object of the assessment exists and does not exist, asks them the maximum amount

of money they would be willing to pay to ensure that an item (goods or services) does not disappear from the market (i.e., willingness to pay, or WTP), and then calculates its monetary value. In addition to items that individuals use directly (e.g., libraries, parks), the CVM also allows evaluation of things that have significance owing to their existence alone, such as the natural environment, scenery (e.g., cityscapes), and historical and archaeological sites. The Reverse CVM, although based on the same principle as the CVM, is characterized by the fact that the goods and services to be evaluated are past events including sporting events (Bakhsh et al., 2022). Although it is difficult to apply in this study because applying this method to ongoing or future SDP projects presents challenges, it is a useful method for evaluation after the project is complete.

Application of CVM in the Field of Sports Management

The CVM has also been used in the field of sports management and to investigate various sports projects in the public and private sectors, including professional sports teams, natural sports parks, lifelong sports, attracting and organizing mega-sports events, and elite sports success (Orlowski & Wicker, 2019).

A study of elite sports success focused on the fact that, in the 2012 London Olympics, the mean WTP for the German national team placed first in the number of medals won was € 6.31 per person (Wicker et al., 2012) and on the Canadian public found that the annual WTP for the increased budget for an elite sports education program was $ 38.19 per person prior to the Olympics and $ 89.70 per person after the Olympics (Humphreys et al., 2018). According to Orlowski & Wicker (2019), the CVM accounts for about one-third of the cost-benefit analysis used in the sport management domain, and the method has academic implications in terms of its application The revealed preference method is limited to actual consumer decisions, whereas the CVM is more flexible because scenarios can be designed to fit more diverse policy changes (Owen, 2006).

Therefore, we decided to apply CVM in this study, which is easy to apply even when the context of SDP is different from that of conventional sports management research, and which enables evaluation including non-utilization values. We aimed to utilize CVM to determine a monetary estimate of the value to the public of SDP initiatives in Japan.

CVM-related issues in research that require re-evaluation are the consistency of the sample and study population (Carson, 2000). These select studies have utilized random sampling. However, the need to adjust WTP through a comparison of the study population and limited studies on

the distribution of individual attributes have led to cases in which WTP estimates have been inaccurate. In addition, value may not be accurately estimated in cases where WTP is estimated without eliminating from the analytical sample resistant responses, or responses indicating unwillingness to pay for reasons other than economic ones, such as cases in which the respondent is unconvinced of the proposed hypothetical scenario or the payment method. Additionally, the validity of the monetary value calculated needs to be verified. Long-term studies may exhibit time selection bias within samples. In consideration of these potential pitfalls, we included the following procedures in our survey analysis: (1) a short study period that could minimize time selection bias in the sample; (2) appropriate elimination procedures for resistant responses within the recovered sample; (3) determination based on government statistics of any discrepancies between the sex, age, education, and other basic attributes in the population and the sample; (4) in cases of discrepancy, calculation of WTP after determining whether the attributes affect WTP; and (5) verification of the validity of WTP.

Hypothesis to Examine the Validity of the Calculated WTP

To verify the validity of the WTP indicated above, we decided to use variables that have been pointed out in existing studies; in previous studies on sports management using CVM, various variables have been put in to verify the validity of the calculated WTP (Funahashi & Mano, 2015).

In general, public WTP for a given subject is related to a variety of indicators, including experience using the asset or service, attitude, interest, and socio-economic characteristics of the respondent. Evaluating how consistent a study's results are to theoretical expectations is based on the expectations, it is an important approach for the purpose of judging theoretical validity (Carson, 2000). If it is found that an important variable is not significant, or that the specified values have been inexplicably affected, then the theoretical validity of the results would be questionable. For this reason, we identified the following items related to attitude and interest for the purpose of verifying the validity of WTP based on previous studies.

First, it has been noted that the perceived social and personal benefits of a policy are significantly related to WTP (Funahashi & Mano, 2015). Previous CVM studies on elite sport success have found that the social benefit of believing that it is important for a nation for its athletes to perform on the international stage (Wicker et al., 2012) or for the prestige of the nation (Humphreys et al., 2018) Cognitions have been reported to be associated with valuing

elite sport success (Wicker et al., 2012). Similarly, feeling that improving international competitiveness is important to oneself or feeling happy and proud due to elite sports success (Wicker et al., 2012), were found to be explanatory factors for WTP. WTP is a factor that is known to be an explanatory factor for WTP.

Also, the benefits of the enjoyment derived from the success of international cooperation through sports can be expected to have a positive effect on WTP. A survey of public attitudes toward international cooperation projects showed that it was evaluated from the dual perspectives of benefit to the recipient country/region and the donor country (Oyama, 2021).

It can also be assumed that, in conjunction with the perception of benefit provided by the project, the perception towards the direct recipients participating in the SDP project (i.e., the project's main actors) is related to WTP. As in studies on elite sports success and sporting events, this can be attributed to the fact that, since it is possible to consider that the project is for a small number of direct recipients receiving support and that some portion of public support has been provided to them through projects and the like, the benefit to the respondents may change based on their perception of recipients' performance, behavior, and conduct (Wicker et al., 2012).

Therefore, in this survey, four concepts were established: perceived personal benefits to the project, perceived social benefits to the donor, perceived social benefits to the recipient, and perception towards the direct recipients receiving support. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H_1: The perception of personal benefit will directly influence WTP.
H_2: The perception of social benefits to the recipient will directly influence WTP.
H_3: The perception of social benefits to the community will directly influence WTP.
H_4: The perception of social benefits to the community will directly influence WTP.

WTP changes in response to concerns about the risk to assets. Previous research has also found that respondents who do not have a sense of the potential risks to the development of sports such as doping, game-fixing, and overemphasis on a "victory is everything" attitude have increased WTP (Funahashi & Mano, 2015).

In addition, public support for municipality-led projects has been found to have a positive correlation to reliability in the municipality's ability to conduct the project (Levi & Stoker,

2000) and, regarding socio-economic variables, to the household income of the respondent (e.g., Wicker et al., 2012). To summarize, we can organize the hypotheses as follows:

H_5: Risk perception will directly influence WTP.
H_6: Confidence in the municipality will directly influence WTP.
H_7: Household income will directly influence WTP.

In general, there are no prior theoretical expectations related to other demographic variables, and normally there are no prior theoretical expectations regarding other demographic variables such as sex and age in surveys. The validity of the estimated WTP was verified using the above variables.

METHODS

Selection of the Project to be Surveyed

The program subjected to a value estimation using CVM was a long-term project implemented in Maebashi City, Gunma Prefecture, which accepted athletes from South Sudan planning to participate in the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. This project began in July 2018 when a representative from the Japan International Cooperation Agency visited Maebashi to discuss the prospect of the city accepting athletes and others from South Sudan, in the context of the unstable domestic conditions in South Sudan and their impact on the training environment of athletes who wanted to participate in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Maebashi decided to undertake the "Peace Promotion through Sports" effort. In November 2018, Maebashi representatives held discussions with the President and General Secretary of the South Sudan Olympic Committee. This marked the beginning of formal interactions with South Sudan and specific discussions for providing its athletes with a long-term camp in Maebashi. The project aimed to provide indirect support for South Sudanese athletes who visited Maebashi to engage in activities as their country's role models and promote peace education among Maebashi citizens through exchange and interaction with South Sudanese athletes. Although the project had the start of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as a built-in time limit, decision-makers later announced that the project would continue until the 2024 Paris Olympics. In addition to municipal taxes, a part of the budget for the project was provided by crowdfunding by Maebashi, which covered the annual project cost of approximately ¥20 million.

Procedure for Establishing the Hypothetical Scenario used in CVM

The details of the evaluation, types of goods and services, and study duration to be used in CVM must be clarified (Hidano, 1999). A hypothetical scenario must be created based on minute value estimations and in a manner that facilitates specific responses not based on the imagination of those surveyed. Therefore, the conditions under which the project is to be implemented, method of payment, and form of payment must be clearly indicated. Accordingly, we conducted a preliminary interview survey of Maebashi citizens to support the formation of the hypothetical scenario to be used. The interview was conducted with 16 citizen-volunteers involved in the project. The interview items were designed to clarify the following: information on previous projects, information acquisition, the project's popularity, the project's effects on the public, awareness of the continuous duration of the project, and impressions regarding the methods used to collect the funds needed for the budget. Transcripts were made of the audio data collected via the interviews, and statements related to the study participants, goods and services, duration of the public policy, and contributions to the budget were extracted. The continuous acceptance of South Sudanese athletes was found to be an issue, in relation to the services and taxes generated by the project that citizens viewed as important. We, therefore, determined that a scenario in which the project was discontinued in March 2025 owing to depleting municipal finances would be appropriate. We also found that the budget was to be sourced using conventional crowdfunding—the intention was to fund the budget via citizen donations. Several payment procedures are used in CVM, including taxes, obligatory contributions, and fees. In our study, we utilized voluntary contributions because these represent a method that citizens could consider for themselves in detail. Considering the short project duration of approximately two years, the payment method we established was lump sum rather than installment payments.

Contingent Valuation Scenario and WTP

We created the following scenario based on the procedures indicated above:

Maebashi City will accept athletes from South Sudan who want to participate in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to a long-term camp to be held from November 2019 until September 2021. The city will continue providing support to the athletes until March 2025. The plan calls for welcoming one athlete each for the April to September outdoor competition and the October to March indoor competition each year for a total of four athletes accepted into the

program. Added support is to be provided for the purpose of competing in the 2024 Paris Olympics. The cost of the project is to be met via the Hometown Tax system.

We created the following hypothetical story:

Assume that this project was removed from the list of target projects of the Hometown Tax system owing to changes in the socio-economic circumstances of Maebashi City, and that these circumstances would otherwise force the discontinuation of the project. To prevent this, stakeholders established the "South Sudan Support Fund" to collect donations from citizens to support the project. This fund is operated by a newly created and highly transparent organization. This makes it possible for Maebashi City to accept a total of four athletes between 2023 and 2025 as planned.
If requested, would you provide a donation as long as you agree with the purpose of this project?
1. It will be a one-time payment.
2. The amount of money you contribute will reduce the proportion of your discretionary income.
Consider the aforementioned points before responding.
In addition, if the target is not met through contributions, the amount you contributed will be returned. Your contribution is not tax-deductible (you will not be returned a fixed percentage of your contribution).

Next, to eliminate strategic bias through selection according to the likelihood of payment (Funahashi & Mano, 2015), only those who were willing to make a payment were asked the following question: "If this hypothetical situation were to occur in reality, how likely would you be to make a contribution?" The responses were rated on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *extremely unlikely* to 10 = *extremely likely*. The responses were used to determine their WTP using an open-ended format for the amount of money.

Measures of the Determinants of WTP

Following the hypotheses presented above, perception of the SDP project, perception of the risks of the SDP project, confidence in governmental administration of the SDP project, and household income (which is a socio-economic variable) were used to verify the validity of the estimated WTP and identify determinants.

The perception of benefits toward assets in the results of studies of the social acceptance of sports policies and policies in other fields (e.g., studies of the outcomes of science and technology policies and elite sports), as well as interview surveys of the public, were examined before deciding on the items for perception of benefits (e.g.,

Wicker et al., 2012). Specifically, there were six items on personal benefits, eight on the social benefits to Maebashi City, four on the social benefits to South Sudan, and three on perceptions towards South Sudanese athletes.

In addition, a one-factor structure was assumed for risk perception, with six items based on existing literature (Funahashi & Mano, 2015) and interview survey results. Finally, a two-factor structure was assumed for perceptions of trust, with two items for procedural fairness and three items for trust in the local government's implementation capacity, based on previous research (Baba et al., 2011).

Responses to each of the survey items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.

Implementation of the CVM survey

The survey was conducted from March 14–16, 2023, by a social survey monitor. The target number of responses was 500, based on the proportion of adults in Maebashi (aged 18 and older) at approximately 280,000. The age groups were stratified to ensure equal proportion with the population distribution shown in the National Census. The respondents were randomly selected, and the samples were collected by an internet survey company. Given the difficulty in obtaining a sufficient number of responses from older people, those in the 70 and older group were allotted to the "Seventies" component of the distribution ratio. Bias owing to the use of internet surveys is not a relatively important issue when the goal is to estimate WTP (Olsen, 2009). Meanwhile, to avoid sample selection bias considering the name of the survey (Carson, 2000), we ensured a wide range of respondents using a common survey title: "Questionnaire on Daily Life." This study was approved by the Human Subject Research Ethics Review Committee of Doshisha University (no. 22074).

In addition to the CVM items, we also included items regarding sex, age group, occupation, and annual household income. As mentioned above, the question regarding household income was used to verify the validity of the estimated WTP.

Analytical Methods

WTP Estimation Procedure

We discussed whether the respondents who were unaware of the policy should be included in the CVM estimate. Unlike public projects (e.g., construction of public facilities) regarding which a value judgment on the policy

can be made upon reading a hypothetical scenario, this project was one that was difficult for the respondents to visualize. We then determined that those who responded "I don't know (about this project)" could not accurately evaluate the target project; and their responses were removed from the analytical sample. In addition, samples in which the respondent answered that they would not pay for a reason other than an economic one (e.g., they remained unconvinced of the circumstances indicated or the payment procedure) on items regarding WTP were removed from our analysis based on the CVM manual (Hidano, 1999). Given the importance of household income and other factors as economic indicators for estimating WTP, samples in which the respondent said "I do not want to respond" to items regarding household income were also removed from the analytical group. According to the above procedures, the final analytical group was N = 288. Since 288 cases for an adult population of approximately 280,000 in Maebashi City exceeded the 90% confidence level (5% acceptable error), we decided to proceed with the analysis as is. WTP estimates were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 23, and the verification of the validity of the results used R.Verification of theoretical validity.

Regression analysis with estimated WTP as the dependent variable was performed to verify the theoretical validity of WTP. In the present study, given that WTP was identified using an open-ended question format, Tobit regression analysis was used, as recommended by a previous study (Hidano, 1999). The independent variables were income and a socio-psychological scale stipulating attitudes toward assets.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed on the socio-psychological scale to evaluate the validity of the construct using a goodness-of-fit index. The statistical software utilized in the analyses was IBM SPSS Amos 29. First, CFA was performed on 21 items of four factors: (1) Perception of personal benefit, (2) Perception of the social benefits to Maebashi City, (3) Perception of the social benefits to South Sudan, and (4) Perception towards South Sudan athletes. The results showed that model goodness-of-fit was $\chi^2/df=2.997$, GFI=0.839, AGFI=0.797, CFI=0.91, and RMSEA=0.083, indicating that goodness-of-fit was not achieved.

Therefore, CFA model was revised by removing four items: "My thoughts about my way of life are more positive" (factor loading = 0.66) and "Increased opportunities for me to learn a foreign language" (factor loading = 0.62) from the Perception of personal benefit factor, "Increased opportunities for the city to gain exposure in national media" (factor loading = 0.67) from the Perception of the

social benefits to Maebashi City factor, and "Contribution to peacebuilding in South Sudan" (factor loading = 0.69) from the Perception of the social benefits to South Sudan factor. These items had factor loadings less than 0.707, which Fornell and Larcker (1981) identify as the threshold for testing convergent validity. Although "The city will become an important partner for South Sudan" (factor loading = 0.70) and "It will lead to the revitalization of the whole city" (factor loading = 0.70) under Perception of the social benefits to Maebashi City not meeting the criterion value of 0.707, they were retained in CFA model as they closely approximated the criterion value.

Subsequent CFA indicated $\chi 2 /df$ =2.740, Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)=0.887, adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)=0.848, CFI=0.941, RMSEA=0.078. GFI and AGFI were under the standard value of $\geqq$ 0.90 (Hair et al., 2005), but were similar to the standard value. However, since three GFIs—$\chi 2 /DF$ (2.00 $\leqq$ standard value $\leqq$ 3.00), CFI (standard value $\geqq$ 0.90), and RMSEA (standard value $\leqq$ 0.08)—met the standard values (Hair et al., 2005), it was determined that the CFA model with the revised scales conformed to the data.

CFA was performed assuming one factor and six items for risk perception and two factors and five items for confidence. The model conformity for risk perception was $\chi 2 /df$ =1.735, GFI=0.983, AGFI=0.959, CFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.051. The model GFI for procedural fairness, which constitutes confidence, and confidence in the municipality's ability to conduct the project was $\chi 2 /df$ =2.17, GFI=0.988, AGFI=0.955, CFI=0.994, RMSEA=0.064. Although the $\chi 2 /df$ for perception of risk was marginally below the standard value, it was within the acceptable range, and thus the CFA model for the scales was judged to be in conformance.

Next, Cronbach's coefficient alpha, which is a reliability coefficient for the intrinsic reliability of the scales, was calculated. The results for all scales (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78–0.90) exceeded the value recommended (>0.70) by Nunnally (1967). Then, the mean extraction dispersion was calculated to verify the convergent validity. The results were values of between 0.50 and 0.78, which exceeded the standard value of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Accordingly, sufficient reliability and validity were indicated. Based on the procedures described above, the mean values for the measured items, including all factors, were calculated as factor scores (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-psychological Characteristics

Factor structure	M	SD	Factor loading	α	CR	AVE
Personal benefits				0.84	0.84	0.57
I feel happy	3.39	0.87	0.72			
It offers a chance for me to be acquainted with foreign cultures and customs	3.16	1.01	0.73			
I feel solidarity as a citizen of Maebashi City	3.05	0.91	0.73			
I started to think about peace	3.32	0.89	0.82			
Social benefits to Maebashi City				0.9	0.9	0.57
Leads to invigoration of the entire city	3.23	0.91	0.81			
Gives rise to diversity in the city	3.52	0.85	0.79			
The city becomes a vital partner to South Sudan	3.56	0.79	0.71			
The image of the city improves	3.64	0.8	0.77			
Leads to educating the citizens about peace	3.46	0.85	0.7			
Leads to the promotion of sports in the city	3.55	0.85	0.74			
Allows the city to be proud of this project	3.57	0.87	0.78			
Social benefits to South Sudan				0.88	0.88	0.71
Contributes to the promotion of sports in South Sudan	3.74	0.76	0.83			
Leads to the improvement of the potential competitiveness of South Sudanese athletes	3.77	0.74	0.86			

Is beneficial to the potential in the lives of South Sudanese athletes	3.76	0.76	0.84			
Perception towards South Sudan athletes				0.89	0.89	0.73
South Sudanese athletes are people whom the citizens [of Maebashi] should emulate	3.12	0.7	0.88			
South Sudanese athletes are making efforts in a way that I would like to imitate	3.3	0.78	0.84			
South Sudanese athletes are providing a good example that others should emulate	3.2	0.73	0.84			
Risks				0.86	0.86	0.5
The lifestyles of South Sudanese athletes will be negatively affected	2.38	0.86	0.78			
The training of sports athletes from Maebashi City will be hindered	2.28	0.94	0.73			
It will make the South Sudanese become accustomed to assistance	2.7	0.95	0.71			
It will cause a stagnation in international support for efforts that are more important than sports	2.51	0.9	0.71			
It will cause stagnation in other policies in Maebashi City that are of higher priority than this one	2.59	0.98	0.67			
This project provides merits to neither South Sudan nor Maebashi City	2.27	0.89	0.65			
Confidence in [the municipality's] ability to carry out the project				0.78	0.79	0.55
This South Sudanese athlete acceptance program is being carried out for the sake of the citizens of Maebashi City	3.46	0.8	0.83			
Maebashi City is likely to carry out this program to accept South Sudanese athletes with the citizens [of Maebashi] in mind	3.46	0.79	0.69			
This program to accept South Sudanese athletes is being carried out with the people of South Sudan in mind	3.37	0.78	0.7			
Procedural fairness				0.88	0.88	0.78
I think the way in which South Sudanese athletes are being accepted by Maebashi City is desirable	3	0.9	0.91			
I think the way Maebashi City is accepting South Sudanese athletes is fair	3.36	0.79	0.85			

RESULTS

Aggregate Results

Table 2 provides an overview of the respondents. Significant difference arose for the results on which the chi-squared test was applied compared with the values that reflected the study population, sex, age group, and household income (p < 0.05). Specifically, to address the discrepancy between the samples analyzed and the population of this study, we investigated the need to perform corrections when calculating WTP. We performed the chi-squared test on individual attributes (sex, age group, household income) that were found to have significant differences from the population to determine their relationship with WTP. The results showed no significant differences and no relationship with WTP (sex: $\chi^2(1)=0.816$, p=0.366; age group: $\chi^2(1)=0.312$, p=0.077; household income: $\chi^2(1)=0.310$, p=0.578). Therefore, a final correction for WTP was deemed unnecessary.

Table 2. Overview of the respondents

		sample		ref(a)		
		n	%	n	%	χ^2
Gender	Male	162	57.3	169	48.5	***
	Female	126	42.7	180	51.5	
Age	18-29	17	5.9	40	13.7	***
	30-39	40	13.9	36	12.3	
	40-49	84	29.2	45	15.7	
	50-59	60	20.8	47	16.3	
	60-69	57	19.8	41	14.4	
	70 over	30	10.4	79	27.6	
House hold income	less than 500 million yen	153	53.1	187	64.9	***
	500 million yen or above	135	46.9	101	35.1	
Employment status	Full-time worker	151	52.4			
	Others	137	47.6		NA(b)	
Educational qualification	Degree level or above	163	56.6			
	Others	125	43.4			

(a): Reference numbers from census data

(b): NA indicates that there are no government statistics for occupational and educational categories like those in this survey.

Estimation of WTP

Respondents who indicated no willingness to pay or who had a low likelihood of paying were considered WTP = ¥ 0. Respondents who indicated their WTP were listed by the monetary amount indicated. The mean WTP for all samples in the analytical group was ¥ 2,485 (standard deviation: ¥ 525), and the trimmed mean was ¥ 1,396. Investigation of the validity of the results.

To verify the validity of the results obtained, the factors understood to be related to WTP were analyzed. Since the responses concerned amounts of money, the validity of WTP would be subject to suspicion if a relationship to household income were not found. Table 3 shows the results of Tobit regression analysis and the relationship between the variables and WTP. They indicate that, in this model, the income variable had a significant relationship, which means that the WTP is theoretically valid. It was additionally found that risk perception had a negative correlation and that procedural fairness had a positive correlation. Meanwhile, perceptions of personal benefit, social benefits, and attitudes towards South Sudanese athletes, collectively forming benefit perception, were not found to have a significant relationship with WTP. Consequently, hypotheses H1 to H4 were rejected, while hypotheses H5 to H7 were accepted.

Table 3. Results of the Tobit models

	Tobit model		
	Estimate		z value
Intercept	-41861	***	
Personal benefit	1264.551		0.515
Social benefit to Maebashi City	446.2623		0.121
Social benefit to South Sudan	305.199		0.112
Perception towards South Sudan athletes	3220.745		1.394
Confidence in [the municipality's] ability to carry out the program	607.4386		0.233
Procedural fairness	5705.897	*	2.202
Risks	-5478.28	***	-3.354
Household income (annual)	1407.449	***	3.842
R2	0.09		
Log-likelihood	-1280.364		

$*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.$

The WTP estimate was obtained using the procedures described. This value was multiplied by the size of the target population—the adult population—to calculate the estimated WTP for the target population (i.e., approximately 280,000 adults residing in Maebashi). Assuming that 70% of these were aware of the project, we calculated that the study population WTP was approximately ¥ 490 million based on the mean WTP of ¥ 2,485.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the value to citizens of an international sports cooperation long-term camp program that accepted South Sudanese athletes was estimated. The mean WTP with a constant theoretical validity was calculated as ¥ 2,485 and the aggregate value of the WTP of the study population was approximately ¥ 490 million. The fact that the funds collected for the implementation of this program was approximately ¥ 20 million per year suggests the possibility that more than ten times that amount in socio-psychological benefit was experienced by the citizens of the municipality. Therefore, this study found that the citizens of Maebashi City had a certain WTP for the program to accept South Sudanese athletes.

Previous research of elite sports success focused on the fact that, in the 2012 London Olympics, the mean WTP for the German national team placed first in the number of medals won was € 6.31 per person (Wicker et al. 2012) and on the Canadian public found that the annual WTP for the increased budget for an elite sports education program was $ 38.19 per person prior to the Olympics and $ 89.70 per person after the Olympics (Humphreys et al., 2018). Although factors such as differences in the events, regional characteristics, social and cultural background, the competition results during the survey period, and the CVM survey design all had an effect, the WTP calculated in the present study was the same as or marginally higher than the monetary amounts reported in previous studies.

Maebashi City's program to accept South Sudanese athletes was not implemented in South Sudan but rather entailed Maebashi City accepting South Sudanese athletes and providing them with a support program within the city. Therefore, there was limited physical or psychological distance between the residents of Maebashi and South Sudanese athletes as there were opportunities to see and directly interact. In the literature exploring the social benefits of sports events for citizens, the concept of "closeness" has been highlighted. It is noted that residents residing in areas near the host city have greater opportunities to experience the event's value. For instance,

Potwarka and Leatherdale (2016) propose the idea of an "epicenter effect," suggesting that residents living closer to the sporting venue are more susceptible to the social impacts of the event. Although this study did not conduct a comparative study of residents of municipalities in the prefecture other than Maebashi, we believe that the "closeness" to the WTP for citizens, fostered by the experience of interacting with the athletes and daily media coverage, had a positive impact on the WTP.

The results of Tobit regression analysis showed that the fact that the perception related to procedural fairness was high and there was low perception of risk was positively related to WTP. Past research indicated that public criticism of the risks of paying for sports-related programs and disappointment with such programs led to a decreased perception of the value of such programs (e.g., Funahashi & Mano, 2015). The results of this study suggest that, as in Event Management and Elite Sports Success, perceptions of negative aspects negatively influence citizens' supportive attitudes in municipal-led SDP. In addition, the procedural fairness of the municipality, as the policy actor, was found to be positively correlated with WTP. In previous studies, it has been demonstrated that those who have more trust in the implementation ability and fairness of the municipality that is the agent of the policy will express higher WTP toward the promotion of the policy in question. The results of this study suggest that increasing trust in local authorities is a major tailwind for gaining public support in the practice of SDP.

In contrast, no significant relationship was found for perceptions of personal benefit, social benefit, or role models, which were demonstrated in previous studies. Investigation of benefit perception (Baba et al., 2011) found that knowledge or familiarity with the project leads to understanding the benefits derived from it. For example, in the field of health, there is a high degree of perception regarding the importance and benefit in fields that are directly related to the fundamental benefit of the person involved but that the same tendency may exist in fields that are not directly related to individuals, such as the field of environmental policy. It has been shown that in sporting events, the subjects of research have seen various changes associated with the hosting of the event, such as construction projects and educational projects related to the event, and that social values are formed through the experiences derived from them (Bakhsh et al., 2023). However, there were no major changes affecting the lives of citizens, such as construction projects related to the targeted Maebashi project, and it is considered that the event did not provide sufficient experience to recognize the benefits. Since the present study focused on Maebashi

residents, who were not direct recipients of the international sports cooperation, it was expected that the socio-psychological mechanism in which the benefits were perceived based on the hypothetical scenario would produce results that differed from previous studies.

This study has several limitations. First, the payment method in the hypothetical scenario in this study was contributions, and the amount donated was reported in the form of open-ended responses. Previous research has pointed out that, when money was contributed via donations, the psychological hurdles to payment were lower as compared to other payment methods and that, when the amount of money donated was reported in the form of open-ended responses, higher amounts of money may be reported. The reason the project in the present study was not widely known by the general public and why a funding method that closely resembles contributions (namely crowdfunding) was utilized was that this study was designed so that the respondents could freely report the amounts of money to be donated via contributions. However, in the future, there is likely to be a need to verify the results of this study using a two-tiered selection method and a different hypothetical payment method.

Another limitation was the fact that there needs to be consideration of the possibility that the sample size may have affected the high mean value. To ensure an accurate perception of what was to be assessed by the subjects of this study, only the sample size that understood the project was subject to analysis. In addition, to verify the validity of the results, complete responses including household income and resistant responses were removed. This resulted in a reduction of the sample size, and although stratification at the same distributions as government statistics was performed at the survey stage, when actual analysis was performed distortions were detected. In the end, as it was determined that correction of these distortions was unnecessary and that the results reflected the prioritization of highly refined and detailed assessments, it cannot be ruled out that the results of this study may show major discrepancies with reality, and thus caution must be exercised when determining the sample sizes of future study of this topic.

In addition, the WTP calculated in this study was cross-sectional, which means that temporal reliability is weak. Previous research has pointed out that the period during which the survey is implemented has an effect on WTP, and that a comparative study of the periods before and after the Olympics and Paralympics are held shows that the mean WTP value was affected (Humphreys et al. 2018). The present study was implemented six months after the close of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, but if the survey were conducted during the implementation of a project in progress after the acceptance of new athletes or during the 2025 fiscal year after the project was completed, there may be variations in the mean values obtained. Furthermore, the SDP that was the subject of the present study was an invitation project in which athletes from a developing country were accepted. Many of the venues for SDPs are the countries of those receiving support. It cannot be ruled out that this difference in the form of the activity may have affected value assessment.

It is imperative to conduct further investigation using different project forms and in larger regions of activity, focusing on the above-mentioned limitations. In addition, conducting research into what factors determine socio-psychological benefits will likely provide SDP groups and related government actors with useful methods of implementation.

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Original Research

From academic silos to interdisciplinary engagement: Understanding and advancing research and evaluation in Sport for Development

Katrin Bauer[1], Nico Schulenkorf[2], Katja Siefken[3]

[1]Freelance Researcher, Tübingen, Germany

[2]Centre for Sport, Business and Society, UTS Business School, University of Technology Sydney; and Centre for Sport Leadership, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

[3]Institute of Interdisciplinary Exercise Science and Sports Medicine (IIES), Medical School Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

Corresponding author email: mail@katrin-bauer.net

ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, the growing recognition of sport as an enabler of sustainable development has allowed Sport for Development (SFD) to emerge as a dynamic research field featuring contributions from a wide range of scholarly disciplines. Within this research, evaluation has played a prominent role, especially against the background of omnipresent demands to 'prove impact' and legitimize the field. Despite the growth of scholarly activity, the field remains largely scattered with limited interdisciplinary engagement. This article presents an overview of the conceptualization and implementation of SFD research and evaluation, encompassing study types and methodological approaches. Findings were generated from a scoping review of publications on research and evaluation activities in the SFD field, guided by the newly proposed Evaluation Research Framework. They highlight that the field is suffering from terminological imprecisions that lead to vague and often undifferentiated debates about methodologies and approaches. Moreover, there remains a limited progression of theoretical advancements in SFD, with purposeful engagement across disciplines and innovative developments still being underutilized. We conclude that if SFD scholars remain within their disciplinary silos and do not move towards a common interdisciplinary research understanding, the field will continue to suffer from confusing theorization processes with limited prospects for further academic advancement and practical development.

From academic silos to interdisciplinary engagement: Understanding and advancing research and evaluation in Sport for Development

Since the turn of the millennium, sport has increasingly been accepted by governmental and non-governmental actors as both a goal in its own right and a medium for achieving a variety of development goals. Sport's recognition as a critical site for socialization (Coakley, 1998) and its reputation of being a low-cost and high-impact tool in achieving development goals has led to an increasing institutionalization of sport for development (SFD) within international relations and global development, flanked and funded by national and multilateral development agencies including the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth Secretariat, and country-specific institutions such as the Norwegian or German Development Cooperation Agencies (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Kay & Dudfield, 2013). Although SFD initiatives have existed for decades, the field's practical nature likely contributed to a delayed onset of specific research studies and wider scholarly engagement with the field (Darnell, 2012). In fact, there were only a handful of dedicated SFD publications available in the early 2000s and contributions to scientific journals only started to increase more significantly from around 2008 onwards (Schulenkorf, 2017; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). By 2013, the number of annual publications amounted to over 100 articles – a remarkable development that was accompanied by the establishment of the open-access *Journal of Sport for Development* (JSFD) as well as publication and dissemination opportunities on the SFD online platform sportanddev.org. Taken together, these initiatives assisted in providing much-needed accessibility and transparency

Keywords: sport for development; interdisciplinarity; research; evaluation; scoping review

regarding evaluation and research approaches in SFD (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2019b; Whitley et al., 2019a).

Given its widespread appeal, numerous theoretical foundations, approaches, designs, and methods have been used in SFD research. However, research endeavors and scholarly engagements have largely remained within their disciplinary silos. Disciplinary trends from sport sociology, sport management, public health, leisure and other disciplines have already been transferred to the SFD context, but interconnections and common perspectives – including transdisciplinary engagements – have thus far been neglected (Massey & Whitley, 2019; Siefken, 2022; Whitley et al., 2022). As a result, research to date has led to critical yet largely isolated and often under-used SFD-specific theories and concepts (Welty Peachey et al., 2021). Moreover, while the benefits of intersectoral or inter-disciplinary SFD have increasingly been recommended in academic scholarship or mapped in the form of brainstorming articles (Collison et al., 2019a; Delheye et al., 2020; Welty Peachey et al., 2021; Whitley et al., 2022), there remains a lack of clarity and common understanding across several domains, including the terminology that surrounds aspects of research and evaluation in SFD. Such a common understanding is critical for interdisciplinary research where the great diversity of parties involved – including observers (e.g., scholars), those observed (e.g., project and program implementers, non-governmental organizations), interested parties (e.g., donors, community), and influencers (e.g., national agencies, ministries) – should sing from the same hymn-sheet rather than remain with different and at times contradictory understandings of research approaches and associated terminology (Massey & Whitley, 2019).

Against this background, we conducted a review of publications focusing on research and evaluation in SFD to showcase the different types of research and evaluation studies that have been undertaken in the SFD field; how they have been conducted; and how different research terms have been used, understood and differentiated.

Our scoping study aimed to map the status quo of SFD research and evaluation and the associated terminology, and shed light on the shortcomings, development opportunities and future advancements in this critical space. In the following, we present the scholarly framework and methodological processes that underpin our study. In line with the two research questions, we then highlight and discuss key research findings and conclude with a call for action to define and unite common interdisciplinary research understandings in SFD.

Evaluation Research Framework

Evaluation research emerged as a distinct field of study in the mid-20th century, primarily in the United States of America. Its development can be attributed to the growing interest in assessing the impact and effectiveness of social programs and policies. Influenced by the fields of sociology, psychology, and public administration, evaluation research gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the growing demand for evidence-based approaches to inform decision-making and resource allocation (Marjanovic et al., 2009). In the 1960s, the American development agency USAID and a few larger United Nations organizations made first attempts to establish evaluation as an integral part of project and program management (Döring & Bortz, 2016). In Europe, the integration of evaluation into institutional structures and processes within the context of political systems, presented a main driver for the significant increase in practical evaluation studies, particularly in the context of growing development cooperation (Stockmann & Meyer, 2017). Since its inception, evaluation research has expanded globally and is now practiced across various disciplines and countries, shaping policy development and program implementation worldwide.

Most authors in evaluation research use the term 'evaluation research' synonymously with 'scientific evaluation' or in short 'evaluation' (Döring & Bortz, 2016; Rossi et al., 2004; Scriven, 2008; Vedung, 2000). Here, the common understanding is that evaluations "are assessments made on the basis of research findings in a scientific process by evaluation professionals qualified in social science" (Döring & Bortz, 2016, p. 977). As such, evaluation is part of applied social research and it features a whole range of social science theories, concepts and research methods (Stockmann, 2007). In the social and health sciences, program evaluation is likely the largest area of evaluation research which – due to its application-oriented nature – has the distinct ability of generating evidence-based knowledge for practical use (Rossi et al., 2004). This practical knowledge can then be used to optimize, steer, or legitimize programs, among other functions of evaluations (Stockmann, 2007). Due to its applied nature and the ability to advance practice in the field, evaluation research is of particular relevance and importance for SFD studies.

There are countless concepts, models, theories and approaches to evaluation across theory and practice, including directions for evaluation design and implementation. As such, different attempts have been made to classify evaluation concepts, models, theories, and paradigms based on their similarities and differences (Alkin

& Christie, 2009; Rossi et al., 2004). Of particular relevance for the current study is Rabie's (2014) classification system which brings together important and widely used concepts of evaluation research and presents a comprehensive yet clearly structured approach to evaluation that provides analytical rigor and compensates for some of the limitations of previous systems in use. Hence, in an attempt to explore the research and evaluation activities in the field of SFD, Rabie's (2014) work underpinned the design of the newly proposed Evaluation Research Framework (ERF) which was used as a deductive framework for this review study.

Figure 1:

The Evaluation Research Framework (ERF) and its Categories
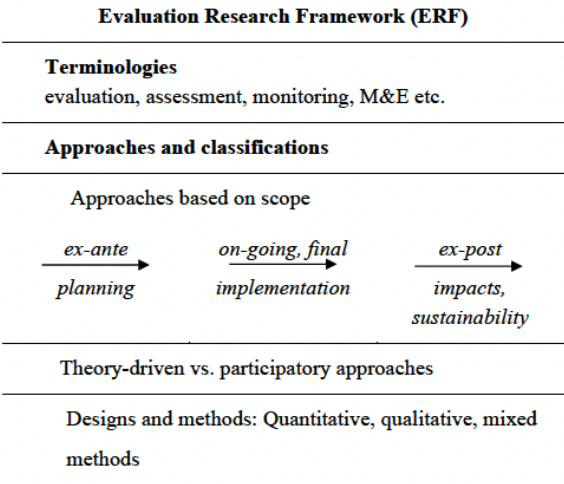
The ERF is based on previous work by the first author (Bauer, 2022) and contains three different yet interrelated domains: First, the *terminologies* focus on the understanding and interplay of definitions regarding the terms used in this space, including monitoring, evaluation and research. According to Vedung (2000, p. 124) "the key difference between evaluation research and fundamental research is that the former is intended for use". It is therefore more prescribed and less free than fundamental or basic research, which can strive for knowledge without a specific pre-defined purpose. In addition, there are many other terms used instead of, combined with, or in conjunction with evaluation, such as appraisal, assessment, auditing, (financial) controlling or monitoring (monitoring and evaluation, in short: M&E). Finally, recent trends have also emphasized evaluation and value functions combined with research and monitoring, such as 'learning' or 'accountability' (e.g., MEL, MERL or MEAL). Even though the activities associated with these terms differ from those of evaluation, the dividing lines are often blurred (Scriven, 2008).

As the second domain, the framework captures and systematizes the various *approaches and classifications*, including concepts, models, theories, and approaches. It follows a three-tiered pragmatic approach: The first sub-category helps to delineate what will be evaluated and focuses on the *scope* of a study. For instance, the evaluation may be very broad and includes comprehensive evaluands (e.g., strategies, systems, sectors, interventions in their entirety) which are covered by different forms of reviews (evaluation synthesis, systematic review, meta-evaluation). Alternatively, it may focus on one particular aspect or phase of an intervention, which can differ in timing and its objective: For example, ex-ante evaluations may operate as feasibility or baseline studies before a project starts; on-going evaluations can be used for process evaluations; and final evaluations may feature at the end of a project for the assessment of direct goal achievements or as ex-post studies to evaluate program impacts and sustainability (Rabie, 2014; Rossi et al., 2004; Stockmann, 2007).

The approaches of the second sub-category can help to clarify the purpose of the evaluation. Here, *theory-based approaches* aim to increase knowledge about the object of study and explain causalities, e.g., by using a logical model/logical framework, which can make statements about whether pre-formulated indicators are achieved in terms of its resources (inputs), performance (outputs), effects at the target group level (outcomes) or effects at the societal level (impacts) (Kurz & Kubek, 2016; Oberndörfer et al., 2010; Scriven, 2008). Meanwhile, *participatory approaches* aim to actively involve stakeholders in evaluations, to empower their evaluation capacities, and to create a common understanding (Rabie, 2014).

The third and final sub-category focuses on *designs and methods* and answers the question of how a specific program is assessed or evaluated. Specifically, it determines if quantitative (quasi-experimental or experimental designs like Randomized Controlled Trials - RCTs), qualitative (e.g., participatory action research) or mixed-methods designs are used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rabie, 2014; Scriven, 2008). Taken together, the ERF allows scholars to examine research and evaluation thoroughly and holistically. Specifically, it determines how terminology is used; identifies the attribution and intention of a study (basic research or evaluation research); establishes the extent to which it is comprehensive or partial (scope); assesses whether the purpose is theory-driven or participatory; and understands the way research and evaluation is carried out (design and method).

METHODOLOGY

Scientific review studies come in a number of different shapes and sizes or, as Grant and Booth (2009) outlined, there is a large variety of research types and associated methodologies for researchers to choose from. For this paper, in which we aimed to review and map evaluation and research practices and debates in the field of SFD, a scoping review approach was carried out. Scoping reviews have gained prominence in the SFD space over the past 10 years; specifically, previous studies have focused on SFD research within Aboriginal communities (Gardam et al., 2017); have examined innovation approaches such as Design Thinking in SFD practice (Joachim et al., 2020); or have mapped SFD evidence specific to the African continent (Langer, 2015). The scoping review seemed the most appropriate type for this study as it aims to summarize and disseminate findings, clarify key definitions in the literature, examine how research is conducted on a certain field and identify research or knowledge gaps in existing literature – regardless of differences in publication types and without the need to account for research quality per se (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). As such, it presents a significant first step in our endeavor to better understand the research and evaluation space in SFD and it may provide a critical stepping stone for more advanced and comprehensive systematic reviews that focus on quality and rigor in the future. To conduct a scoping study, Arksey and O'Malley (2005) recommend five critical steps which have also guided our investigation.

Identification of research questions

In the first stage of a scoping study, it is recommended to use broad search parameters to ensure that no relevant studies are overlooked (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To avoid an unwieldy number of publications, we used the ERF model as a theoretical-conceptual perspective based on evaluation research (Bauer, 2022). This allowed us to specifically address two interrelated research questions.

> (1) How are research, evaluation and other related terms defined and understood in the SFD context?
> (2) How are research and evaluation activities carried out, i.e., which different approaches – including designs and methods – are used?

Identification and selection of relevant publications

To identify the literature that answers the research questions, a comprehensive search of databases and journals was conducted. As suggested by Arksey & O'Malley (2005), we employed flexible strategies that involved searching for relevant publications across various sources, including electronic databases, reference lists, hand-searching key journals, and relevant organizations and conferences. In line with previous review studies, a variety of thematically relevant and multidisciplinary databases and catalogues were used, including sport-focused databases, general academic search engines, and a range of topic-specific journals (see Table 1); moreover, specific journals that had previously been identified as leading outlets for SFD work in Schulenkorf et al.'s (2016) comprehensive integrative review were included. Finally, the search was complemented with relevant items from various supplementary materials including academic books, internet sources, journal articles, reports, theses and grey literature (e.g., documents of the United Nations or Commonwealth Secretariat).

For the different sources, a combination of search terms connecting evaluation, research and SFD were used in English and German language. Specifically, as the review formed part of a larger research project on SFD in the context of German development cooperation, German search terms and literature were used in addition to the otherwise predominant English vocabulary and publications. Overall, the following search strings were used: *evaluation, research, Forschung, Methode(n)/method(s)* as well as the combined terms *sport + development, "Sport for Development", "Sport für Entwicklung", Sportförderung.* Table 1 presents the search area and bibliographic accesses used in addition to the search terms.

Table 1.

Overview of Search Terms, Area and Bibliographic Accesses

Search Terms	**English**: ("evaluation" OR "research" OR "method*") AND ("Sport for development" OR "sport" AND "development") **German**: ("Evaluation" OR "Forschung" OR "Methode*") AND ("Sport für Entwicklung" OR "Sportförderung")
Search Area	Title, abstract, full text
Bibliographic accesses	<ins>**Catalogs and databases:**</ins> • Google Scholar, Google Books • Online Catalog "ZB Sport" German Sport University Cologne • SURF – the Sports information portal of the Federal Institute for Sports Science (BiSp) including different databases • Spolit – database including sports-related articles from journals and anthologies • Digital Library German Sport University Cologne • Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE) **Relevant Journals:** • European Journal for Sport and Society (ISSN 1613-8171) • International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics (ISSN 1940-6940) • International Review for the Sociology of Sport (ISSN 1012-6902) • Journal of Sport and Social Issues (ISSN 0193-7235) • Journal of Sport for Development (open access): https://jsfd.org/ • Journal of Sport Management (ISSN 0888-4773) • Sport, Education and Society (ISSN 1357-3322) • Sport Management Review (ISSN 1441-3523) • Sport in Society (ISSN 1743-0445) • Sociology of Sport Journal (ISSN: 0741-1235) • Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health (ISSN 2159-676X)

The initial focus on the title search made sure that results would include documents with a clear focus on research and evaluation in the field of SFD, including discussions on methodological research approaches such as M&E and qualitative methods. In other words, the intent was to capture articles, reviews, conceptual papers or texts with a distinct research focus, rather than single empirical studies that merely mentioned the term research as part of their analysis or structure. The publication types included monographs, edited books, book chapters, internet sources, journal articles, reports, grey literature as well as PhD and Masters theses in English and German published between 2006 and March 2022. The year 2006 was selected as the earliest date because it was when the first manual focusing on M&E in the context of SFD was published (Coalter, 2006). This manual resulted from a workshop initiated by UNICEF and attended by key scholars, politicians,

development agencies, and practitioners (Burnett, 2015). Furthermore, to complement the automated findings of the journal and database search, the reference lists of included documents were manually scanned to identify further potentially relevant materials (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Herold et al., 2020).

From a process perspective, two authors eliminated duplicate articles and analyzed all available abstracts according to the key elements identified in the ERF that guided this study. All abstracts were read independently by the two authors to enhance validity and to ensure inter-coder reliability, the third researcher became involved in case of disagreement. In total, 204 relevant publications and internet documents were identified and subsequently charted. Table 2 summarizes the sampling results according to publication types.

Table 2

List of Analyzed SFD Publications

Type of publication	Numbers
Monographs	16
Edited volumes	15
Book chapters	43
Journal articles	101
Grey literature	18
Internet sites	3
White papers (University publications)	8
Total	204

Charting the publications

Based on the total sample identified, the material was sifted, charted and sorted according to the different key elements identified in the ERF (see Figure 1). In particular, special attention was paid to the terminology used (e.g., evaluation, monitoring, etc.) as well as the various approaches and classifications mentioned or employed (e.g., scope of studies, designs, methods, etc.). The ERF categories were used to record the information descriptively. As an example, Kay's (2012) article on monitoring and evaluation in SFD partnerships contains information about specific terminology and approaches. She clearly distinguishes between M&E and research and does not endorse logical models as approaches.

Collating, summarizing and reporting the results

As the information from the publications were chartered according to the ERF-categories, also the findings are structured and presented in accordance with the categories outlined in the ERF and the research questions listed above. First, the different understandings and interplays of terminologies within the realm of SFD research and evaluation are presented. Subsequently, a discussion of the various approaches and classifications employed in the SFD context is provided.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Terminologies: Imprecisions in understanding, application and interplay

Out of our total sample of 204 publications, 21 specifically related to terminologies used in SFD research. Across these documents, the terms *research*, *evaluation*, *M&E* and more recently also *MEL* (*Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning*) or *MERL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, Learning)* are used with a wide range of variations and are often employed interchangeably. In short, there is no clear conceptual demarcation. 'Conducting research' is often equated with M&E activities, which inevitably leads to an undifferentiated discourse (Kay, 2012). Here, the rather simplistic merger of the terms monitoring and evaluation into a single entity is problematic, as the two research functions require specific approaches as they serve different aspects: "As they pose and respond to different types of questions, it is evident that monitoring and […] evaluation […] require different tools, different skills, different strategies and ideally different personnel" (Kaufman et al., 2014, p. 177).

Numerous authors critically note that even well-established

evaluation and they emphasize the need for a clear differentiation (Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015). For Jeanes and Lindsey (2014, p. 199), M&E should be considered a "processes of research". They see the distinction in the fact that M&E is mainly used in the program context and aims at optimization, while research goes beyond that. However, Whitley et al. (2020, p. 22) note that "evaluation and research are not mutually exclusive, and there are arguments that evaluation is a subset of research (and vice versa)". Collison et al. (2019a, p. 6) concur that research simply cannot be separated from M&E processes:

We would argue that the assumption that research necessarily informs, guides, influences or even constructs M&E frameworks or evidence is misguided. Progressive research methodologies focused on M&E, for example participatory action research, may well serve the dual purpose of knowledge production while producing and assisting with the formal process of evidencing and reporting, but the relationship between these processes requires ongoing negotiation and reflexivity.

Overall, this review reveals that the current incoherence in the SFD research field stems from the imprecisions in the use of terminology and concepts. The absence of clarity concerning research, evaluation, and M&E terminologies inevitably leads to a variety of debates in SFD research, including the role of researchers (who carries out the research and under which conditions?), methodological procedures (which designs and methods are best suited?) and the overall objective of the research (is it merely about generating new knowledge, about making strategic decisions or about receiving funding?).

A starting point for addressing imprecision in the use of terminology and related discussions would be the establishment of a shared vocabulary with the intention of '*finding a common language'* (Barisch-Fritz & Volk, 2016). The benefit of such a vocabulary – particularly in the context of interdisciplinary research – is the ability to overcome obstacles by creating a unified language based on mutual understanding and effective dialogue among researchers from a range of disciplines. However, achieving a shared understanding requires acknowledging and including external expertise from a variety of areas. Moreover, given the potpourri of approaches taken by researchers – including fundamental research, evaluation research, or evaluation based on monitored information, and the different objectives and strategies in place – active collaboration and clear communication are required to achieve overall consensus.

Within the described debates and underpinned by the results of our study, there remains a regrettable lack of acknowledgement and inclusion of traditional debates from the social sciences and development studies. In fact, it seems important to consider multi-perspective considerations, such as critical voices of – and relations between – researchers, evaluators, commissioners and donor organizations, to find some common ground. Instead, SFD is as heavily influenced by hegemonic discourses, particularly in relation to the concept of development. In fact, it is widely acknowledged that the conceptualization of development presents one of the foremost challenges in the field of SFD (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Accordingly, the field of SFD has encountered similar debates and policy challenges to those reported in wider development studies (Darnell & Black, 2011). Overall, it is suggested that unless the SFD research community addresses the described ambiguities and establishes crucial distinctions and a common language through active engagement and deliberation, progress towards terminological and conceptual clarity will be difficult to achieve.

Approaches and classifications: Many use what they know, few use what is established

Before the different sub-categories from the ERF are discussed (approaches based on scope, theory-driven and participatory approaches, designs and methods), general theorization processes in SFD research are highlighted first. This is done to provide the wider context and to 'couch' the applied findings related to approaches and classifications. Due to their importance in SFD research, the aspects of impacts and sustainability – which from an evaluation-theoretical perspective are subject of ex-post evaluations – are considered separately.

The theorization of SFD

Our scoping study identified 127 publications that engaged with aspects of theorization in SFD. Our review revealed that a lack of a theoretical foundation for research in the field of SFD was an early warning raised by numerous authors and that over the years, the demand for its establishment and the call for connectivity to other disciplines has only intensified (e.g., Coalter, 2013b; Darnell et al., 2019; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Massey & Whitley, 2019; Siefken, 2022; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015; Zanotti & Stephenson, 2019). Despite a stated lack of theoretical grounding and the scholarly verdict that "much work remains to be done" (Zanotti & Stephenson, 2019, p. 172), it should be noted that a number of significant theoretical and conceptual developments have taken place over the past decade (Darnell et al., 2019; Massey &

Whitley, 2019; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Specifically, the contributions in the *Routledge Handbook of Sport for Development and Peace* (Collison et al., 2019b), as well as Welty Peachey et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis of theoretical advances in SFD illustrate the research community's willingness and associated attempts to develop, employ and advance theoretical approaches.

Given the need to advance theoretical and conceptual thinking in SFD, a number of studies have employed a distinct sport-focused model of theoretical framing. Here, Welty Peachey et al. (2021) have identified the Sport for Development Theory (SFDT) (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011), the S4D Framework (Schulenkorf, 2012), Sugden's Ripple Effect Model (2014), Coalter's Program Theory (2013b) and Schulenkorf and Siefken's (2019) Sport-for-Health Model as relevant examples. However, to date, most of these are hardly used to guide or support other studies which speaks to the relative infancy of SFD theory and the need to do more and better in an attempt to truly legitimize the field (Welty Peachey et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, where SFD studies have been underpinned by a derivate model of theoretical framing (see Chalip, 2006), the concepts of social capital and Positive Youth Development (PYD) theories have most commonly been employed in the context of SFD (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). However, despite their popularity, Darnell, Chawansky and colleagues (2018, pp. 138-139) describe these approaches as "relatively neutral" and "apolitical" and are calling for more critical SFD research that uses politicizing approaches (e.g., postcolonial or feminist), including those "that draw attention to the roots of inequality".

As part of this development towards critical scholarship, academics from different disciplinary backgrounds have started to compile their varied theoretical approaches and brainstorm possibilities for transdisciplinary research in SFD. Here, a special issue in the journal *Social Inclusion* has opened transdisciplinary and intersectoral perspectives by providing a selection of articles that bring together various disciplinary streams (Delheye et al., 2020). Moreover, a recent journal article in *JSFD* has described selected disciplinary trends from the fields of sport sociology, social anthropology, sport management, public health, leisure, sport pedagogy, and sport psychology and provided critical avenues for transdisciplinary engagement (Delheye et al., 2020). Further, Siefken et al. (2022) emphasized the necessity to connect physical activity research with SFD, as highlighted in their recently published edited volume addressing opportunities and challenges in low- and middle-income countries. The call for cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary work has been made. The integration of these perspectives certainly

provides first important steps towards interdisciplinarity modifiable; however, thus far the selection of viewpoints has largely been based on the research backgrounds of the contributing authors of the articles published and a concerted effort to include *all* disciplines of the SFD field is yet to be realized.

In order to foster true interdisciplinarity, it is essential to *'identify shared problem perspectives'* (Barisch-Fritz & Volk, 2016). Here, Whitley et al. (2022, p. 9) emphasize that common interests between different disciplines include life skills development and transfer, as well as the parallels between PYD theory and "the anthropological examination of youth in SFD". Furthermore, the wide-ranging orientation of SFD organizations towards the Sustainable Development Goals and related issues such as social inequality, environment, safeguarding, refugees, and social entrepreneurship (Giulianotti et al., 2019) could form common denominators.

Approaches based on scope

The scope of research studies varies considerably across academic domains and our review revealed that this is no different in the SFD space. Overall, we identified 18 publications related to scope-based approaches. Specifically, after an initial focus on micro-level case studies and first attempts to 'map the field' (e.g., Hillyer et al., 2011), SFD researchers have now embarked on the next level of systematic reviews and assessments. In this context, Darnell, Chawansky and colleagues (2018, p. 134) call it "a marker of the field's maturation" that more and more researchers are conducting and publishing comprehensive systematic reviews and meta-analyses, in this case based on available SFD literature (Holt et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Langer, 2015; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2021; Whitley et al., 2019a).

Whilst these review studies have contributed significantly towards a broad picture of the SFD overall research landscape, the findings show that there remains a lack of specific meta-evaluations that examine the *quality* of studies and evaluations, including those that focus on specific themes or domains such as impact and sustainability – issues that are considered critical in SFD work and which are discussed in more detail later in this article. Moreover, our scoping analysis revealed that to date only one systematic review has examined the methodological quality of studies in detail (Darnell et al., 2019) and can therefore be classified as a meta-evaluation in the context of the ERF. To further support SFD's 'maturation' process, it seems essential that further studies with a wider scope and deeper

focus – in particularly meta-evaluations that explore and improve the quality of SFD studies – will be undertaken in future research.

Our review further shows that most SFD studies take place during project implementation ("ongoing") or right at the end of the project ("final") when research funding is often still available. No studies could be identified that explicitly focus on the planning ("ex-ante") or post project/program phase ("ex-post"), highlighting the persistent lack of focus on researching long-term impacts and aspects of sustainability. Both these aspects are discussed in more detail at the end of this section.

Theory-driven vs. participatory approaches

Overall, the scoping study identified 47 publications that discussed theory-driven or participatory approaches. Despite their ability to demonstrate the causal relationship between projects inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts (Kurz & Kubek, 2016), to date, only few SFD organizations can be credited for – or have proven to employ – theory-driven approaches such as logic models to underpin their operations (Whitley et al., 2019b). However, there seems to be a growing interest and increased understanding in this critical space. Most notably, the theory-driven Results Based Management (RBM) approach – which has been widely used in general development cooperation work since the 1990s (Binnendijk, 2000) – is part of the most recently published SFD-guidelines of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2019). However, the findings show that overall attitudes towards theory-driven logic models still differ among SFD researchers: on the one hand, critics describe them as being overly output-oriented, linear and rigid, and largely top-down or donor-imposed (Kay, 2012; Lindsey & Grattan, 2012; Spaaij et al., 2018). On the other hand, according to proponents, they represent flexible frameworks "that are participative, collaborative, iterative, and developmental" (Whitley et al., 2020, p. 23). Preti (2012) points out that criticism in this regard must distinguish between the general approach (i.e., project planning including problem analysis, development of objectives and indicators, identification of risks and assumptions) and the logframe matrices used in programs summarizing the main elements. The latter tend to have numerous shortcomings: They often remain "inflexible blueprints" in that they are established before a project begins, 'imposed' on a project, and therefore limited in their ability to make regular adjustments during the course of the project. Hence, Whitley et al. (2020, p. 24) advocate for active support of SFD organizations "in setting up their own [...] frameworks [...] or adapting/adopting existing frameworks" that hold credibility and provide legitimacy to funders, align with national policy priorities, and enable

organizational development and learning.

Meanwhile, our review revealed that numerous researchers are also calling for more participatory, culturally and context-sensitive approaches, designs, and methods to holistically understand complex development dynamics, including M&E processes (Burnett, 2015; Collison & Marchesseault, 2018; Darnell, Chawansky, et al., 2018; Darnell et al., 2016; Kay, 2012; Sherry et al., 2017). In general, participatory approaches such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) have been used on a regular basis when analyzing SFD projects and programs (Burnett, 2015; Sherry et al., 2017). Furthermore, participatory approaches are modifiable into guiding study models or frameworks, for example in the form of the Sport for Development Impact Assessment Tool (SDIAT) (Burnett & Hollander, 2007), Participatory Social Interaction Research (PSIR) (Collison & Marchesseault, 2018), Post-colonial-feminist Participatory Action Research (PFPAR) (Hayhurst et al., 2015) and the qualitative Sport in development settings **(**SPIDS) framework – where reflection and reflexivity are given a special role in sport and development scholarship (Schulenkorf et al., 2020). The latter comes on the back of research by Spaaij and colleagues (2018) who examined a variety of participatory SFD studies which showed particular deficits in reflection and critical questioning of the researchers' roles (reflexivity) – an area that has previously been highlighted as a critical yet understudied space in SFD research (Darnell, Giulianotti, et al., 2018).

Designs and methods

In our analysis, we identified 23 publications related to the designs and methods used in the field of SFD. In their integrative review of SFD scholarship, Schulenkorf et al. (2016, p. 35) identified a "potpourri of research approaches and methods" with more qualitative designs being used overall and fewer quantitative or mixed methods designs. For data collection, mainly traditional qualitative methods have been used, including observations, interviews, and document analyses (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). The benefits of innovative, creative, culturally appropriate, and technologically savvy designs and methods are only starting to be realized. Specifically, methods that use innovative media technologies, such as videos, iPads or social media, as well as diverse creative and flexible survey types such as drawings, poems, stories of change or participatory mapping have been suggested as critical elements for methodological advancement (Darnell et al., 2016; Luguetti et al., 2022; Preti, 2012; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Sherry et al., 2017).

It is logical that a field of research – which is shaped by

researchers from various disciplines with different theoretical approaches and educational backgrounds – cannot show unity with regard to research paradigms or methodological procedures. However, the review uncovered that in the specific SFD context, more seems to be at play. At first glance, it may be seen as merely a methodological dispute that takes place in empirical social research, i.e., a split between supporters of the quantitative and qualitative 'camps'. On closer examination, however, the dispute goes beyond the discussion about the 'right' methodological approaches and leads to fundamental debates about power and ownership, including top-down and bottom-up (research) approaches in development work. Here, discussion topics go beyond the value and rigor of scientific traditions (positivist vs. interpretivist, constructivist or critical paradigms) and extend to the research perspective of researchers from the Global North ('colonizer') evaluating projects and organizations in the Global South; the conceptualization and definition of 'development' in general; and the production of new knowledge and localized, Indigenous voices in particular (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Whitley et al., 2020).

In this context, critics often question positivist approaches and are concerned that associated methods and top-down procedures (external researchers assessing local projects without local contributions) reinforce neo-colonial power structures and hegemonic systems while suppressing local knowledge production (Kay, 2012; Lindsey & Grattan, 2012). Opposing voices portray this as a critique of militant "liberation methodologists" (Coalter, 2013a, p. 38) who defy reality and who seek to put neo-colonial attitudes on par with positivist methodological approaches whilst avoiding the much-needed defining and measuring of outcomes and impacts (Whitley et al., 2020). Overall, the repartee is sometimes more, sometimes less extensive across all kinds of publications (e.g., Coalter, 2013a; Darnell et al., 2016; Kay 2012; Lindsey & Grattan, 2012) which leads Massey and Whitley (2019, p. 177) to suggest that to meaningfully address this issue, it would be better to have a more nuanced debate on methodology: "Rather than lay blanket critiques across different research paradigms and epistemologies, there is a need to discuss higher levels of sophistication in both instrumental/positivist (i.e., quantitative) and descriptive/critical (i.e., qualitative) SDP research". In building on this recommendation, researchers are now increasingly trying to bridge the gap between the two main streams. In other words, in an attempt to avoid an 'either-or' perspective scholars have started to engage in more nuanced discussions for more inclusive theoretical and methodological solutions (Whitley et al., 2020). Here, the previously discussed use of theoretical approaches that focus on systemic interrelationships – such as the concept

of policy coherence (Lindsey & Darby, 2019) or actor-network theory (Darnell, Giulianotti, et al., 2018) – could be valid ways forward.

Impacts and sustainability

Overall, we identified 44 publications related to impacts and sustainability aspects. Due to its label as a "low-cost, high-impact tool" for international development (Kay & Dudfield, 2013, p. 13), sport is – perhaps more than any other tool – under pressure to prove what it can contribute to various development outcomes (Levermore, 2011). Hence, impact studies have become a popular approach to justify sport-based development programs. However, critical voices have objected the instrumentalization of impact studies and have accused both implementers and donors to mainly use them as a vehicle that legitimizes their investments and shows alleged "proof" of the effects of their programs (Burnett, 2015; Preti, 2012; Schulenkorf et al., 2016).

The difficulty of tracking, measuring, or even isolating the 'sport-made' impacts and thus closing the attribution gap has long been recognized in the SFD domain (Coalter, 2013b, 2013a; Levermore, 2011). In fact, in some cases attempts to measure sport-specific contributions have been declared as impossible (Lindsey & Chapman, 2017). While there is agreement in regards to the criticality of making impacts 'visible' (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2019), impact attributions are therefore formulated more 'cautiously' (Kay & Dudfield, 2013; Schulenkorf, 2017) and scholars mainly talk about (often indirect) contributions to specific development objectives or the SDGs more broadly (Lindsey & Chapman, 2017). Perhaps the exaggeration of sport being an "all-purpose social vaccine" (Coalter, 2013a, p. 55) has finally been demystified, or – as Schulenkorf (2017, p. 244) has put it – "it seems that the SFD community has largely cured its own biggest social ill; namely, the simplistic view that sport, and even SFD, automatically leads to positive social, cultural, educational, health-related and/or economic development".

Popular across the natural sciences, RCTs – also known as the 'gold standard' of evaluations – are supposed to close attribution gaps and isolate the effects of an intervention by comparing changes of randomly selected intervention and control groups (Mueller & Albrecht, 2016; Scriven, 2008). In the SFD context, this rigorous yet complex design is rarely feasible. Although there is an increasing demand for robust SFD study designs (Darnell et al., 2019; Kaufman et al., 2014; Lindsey & Darby, 2019; Massey & Whitley, 2019), researchers are weary that in addition to methodological and practical challenges of RCT trials –

including limited opportunities for control groups – ethical challenges remain. Specifically, interventions have to be controlled and standardized in order to explain causal mechanisms in a way that may neglect the specific needs and concerns of vulnerable populations, including individual children (Mueller & Albrecht, 2016). This also speaks to a wider issue of quantitative impact studies which tend to neglect the social context of programs. Here, internal and external factors and their influence on an intervention's effects are often not appropriately considered or underestimated. Associated social, managerial and political factors such as internal organizational structures, staff rotations, project durations as well as political systems and cultural peculiarities do have a great influence on the impacts and outcomes of a project or program, and they tend to be largely ignored in RCT assessments (Lindsey, 2017; Stockmann, 2006).

While the absence of RCT studies can be explained in part by the factors above, the limited use of ex-post evaluations – meaning studies which are set-up after the completion of a project in order to assess long-term effects (impacts) and sustainability – remains a surprise, specifically as there are also readily available theoretical models for impact evaluation in evaluation research (Oberndörfer et al., 2010). Aspects of sustainability (in terms of durability) of donor-dependent SFD projects have previously been questioned and criticized (Lindsey, 2017). Furthermore, (long-term) ecological impacts have been discussed in the context of sport and environmental issues (Darnell, 2019) and 'thought about' in the context of the S4D Framework (Schulenkorf, 2012). However, the issue of sustainability per se has received little explicit practical attention in SFD evaluations and research. In fact, with the notable exception of Lindsey's (2008) conceptual work, suitable theoretical approaches or assessment frameworks have not yet been developed (Sherry & Osborne, 2019). As the findings of the category "approaches based on scope" have already shown, no studies could be identified that explicitly focus on the post project/program phase ("ex-post"), highlighting the persistent lack of focus on researching long-term effects and aspects of sustainability. Again, these omissions provide a worrying status quo as it has long been argued that conducting more ex-post evaluations on completed projects is crucial to assess processes (e.g., the influence of project planning, management, and follow-up on sustainability), sustainability (i.e., the fate of projects after funding), and overall SFD impact (i.e., intended and unintended effects, identify factors of success and failure).

CONCLUSION

The present scoping study aimed to review and subsequently advance our understanding of research and evaluation in SFD. The study was underpinned by the newly designed ERF which has been introduced to the SFD space as a conceptual guide that provides an appropriate lens from which to conduct evaluation research. In SFD circles, evaluation research has struggled to receive the explicit attention it deserves and as such, the ERF framework makes an important conceptual contribution for the sector and beyond, as it draws attention to evaluation-relevant aspects, such as the timing of studies (ex-ante, on-going, ex-post) or the objectives and function of studies.

Against this background, our study uncovered several key findings and implications. Firstly, by examining SFD research through the lens of evaluation research, it became apparent that there is a lack of clarity surrounding research, evaluation and M&E terminologies resulting in imprecise study foci and associated debates around research objectives and researcher roles. In other words, our review uncovered one critical source of misunderstandings and misalignment amongst researchers, and a potential obstacle to stronger interdisciplinary engagement in research. Secondly, concerning approaches employed in SFD generally, our review highlights a limited progression of theoretical advancements in SFD, with researchers from a wide range of disciplines merely relying on the approaches and concepts they already know. Purposeful engagement across disciplines and innovative developments for new theoretical concepts related to SFD are still underutilized, despite a number of promising avenues including systems approaches or sustainability concepts that deserve to be investigated further. Overall, the limited utilization of existing concepts and lack of interdisciplinary collaboration remains a challenge, despite recent efforts to bring together approaches from various disciplines.

On the basis of the findings – and in order to tackle identified challenges with an end-goal of shifting towards more interdisciplinary engagement in SFD – three steps are suggested as a way forward:

(1) *Establishing effective communication strategies to create a shared language:* The review reinforced the criticality of this first step. A clearer differentiation and communication of the type of research being conducted (e.g., basic research, evaluation research, research based on M&E) is necessary to establish mutual understanding. In this context, it is important to consider evaluation not just as a component of M&E, but also as a segment of applied social research that utilizes a broad range of social science theories, concepts and methods. One initial measure would be to create a cross-disciplinary SFD glossary that integrates evaluation and research elements. Another option could be for researchers to provide a clear description within studies of how the research – specifically studies with quantitative or mixed-methods designs – was undertaken and how this may have impacted the study, including categorizing the role of the researcher in relation to the study ('reflexivity').

(2) *Examining neighboring fields to unify approaches and reconcile methods:* By reviewing and summarizing approaches from different disciplines in the form of handbooks and brainstorming articles, researchers have started to examine the different disciplines connected to SFD. A critical next step would be to deepen the engagement with other fields of study and to identify further crucial theoretical elements for SFD, focusing on so far neglected but important theoretical models and approaches (e.g., concepts focusing on quality, impacts, sustainability and systems from development studies and evaluation research). However, instead of just imposing familiar theories stemming from their own disciplines, researchers should also engage in exploring some of the previously proposed SFD theories and concepts in order to assess their feasibility and applicability in different contexts. Such a sport-focused approach would allow for much needed critical engagement with SFD conceptualizations as well as opportunities for theoretical and methodological advancement 'from within' the discipline (see also Chalip, 2006; Welty Peachey et al., 2021). Taken together – and acknowledging the inherent complexity involved in combining or reconciling fields for interdisciplinary research – we argue the recommendation of 'spreading out' to other theoretical fields does not have to come at the expense of 'diving deeper' into existing SFD conceptualizations.

(3) *Identifying shared perspectives and interests on problems:* SFD scholars have already identified key development areas that are critical for future engagement and collaboration between organizations and researchers, such as social inequality, environmental issues, safeguarding, refugees and social entrepreneurship (Giulianotti et al., 2019). There is also a shared interest in different impact mechanisms and processes of SFD - i.e., explanations for why certain impacts and developments occur when using SFD (Whitley et al., 2022). These subjects form an opportune foundation for collaboration, as already realized by various scholarly initiatives, including webinars organized by the authors of "Moving beyond disciplinary silos: the potential for transdisciplinary research in Sport for Development", led by Meredith Whitley in October 2022. As a consequence of this exchange amongst SFD researchers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds from across the globe, working

groups were established to explore different SFD-relevant subjects, including 'livelihoods', 'policy', 'system thinking and collective impact', and 'education, youth development and life skills'. With a first step towards shared perspectives now realized, it will be intriguing to observe if and how interdisciplinary contributions to SFD research will emerge from these working groups in the future.

Embarking on this suggested three-step approach necessitates resources and a shared commitment. Familiarizing oneself with the theoretical concepts of other fields, engaging in dialogues and debates, and gaining a comprehensive understanding require both willingness and availability. Regrettably, university structures often fall short in providing said resources, particularly to early-career scholars who often struggle with limited time and financial capabilities (Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015). We conclude that evaluating SFD programs is complex for a multitude of inter-related reasons, including their multifaceted nature; their transdisciplinary approaches; and the diverse range of goals they aim to achieve. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative approach that involves active engagement from researchers, practitioners, and the wider SFD community.

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Original Research

Navigating Neoliberalism: The Realities and Challenges of a Veteran Sport Programme in the UK

Rebecca O'Hanlon[1], Chris Mackintosh[2] and Holly Thorpe[3]

[1] Division of Sport Exercise and Health, University of the West of Scotland
[2] Manchester Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University
[3] School of Health, University of Waikato

Corresponding author email: rebecca.ohanlon@uws.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of neoliberalism on the design, development, and delivery of a Sport for Development (SFD) programme in the United Kingdom and is the first to do so using an empirical case study globally focusing on military veterans. Drawing on an 18-month ethnography, this study reveals the neoliberal pressures faced by individuals working in SFD in relation to achieving programme aims, developing productive partnerships, and shaping delivery approach. We argue that the neoliberal context, within which this SFD programme is operating, limits the potential of such programmes to achieve their social justice objectives and the possible scope of their impact. Less attention should be placed on quantifiable measures and performance frameworks, and those working in SFD should challenge the neoliberal structures that limit their necessary and important work. We call for SFD programmes and staff to adopt alternative and sustainable approaches that allow them to address complex objectives, demonstrate this in participatory and innovative ways, and maintain productive partnerships. This paper offers an empirical example of the broader social forces limiting the potential of SFD for achieving their stated aims, and the novel policy challenges experienced by staff as they work to navigate neoliberal pressures and expectations.

Navigating Neoliberalism: The Realities and Challenges of a Veteran Sport Programme in the UK

Since its introduction during the 1980's, under Margaret Thatcher as Conservative Prime Minister, British society has been underpinned by a neoliberal ideological agenda (Dowling et al., 2023; Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013). Underst-ood as a broad model with political, cultural, and economic implications, neoliberalism is not confined to the United Kingdom (UK) but has far reaching effects on governance and management structures (Bjarsholm & Norberg, 2021; Cleophas & Le Grange, 2020; John & McDonald, 2020). It has been recognised that some effects have significant implications for sport policy, public perceptions of sport, and the development of community sport (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013; Rich et al., 2022). Scholars have argued that sport is both a reflection and driver of neoliberalism, embodying and embedding neoliberal ideas about individualism, competition, and market-oriented thinking, however this has largely been focused on the organised, competitive, and commercial nature of elite sport (Coakley, 2011; John & McDonald, 2020).

In many contexts around the world, Sport for Development (SFD) is required to operate within a neoliberal context, and this inevitably aligns these provisions to the neoliberal agenda, due to the need for funding, a supportive organisational structure and, for some SFD objectives, to develop programme participants as active and contributing citizens (Coakley, 2011; Doa & Chin, 2021; Ruck & Moustakas, 2023). Neoliberalism is woven into the social order and ultimately SFD is a domain where neoliberal agendas are at play, and can present additional layers of complexity and difficulty, which must be negotiated by leaders, staff and participants.

Drawing on the first ever 18-month ethnography of a SFD programme based in the UK, which uses sport as a tool to support veterans undertaking the military to civilian transition, this paper illustrates how the neoliberal context impacts upon and influences the design, development and

delivery of SFD. This provides an original contribution to both the applied and theoretical understanding of SFD. While neoliberal influences on SFD have been considered in previous academic studies (Armstrong, 2004; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012), this research is the first to offer a managerial analysis of what neoliberalism means for the daily operation and implementation of SFD in a Global North context. The neoliberal partnership structures evident within this SFD work are also examined, with the aim to understand how they are navigated by those working in this field within daily operations. This research therefore increases understanding of neoliberal influences on SFD design, development, and delivery by identifying the realities and challenges faced by those working in the domain. This also responds to a call from McSweeney et al. (2020, p.4), within this journal, for further work that "unpacks the complexities, relations of power, and neoliberal structures of SFD" and uncovers "the way in which SFD programs, participants and organizations navigate, perpetuate, and/or resist a neoliberal ethos".

The original empirical case study presented here reveals the neoliberal pressures faced by individuals working in SFD. We argue that, in managing the demands of the neoliberal context, focus is detracted from the core purpose of the SFD provision and, while this is concentrated at a local level, we contend that this has significant implications for the wider field of SFD. We consider the partnerships and collaborations that are formed both within the delivery organisation and across their external networks, and how these are shaped by neoliberal forces, as well as the overall delivery approach. This article concludes with a call to SFD funders and organisations to challenge and consider embracing alternative approaches to the existing and rigid neoliberal structures and frameworks.

Neoliberalism and Meritocracy

While neoliberalism is not uniform across any geographic region, it continues to persist globally and often underlies structural, institutional, and substantial changes (Kashwan et al., 2019). As a concept, neoliberalism can span several domains but also be difficult to pin down. Springer et al. (2016, p.2) define it as "the new political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasise market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility … [and] the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life". A core pillar of neoliberal ideology is meritocracy, and that people will get what they deserve based on their efforts and personal achievements (Bettache et al., 2020; Verhaeghe, 2014). This need to identify and measure success has facilitated the development of neoliberal evaluation systems, focusing on quantitative and

rigid measures of production, and individual contributions to it, where quality is determined by measurability (Verhaeghe, 2014). Verhaeghe (2014) critiques these systems, explaining that they can foster an atmosphere of frustration, fear, paranoia, and competition, as well as diminishing a sense of belonging or team building. In practice, this can create worry around job stability and a fixation on being able to demonstrate individual achievements and success.

Neoliberalism has been subjected to various critiques across the academic literature. It has been argued that neoliberalism as a concept is now ambiguous and often used, but poorly defined (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009; Venugopal, 2015). Some academics contend that it is so assorted there is no use in applying the term, yet not doing so does not recognise its widespread influences (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010; Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009; Ferguson, 2006; Kashwan et al., 2019). Neoliberalism has been described as a super-sized and omni-present model which fails to account for contextual variance, with cautions that it should not be understood as a singular set of ideas presented from a single source (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010; Mudge, 2008; Plehwe et al., 2005; Venugopal, 2015). Neoliberalism has also been criticised for condoning social inequalities and legitimising the suffering of disadvantaged groups, in the attribution of social hierarchies to innate individual differences and acquired traits (Bettache et al., 2020). Meritocracy increases the extent to which inequalities are justified, with emphasis on competition and reward based on effort and success (Bettache et al., 2020). Despite these criticisms, it is evident that the neoliberal ideology has maintained, and influenced society in a variety of ways, suggesting that there are multiple neoliberalisms at work (Rose, 2022). In the context of this paper, neoliberalism is understood as a political ideology that has consequences for management thinking and practices, in which neoliberal ideas are implemented and realised through managerialism (Lynch & Grummell, 2018; Thompson, 2016).

SFD and Neoliberalism

This paper focuses on SFD, defined as "the intentional use of sport, physical activity and play to attain specific development objectives" (Sport for Development Peace International Working Group, 2009, p.305), and this is an area that, intersecting with neoliberalism, is shifting and continuing to present new knowledge and insight. Governments, namely in the UK and America, have increasingly reduced funds available to provisions that support basic human rights, both locally and abroad. This playing out of the neoliberal agenda, featuring the

re-tasking of the state and the extension of competitive markets, creates spaces, previously occupied by government, for social justice oriented non-governmental and third sector organisations to now fill (Harvey, 2007; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012). These organisations use sport as a vehicle to achieve social justice objectives and have proliferated within the field of SFD, to the extent that their position has become accepted and expected in the place of government involvement.

Yet, it has been argued by Weems et al. (2017) that the work of these organisations within SFD, at best provide a limited response to social issues and at worst create further inequalities, while their position is rationalised and intensified by neoliberal logic. It has been contested by scholars that, while these third sector and non-governmental organisations working in SFD largely have altruistic, philanthropic, and benevolent ambitions, many are now independent and profit making, promoting features of the pervading neoliberal ideology (Armstrong, 2004; Collison et al., 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012). This move towards increasing professionalisation is not one of choice but necessity, as a strategy to navigate the competition for scarce resources and funding (Hayhurst et al., 2011; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012). Armstrong (2004) describes how some of these organisations, while indulging in market-centred approaches, are more interested in signing sporting celebrities to promote their cause, rather than using sport to facilitate development. Ultimately, they set out to resist and transform the inequalities and injustices of society, but the marketisation of their work compromises the goals they can achieve (Hayhurst et al., 2011; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012). Thorpe & Rinehart (2012) assert that the organisations with the best survival rates are those who adopt a more compromising stance and meet the development agendas of their funders. Thus, the original altruistic, philanthropic, and benevolent ambitions are compromised for the sake of surviving in a neoliberal society and market.

SFD plays an important role in developing connections, making partnerships, and linking stakeholders together, yet there are significant tensions evident in such relations (Hayhurst et al., 2011, Welty Peachey et al., 2018). Within SFD, organisations form partnerships and networks to mobilise resources, secure funding, assist programme implementation, and ultimately manage the uncertainties of neoliberal times (Burnett, 2009; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Raw et al., 2021; Welty Peachey et al., 2018; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). These partnerships and networks are thought to address resource deficiency and instability, build capacity, provide beneficial opportunities to stakeholders, and, when underpinned by quality, effectiveness, and a

consensus towards a collective goal, they can enable the achievement of benevolent ambitions (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Raw et al., 2021). Despite these advantages, problematic relationships exist, as they are difficult to form and maintain, and many fail (Hayhurst et al., 2011; Welty Peachey et al., 2018). This can be due to the pressure of funding applications, or the formation of partnerships in the spirit of competition, profit, and survival, rather than being focused on social justice objectives (Hayhurst et al., 2011). The competitive nature of SFD makes true collaboration difficult, but it is suggested that successful partnerships are possible when the collaborative process is continually nurtured (Welty Peachey et al., 2018; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009).

The development of neoliberal evaluation systems, responding to the need to identify and measure success in a quantitative and rigid manner, has implications for SFD (Verhaeghe, 2014). Oatley & Harris (2021) explain that the role of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is to produce data that is measured against agreed outcomes, inform funders, and hold organisations accountable. Yet, there are significant challenges around producing data appropriate to the existing neoliberal evaluation systems that also captures the complexities of designing, implementing, and developing a social justice-oriented provision. The frameworks for MEL, privileged within the neoliberal agenda, focus on positivistic evidence and tracking changes, as opposed to facilitating evaluative thinking, examining impact, and incorporating practitioner knowledge (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Nicholls et al., 2011; Oatley & Harris, 2021). Hayhurst et al. (2021, p.195) describe this as "indicator culture", where emphasis is placed on demonstrating accountability, proving impact, and presenting objective data that addresses performance indicators, acting as a measure of success. This approach fails to reflect local interest or need, and limits the involvement of stakeholders, potentially contributing to the problematic partnerships discussed previously (Harris & Adams, 2014). Ultimately, these neoliberal evaluation systems, and their application to SFD, receive criticism as they limit the existing evidence base and the potential impact of work in this field (Coalter, 2010; Kay, 2009; Oatley & Harris, 2021). Oatley & Harris (2021), among other scholars (Coalter, 2009; Harris, 2018; Henry & Ko, 2014; Spaaij et al., 2018), advocate for more participatory based approaches, challenging the existing neoliberal demands in terms of what evidence or knowledge is considered legitimate, how it can be obtained, who is asking for it, and how it meets the needs of all the stakeholders involved (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Oatley & Harris, 2021).

This paper draws on an empirical case study, that used sport

as a tool to support veterans in their transition from the military, and offers a managerial analysis, to examine and illustrate the neoliberal pressures faced by individuals working in SFD to navigate partnerships and deliver this programme. Underpinned by a neoliberal partnership structure, in the absence of government involvement, we assert that the neoliberal context of delivery limits the programmes' scope and impact, as well as its potential to make contributions to broader policy objectives. While this case study concentrates on these implications at a local level, we contend that this has significant implications for the field of SFD. We conclude with a call to funders and organisations to identify and challenge the workings of neoliberal forces and consider embracing alternative approaches to doing SFD work.

Sport Policy in the Context of the UK

Sport policy in the UK has been characterised by duality, in its ability to contribute to wider social objectives such as community development, health, and readdressing social divisions, yet it has occupied a contested space on the margins of government policy discourse (Hylton, 2013). Since the mid-1960's, government has played a significant role in determining the direction of sport and this sustained interest began with the publication of the 1957 Wolfenden Report (Bloyce et al., 2008; Bloyce & Smith, 2010; Mackintosh, 2021; Wilson & Platts, 2018). Under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, as Conservative Prime Minister between 1970 and 1990, sport was a largely neglected and stagnant area of public policy (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013). Thatcher framed any government involvement in sport within a broader neoliberal agenda, including the privatisation of publicly owned organisations, the introduction of private sector provision of local government services and the market-based management of services, and the encouragement of market competition (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013; Wilson & Platts, 2018).

The economic processes of the 1980's have consequences on how sport development and management operate today, including the encouragement of market competition and the increase in private sector delivery (Wilson & Platts, 2018). John Major, who succeeded Thatcher as Leader of the Conservative Party, had a different approach to sport, yet it continued to be in tune with Thatcher's neoliberal ideology (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013; Wilson & Platts, 2018). Following Major, New Labour came to power with a modernising reform agenda, "combining neo-liberalism with a commitment to 'active government'" (Hall, 2007, p.119). Elite sport was prioritised and further legitimated following the success of the 2005 Olympic bid, triggering the modernisation of sport and Sport England. This was

characterised by approaches to management that brought the worlds of sport development and management closer together, and shifted relationships with sporting bodies from ones based on trust to those based on the neoliberal requirements of contract and audit (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013; Wilson & Platts, 2018). In a wider analysis of the four UK home nations, an increase in target setting culture and 'reward and punish' systems of goal focused regimes were evident, in addition to new patterns of partnership working in contractual areas of social outcome focused policy work, with a belief in the mantra of new public management (Dowling et al., 2023).

Case Study: The Vet Fit Programme

There is a long-standing evidence base outlining the benefits of engaging in regular sport and physical activity, relevant to social benefits (Mills et al., 2019), improvements to mental wellbeing (Conti & Ramos, 2018), and physical advantages (Lewis & Hennekens, 2016; Vogel et al., 2009). With a specific focus on military veterans, there is embryonic evidence that these benefits can be translated across to this target population group, with 15 studies published since 1996 relating to the use of sport and physical activity to support veterans across the military to civilian transition (O'Hanlon, 2021). Defining the transition has been contested in the military literature and examining this sits beyond the realms of this paper, however with the programme, the transition was understood as the time period and process of moving from the military to civilian life (Elnitsky et al., 2017). The sports programme at the focus of this study sought to build on this evidence base and was the first of its kind delivered in the UK. Running over a three-year period, this programme's operation was longer compared to the short- and medium-term provisions that have been delivered previously in other international contexts.

For anonymity, in this paper the programme will be referred to as the Vet Fit Programme (VFP). The VFP supported military veterans to stay active during and after their transition into civilian life and was the first with this focus to be funded by a non-governmental, UK sport department. The programme attended to challenges related to mental health, social isolation, and addiction, and was managed and delivered by an Active Partnership (AP). There are currently 43 APs covering 48 counties in England, with a core purpose to create an active nation (Active Partnerships, 2023) through community engagement, building understanding, brokering partnerships and influencing policy and practice (Beacom et al., 2023; Harris & Phillips, 2019). APs were initially hosted by local authorities but have increasingly moved towards independent voluntary

status, accessing funds from public and private streams to support their activities (Beacom et al., 2023). The VFP consisted of weekly sport and physical activity sessions delivered by sporting and community organisations, which the AP developed partnerships with. The weekly sessions included football, rugby, climbing, table-tennis, archery, yoga, and tai chi. The programme was open to male and female veterans of all ages, abilities, and branches of the military. Despite this, 82% of participants were male, resulting in some male only sessions, of which football was one. At the outset many sessions were veteran-only, with links into wider civilian communities, but over time they became more inclusive, facilitating the attendance of veterans and their families.

While attendance data was gathered, and offered some valuable insight, this evolved and shifted as the programme developed. Consequently, it was not possible to draw comparisons or undertake a full analysis, meaning the demographics and engagement figures of VFP participants could not be fully understood. As illustrated previously, MEL frameworks respond to the neoliberal need to identify and measure success in a quantitative and rigid manner (Oatley & Harris, 2021). Yet, this instance illustrates the challenges of producing this data within a complex and evolving programme, which resulted in an insufficient data set that was unable to tell the story of participation. Despite this neoliberal framework being a part of the VFP, this paper stands in contrast to this, drawing on qualitative data, to examine the neoliberal realities and challenges faced by those working in the VFP.

METHODOLOGY

Underpinned by social constructivism (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), this research adopted an ethnographic approach to examine how a SFD programme supported the transition of veterans from the military into civilian life in the Northwest of England. Ethical approval was granted in May 2019 from the Manchester Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board. From this date, the ethnography spanned 18 months, during which time Author 1 was immersed in the VFP. This immersion encompassed the sport and physical activity sessions delivered on the programme, as well as organisational ethnography (Kitchen, 2017) where the researcher was embedded, as an observer, in the AP working environment. This paper focuses on the elements of organisational ethnography, encompassing the researchers' immersion into office spaces, stakeholder meetings and other settings relevant to the design, organisation, and delivery of the programme. This was with the aim to observe and understand the realities and challenges of organising,

developing, and delivering a SFD programme for military veterans. Broader findings of this project, that sit outside the realms of this paper, have been published elsewhere (O'Hanlon, 2021), as have researcher reflections on the ethnographic process, considering gender dimensions, the role and position of the researcher, and the influence of the researchers' identity and experiences (O'Hanlon et al., 2023). The AP acted as a gatekeeper, providing full access to the programme and work environment. The ethnographic data consisted of over 250 hours of observations from the APs working environment, and 14 interviews with AP staff and stakeholders from partner organisations who supported programme delivery (Table 1). Participants were selected for interview using purposive sampling (Neuman, 2014), informed by the research aims and judgement of the ethnographer, who was immersed in the field. To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout. All participants provided both written and verbal informed consent prior to being involved in the study and were made aware at the outset how these results would be shared and disseminated.

Table 1

Role Information of Interviewed Stakeholders

Participant	Employment Sector	Job Title	Role within the Programme	Interview Format
Alex	Active Partnership	Senior Development Officer	Programme lead	3 interviews; 2 in person and 1 online
Ben	Active Partnership	Development Manager	Responsible for securing initial funding, but no further involvement	1 in person interview
Callum	Sport Development	Engagement Coach	Partner organisation who delivered one activity session on the programme	1 in person interview
Daniel	Veteran Support	Operations Manager	Partner organisation who supported the recruitment of veterans into the programme	1 in person interview
Emily	Veteran Support	Partnerships Manager	Partner organisation involved in securing initial funding, but limited further involvement	1 in person interview
Fred	Sport Development	Community Development Manager	Partner organisation who organised multiple activity sessions on the programme	1 online interview
Gareth	Sport Development	Project Leader & Coach	Partner organisation who delivered one activity session on the programme	1 in person interview
Hannah	Sport Development	Community Development Manager	Partner organisation who delivered one activity session on the programme	1 in person interview
Ian	Active Partnership	Senior Officer	Line manager of the programme, and became	1 in person interview

			increasingly involved in the programme due to organisational change	
Jessica	Active Partnership	Development Officer	Supported the daily running and delivery of the programme	2 online interviews
Kate	Active Partnership	Development Officer	Supported the daily running and delivery of the programme, and responsible for the mental wellbeing programme objectives	1 online interview

Observations were handwritten in a field diary and typed up following fieldwork, while interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2010) was used to make sense of the data, and this was an ongoing approach which occurred alongside data collection. Initially, an indwelling period (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was undertaken, becoming familiar with the data (Smith & Monforte, 2020). Themes, relationships between themes, conceptual comments and narratives were next identified and noted, using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. To develop this further, key moments (Sullivan, 2012) were identified relevant to the research aim, and noted in an Excel document. Analytical questioning then occurred to allow for detailed analysis, guided by questions proposed by Frank (2010, 2012) and extended by Smith and Monforte (2020). During the analysis and write up process, Authors 2 and 3 further supported the development of the research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Internal Organisational Structures

Typically, APs are strategic organisations with a remit to develop insight, broker partnerships, and influence policy and practice (Dowling et al, 2023; Harris & Phillips, 2019; Mackintosh, 2021). Thus, their role in managing, developing, and delivering the VFP was a deviation from their usual work. Three AP staff were assigned to the VFP, overseen by a line manager who held a strategic responsibility as opposed to coordinating programme delivery. It was observed that the structures and hierarchies within the AP were influential to the VFP, and the staff assigned to it. There was a clear staff hierarchy, and it was observed that this created an atmosphere of fear, frustration and competition for a variety of reasons. This was first relevant to promotions:

It was announced that [2 staff members] had been promoted, but this was while others were still waiting to hear back about their promotions and pay rises. I also heard that [a staff member] wasn't happy because [a promoted member of staff] now sits above them despite being less experienced, and that [another staff member] is annoyed because they are having to take on more work while a colleague is on maternity leave and is not getting a pay rise to reflect this. [A promoted staff member] said there is a lot of anger in the office so it is a bit uncomfortable, and they felt they couldn't be happy about their promotion (Fieldwork Notes).

This observation demonstrates the frustration felt by some in the workplace, as well as the evident competition between staff to be recognised and rewarded for the level of work they are undertaking. The staff members referred to here include some of those working on the VFP, suggesting that these wider discussions pertaining to promotions and pay rises across the AP, not only impacted them, but also diverted attention away from their work on the VFP. It could be suggested that staff were more concerned with these conversations, rather than the core priorities of their work role. This is a helpful illustration of Verhaeghe's (2014) criticism of neoliberalism, in which he suggests that neoliberal systems can foster an atmosphere of frustration, fear, paranoia and competition, diminish a sense of belonging, and encourage a fixation on being able to demonstrate individual achievements so it is appropriately rewarded. Similarly, Bettache et al. (2020) comment on meritocracy and the emphasis placed on competition and the distribution of rewards based on effort and success.

This need for staff to demonstrate their work, effort and success was felt within the AP and ultimately diverted attention away from core work objectives. For example, Kate, who worked on the VFP, explained that she: "... constantly felt against the clock being part time, and then six months in and not having anything tangible to show or measure …". Her concerns here do not relate to meeting objectives relevant to the VFP or being on track with programme development, instead she is worried about not having "anything tangible to show or measure". Leaning into both meritocracy and neoliberal evaluation systems, focus has been diverted from her responsibility to develop the mental wellbeing objectives of the programme, to concentrate on ensuring her work is being seen, reported and accounted for, so it can be rewarded. This reflects broader criticisms of neoliberal MEL frameworks, which focus on positivistic evidence, tracking change, and encourage an indicator culture (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Nicholls et al., 2011; Oatley & Harris, 2021), ultimately diverting attention from core SFD objectives.

The central aims of VFP were to address mental health, social isolation and addiction and, as complex issues that are tied to contextual factors and broader dynamic processes, these are difficult to quantify and measure (Mellsop & Wilson, 2006). Therefore, acknowledging the challenge of reporting the work required to address these complex objectives, it is ultimately stopped or put aside in favour of activities that can be easily reported and measured. This suggests that the core VFP aims are never fully achieved, but other work which can be more readily quantified is undertaken and rewarded. Connecting this to the field of SFD, this could have significant implications where development objectives are never fully tackled due to the overriding need to provide evidence and tangible measures for reward and success.

External Organization Structures

The neoliberal context of delivery also extended beyond the confines of the AP to influence the partnerships, collaborations, and wider structures they belonged to. The relationship between the AP and programme funder, Sport England, was highly influential and shaped the deliverers' decision making. As the AP were the recipients of funding from Sport England, this influence followed a top-down approach, in which the AP were required to meet the demands asked of them. Not doing so, or challenging these demands, placed them at risk of losing funding or disrupting the working relationship. This was illustrated by Ian, the line manager overseeing the staff working on the VFP, who commented: "... Sport England asked us for a lot more participants than we've got, so although we're not bound by that … I'd still like to see more people involved …". It is evident here that Sport England had set the AP targets around participant numbers. The modernisation of Sport England encompassed the adoption of neoliberal techniques, including the creation of a performance management framework and development of robust reporting procedures (Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Houlihan & Green, 2009), to ensure and increase accountability across the sporting sector. Consequently, Sport England now imposes quantitative measurements of performance, programme quality, production, and impact. This requirement to meet participant numbers, as outlined by Ian, illustrates these neoliberal techniques and, while Ian claims that they are not bound to this figure, he still strives to meet it. This was echoed by Hannah, who worked for a partner organisation and contributed to the VFP:

I think it is difficult because when you apply for funding, you write down how many you expect, and the funder then bases your total money on how many and works out price per head, so you feel a little bit under pressure to hit those

numbers.

These comments suggest that the rigid and quantitative measures imposed by Sport England place some degree of pressure on staff to ensure they are met, with the intention to maintain access to funding and a good relationship with the funder. This is also supported by comments from Alex, the Vet Fit Programme lead, who stresses the value of quantitative measures and outcomes: "... that's really important to gain an audience for the bosses, for people who are looking to sponsor you or support you … people like insight, like the numbers …".

Alex links the focus on quantitative measures with capturing the interest of bosses, sponsors, and advocates. This is an illustration of meritocracy influencing Alex's work, where his attention is redirected away from core programme aims, as these are complex and unquantifiable, and focused on quantitative measures of production and quality which can be monitored and evaluated by Sport England (Verhaeghe, 2014). This connects to previous discussions on the internal structure of the AP and the many distractions that remove attention from the central aims of the VFP, relating to addiction, isolation, and mental health. Thus, the neoliberal context and its associated evaluation systems are enforced both internally and from above, via the APs relationship with the programme funder.

Despite Sport England's requests for quantitative performance measures, their approach to overseeing the VFP was one they undertook from a distance. For both the AP and other partners involved, this was a surprise given the sum of money provided to fund the programme:

A Sport England representative is looking after the project, and they instantly managed expectations and made clear that they will not be on site, it will only be via phone. This is a real hands-off approach for quite a significant sum of money… (Fieldwork Notes).

This management of expectations by the Sport England representative, suggests that their understanding of the programme, and its impact, will be developed through their limited communications with the AP and the quantitative measures they receive. While this is deemed appropriate, it does raise questions if this level of information is enough to hold the AP accountable, as per the remit developed through the modernisation process, to ensure public funds are spent appropriately (Houlihan & Green, 2009). Given that the aims of the VFP centre on addressing mental health, social isolation, and addiction, it could also be argued that the lack of wider MEL processes, beyond quantitative measures, does not enable the funder to fully appreciate if

these aims have been addressed. The focus on participation figures, as raised by Ian, does not appropriately capture or accurately reflect the VFPs aims, outcomes and impacts. Instead, the use of stories, participant quotes, and participatory approaches may be more suitable (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Oatley & Harris, 2021). This is an ongoing criticism of SFD that has been recognised to impact broader work in the field and its value (Coalter, 2010; Kay, 2009; Oatley & Harris, 2021), as well as contributing to problematic partnerships (Harris & Adams, 2014). Sport England's removed stance, combined with their requirements for quantitative measures of production and quality, created a complex partnership for the AP to navigate. While the AP were able to maintain a good relationship with the funder, in meeting their neoliberal measures, this increased competition with other external organisations, working in the same area and vying for the same funds, resources and participants.

A requirement of receiving funds from Sport England was the development of partnerships to facilitate the VFP's implementation. While intentions were well placed, ultimately these partnerships were complex, not always productive, and formed under the pressure of meeting funding requirements. This offers a practical example of the academic criticisms made of collaboration within SFD (Hayhurst et al., 2011; Welty Peachey et al., 2018). In the VFP there were different reasons for the complexities and issues encountered across the collaborations, yet neoliberal features continued to be a significant influence. Underpinned by meritocracy (Bettache et al., 2020), many of the of the smaller organisations that supported the AP in promoting, designing, and delivering the VFP, expected a return for their contributions. These were quantifiable returns they could put towards their own MEL processes, however this prompted conflicts and issues as Fred, a staff member from a partner organisation, explains:

People spend time on the funding application and don't see any monetary return ... that's wrong because the time they spent on it should really have been with the reason of helping military veterans ... if they went into it giving time up thinking they will get a couple of grand on the back of this and they didn't, then that breeds the resentment.

Fred suggests that some organisations' motivation to be involved in the VFP centred around what they would get in return, specifically funds that can be used to evidence their inputs, efforts and success. This is primarily driven by the wider neoliberal context of the programme, in which organisations are under pressure from funders, bosses and advocates to present clear measures of quality and production, employing meritocracy to underpin their actions

(Bettache et al., 2020). Repercussions of this can have a significant detrimental impact, with organisations developing partnerships or becoming involved in initiatives to receive tangible reward, that they can report within their own MEL processes, as opposed to wanting to work together and share expertise to achieve a shared goal. When tangible rewards are not offered this can breed resentment and, as this example demonstrates, the primary purpose of supporting veterans is overlooked.

In addition to breeding resentment, these complex partnerships, particularly in SFD where resources are scarce, can also foster high levels of competition. Verhaeghe (2014) demonstrates this with a particular focus on workplaces, however this can also be mapped to the VFP, and the multiple partnerships involved. Given the niche area of the VFP, in that it was veteran focused and used sport as the tool for delivery, many partnerships were made with organisations who had a similar focus and objective. While this should encourage effective partnerships that are working towards a shared goal, in reality this was disrupted by competition for resources, funds, and programme participants. Alex explains: "... if someone else is doing something that you do, they see that as a threat, that you might get the funding that they want, and they are protecting themselves because they think they're doing it the right way...".

This demonstrates that having a shared goal was not something that connected organisations, but rather caused divisions. Instead of being recognised as potential partners, these organisations were seen as threats, challenging the notion put forward in the literature that, when underpinned by a consensus towards a collective goal, organisations are more likely to succeed in their benevolent ambitions (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Raw et al., 2021). Fred explores this further, to suggest that this threat and competition centres around the participants the programmes are wanting to work with:

... for people with very small budgets and very small staff, who are working hard to make an impact, then someone else comes in and, for want of a better word, takes away the people that they were working with, that breeds resentment quite quickly.

Fred works for a smaller organisation that is partnering with the AP on the VFP, and it could be argued that these comments are reflective of his own position. The AP's introduction of the VFP, has seemingly taken away participants and funds from smaller provisions that were already working in this area. Given that military veterans are a limited and declining population group, based on

Ministry of Defence statistics (2019), this is a small community within the wider population that they are competing to appeal to and engage with. This highlights and extends a current argument within the SFD literature that recognises these provisions as filling gaps in social services, traditionally provided by government and the public sector, helping participants survive amidst inequality rather than to challenging it (Eisenkraft Klein & Darnell, 2024; Hartman & Kwauk, 2011). Yet, this does not acknowledge the competition evident here when many of these services seek to fill the same service gap and the repercussions of a larger, possibly corporate backed, service (like the AP) entering this space and overshadowing the work of these smaller provisions.

From the perspective of the AP, Ben suggests that the partnerships are more one-sided, and these small organisations are using the AP to boost their own reporting figures:

They are accountable for the numbers of veterans they support and, from what I believe, if a veteran becomes a member that's classified as supporting them and that's what they're funded on, that's what their performance is based on. If they get members from [the Vet Fit Programme] that's a benefit, but if they refer no one on to it and it doesn't succeed, it doesn't make a difference to them ... it sometimes doesn't seem like we're working towards the same goal.

This brings to life the complexities that are intertwined with programme partnerships, again with neoliberal evaluation systems and meritocratic principles being highlighted (Bettache et al., 2020; Verhaeghe, 2014). Funding for these smaller organisations is seemingly distributed based on the number of membership registrations, which is equated to the provision of support, despite no evidence of this being provided. Therefore, while participation targets are being met, this suggests that there is no measurement or evaluation specific to the volume and quality of support being provided, and if this is effective or beneficial. It also suggests that these partner organisations have much to gain from this collaboration with the AP, in sharing participation figures and access to funds, but there is little accountability for them to input or contribute to the shared goal. This example illuminates some of the academic discussions around SFD partnerships, as this collaboration does appear to address resource deficiency, provide beneficial opportunities to stakeholders, and have a consensus towards a collective goal (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Raw et al., 2021). Yet, there is a sense that these partnerships are problematic, having been formed in the spirit of competition and under the pressure of funding

applications (Hayhurst et al., 2011). The smaller organisations in this example appear to be using their partnership with the AP, and contributions to the VFP, as a means to survive, rather than collaborating over a core purpose.

Delivery Approach

A common thread of the discussions thus far has been the distractions of operating within a neoliberal context, which has drawn the attention of the AP and partner organisations away from the core purpose of the VFP. As well as being evident across the internal structures of the AP and their external partnerships, this also has a significant influence on the chosen delivery approach. It has been acknowledged that the aim of the VFP, to support veterans in the military to civilian transition with a focus on social isolation, mental health, and addiction, is challenging to evaluate and assess using the quantitative measures that are privileged in the neoliberal context (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Nicholls et al., 2011; Oatley & Harris, 2021). Kate highlights this, explaining that: "... the anecdotal evidence comes out … I think it's very clear that there are strengths, and the connections are there, but it's a tricky one in terms of cold, hard evidence …".

This suggests that there was informal and anecdotal evidence of the VFP providing support to military veterans, relevant to the outlined aims. However, it is a challenge to present this as a quantifiable measure, which Kate describes as "cold, hard evidence". This is supported by Mellsop & Wilson (2006) who outline that complex issues, such as mental health, social isolation and addiction, are tied to contextual factors and broader processes which are difficult to quantify and measure. As these concepts cannot be easily measured, they then become overlooked, aligning to Verhaeghe's (2014, p.137) criticism of neoliberal society where "anything that can't be measured doesn't count", ultimately adjusting the programmes' delivery approach and focus. Instead of addressing challenges faced by veterans related to mental health, isolation, and addiction, the VFP was described by Alex, the programme lead, as "a social club and connector", overlooking the more significant and complex challenges faced by veterans in their transition to civilian life. This focus shift was also observed in some of the APs internal communications:

An email was sent to all staff which provided an update on the progress of [the Vet Fit Programme] and outlined 2 new areas it will focus on. It is interesting as they seem to be different to those set out at the start of the programme, with attention being completely removed from mental health, social isolation, and addiction. Instead, they want to

focus on developing and improving the delivery of physical activity for veterans and identify learnings that bring about long-term culture, behaviour and system change (Fieldwork Notes).

This instruction, shared across the organisation, implies that the focus of the programme has become less around veteran support, and more on the administration, management, and monitoring of the programme, to be able to demonstrate learnings and measurable impact. SFD uses sport and physical activity as a vehicle for development and social change (Coalter, 2010), and while this was the ambition at the outset of the VFP, this no longer appears to be a priority. Instead of focusing on the use of the VFP as a tool to support veterans undertaking the transition, and experiencing challenges related to mental health, social isolation and addiction, efforts are now concentrated on providing quantifiable measures of impact that are not directly relevant to these initial programme aims.

Firstly, attention was placed on the number of veterans attending the VFP sessions. Making connections to earlier discussions, this was a measure highlighted by Ian that had targets and requirements attached to it, as set by Sport England. However, this measure of attendance appears to ignore the levels of engagement and outcomes related to this. It was clear that the AP staff, working on the VFP, were willing to set aside the programmes' objectives in favour of ensuring their attendance figures were as high as possible. This was justified by Alex:

... we're quite passive in terms of the mental health stuff, even though that's our core thing. We don't go to people saying, we want you to come to this because we're worried about you being socially isolated, because as soon as you start using language like that people think it's for people who are broken or struggling, and that's absolutely not what it's about. We want it to feel like you just come to this as a veteran and there's no judgement, you're not waving a flag by doing that, other than I served and I want to do this session, and I'm going to enjoy it. If you get that benefit, people don't need to know about it, you might choose to talk about it if you want, but you don't have to. Every single aspect has been passive really.

Alex outlines the 'passive' approach to addressing the aims of the VFP which have since been embedded and championed. There is a belief that a direct approach to addressing mental health, social isolation, and addiction would impact on attendance levels and instigate judgement, with veterans being identified as broken or needing help. Instead, this passive approach relies on the assumption that sport and physical activity alone can achieve the desired

developmental objectives, and does not consider features of SFD to maximise this (Coalter, 2010). This approach has been criticised in the SFD literature (Bailey & Harris, 2020; Oatley & Harris, 2021; Spaaij & Schaille, 2021), yet a passive approach was adopted in the VFP, with the focus shifting to recording attendance rather than assessing the quality of support provided. While this discussion does not seek to identify if this is the correct approach or not, it does illustrate that veteran attendance was prioritised ahead of achieving the outlined programme objectives. This is because attendance can simply be measured quantitatively, however improvements or changes in veteran mental health, social isolation and addiction are much more difficult to measure in this way and, doing so would ignore important contextual factors (Mellsop & Wilson, 2006). Thus, in a neoliberal society, where "anything that can't be measured doesn't count" (Verhaeghe, 2014, p. 137), reporting and demonstrating the quality of the VFP through quantitative measures becomes more of a priority than achieving programme aims. The focus becomes less on the programme and critical factors that contribute to effective veteran support, and more on the administration, management, and monitoring that demonstrates measurable impact and quality (Verhaeghe, 2014).

A second example of concentrated efforts to provide quantifiable measures of impact and success, relates to sourcing funds. While sourcing additional funds is often a necessary task within SFD due to limited finances and resources (Raw et al., 2021; Welty Peachey et al., 2018), in the VFP this was also used as a measure of success and contributed to the programme's aims becoming increasingly blurred. Securing additional funds was recognised as a measure of the programme's success and quality, as demonstrated in a conversation between Author 1 and Alex who:

...let me know that they were successful in the £70,000 funding bid which they're going to use to add a mental health strand to the programme ... He was really pleased and said that it was more work, but it is exciting (Fieldwork Notes).

This was an interesting conversation where the funding was viewed as a significant marker of the VFP's success, and a measure that could be reported back to Sport England. Another interesting point raised here relates to the use of the money, in that it was being put towards a mental health strand. Alex recognises this requires additional work, despite it being a core aim of the programme from the outset. It could be argued that acquiring money specific to this cause, which is quantifiable and reportable, has brought this objective back into focus. The VFP also received

additional funds to: "… deliver bespoke sessions for wounded, injured and sick veterans, on the behalf of a partner organisation, with the potential to use this as an income generation tool, totalling approximately £100k a year" (Fieldwork Notes).

Alex also mentioned that he had hosted:

… initial talks with [the Health and Social Care Partnership and Combined Authority] about making [the Vet Fit Programme] a public health model, and securing long term funding that way, so it would be a long-term programme, that would expand into different areas.

It is evident from these examples, that gaining income was another quantitative measure employed to validate the quality of the VFP. The demands of neoliberal MEL systems have already been highlighted, including the focus on quantitative production, the need for frequent evaluations in which production and growth is quantified, and the exclusion of that which cannot be measured (Mellsop & Wilson, 2006; Verhaeghe, 2014). Securing additional funding was prioritised, to build income and expand the scope of the VFP and, while this was a quantitative measure used to demonstrate success, quality, and value, it had limited connection to, or influence on, the aims of the programme. Overall, meeting the demands of neoliberal MEL systems were prioritised ahead of addressing the programme aims and meeting the needs of its beneficiaries. Likewise, the multiple sources of income were accompanied with varying requirements, which further exacerbates the different ambitions that are now evident within the programme. These factors steer attention away from core objectives, to achieve the multiple and varied aims which are requirements of the new funds, and ultimately none of these aims or ambitions are achieved, or evidenced, in a convincing or wholly successful manner.

CONCLUSION

This empirical case study is the first to examine and offer a managerial analysis of the neoliberal pressures faced by individuals working in SFD, in the context of a provision for military veterans. While this novel focus on a military context is both necessary and helpful, the implications of this study are further reaching, given the global influence of neoliberalism (Kashwan et al., 2019) and the important and now expected work of SFD organisations, in place of government involvement (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2012). The findings presented here offer novel and significant insights into what neoliberalism means for the operation and implementation of SFD in the Global North, demonstrating scope to influence and shape the field of SFD beyond the

confines of military focused provisions. We argue that the neoliberal context, within which SFD is operating, is limiting the potential of programmes to achieve their social justice objectives, as well as restricting the scope of their impact.

Within this case study, neoliberal influences provided distractions that moved attention from programme aims and work roles, to instead focus on gathering quantifiable evidence and tangible measures that are demanded within neoliberal MEL frameworks (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Nicholls et al., 2011; Oatley & Harris, 2021). Consequently, work towards achieving programme objectives, relevant to the complex areas of mental health, addiction, and isolation, was stopped in favour of activities that were simpler to report and measure. These aims were overlooked in favour of a passive delivery approach, and meeting the neoliberal requirements surrounding programme administration, monitoring, and management. Accessing funds was also accompanied with neoliberal demands, as it was necessary to adhere to performance management frameworks that required measures of programme quality and impact. Yet arguably these did not appropriately capture or accurately reflect the complex programme aims (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Oatley & Harris, 2021). It is suggested that there needs to be a broader acceptance of alternative data forms, looking beyond quantifiable and measurable results, to place value on data gained via participatory research methods, ethnographies, narrative analysis and qualitative methods. These approaches may produce video, storytelling and community-led outputs, that offer rich and complex data, through which the processes occurring with programmes can be unpicked. A wider acceptance of this can ease the pressures faced by deliverers, allowing them to present their data in a format the aligns to their aims and objectives, rather than manipulating it into the measurable and quantifiable forms that are currently privileged.

The development of partnerships was necessary to access funds that facilitated programme implementation. These partnerships were complex and often driven by the receipt of tangible rewards, that organisations put towards their own MEL processes. Despite collaborating over shared aims and goals, the stakeholders were not united by this, but rather in competition for resources, funding, and participants. This challenges current consensus (Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Hayhurst et al., 2011; Raw et al., 2021), and suggests that the neoliberal context contributed to the development of problematic partnerships that were one-sided, lacked collective accountability, and overlooked shared goals. For productive partnerships to be developed, it is suggested that these need to be established in the early stages and throughout any programme, using community

development methods to understand the landscape the programme is being delivered in and how the expertise and resources shared across the partnership can be appropriately utilised. Driven by the desire to receive funding, this step is often skipped and forged as a reaction, rather than being built out of understanding a shared or local need and mobilizing resources to meet this.

Responding to the call of McSweeney et al. (2020), this paper has provided valuable insight into the neoliberal structures underpinning SFD, and how organisations and individuals working in SFD navigate the complexities and challenges associated with this. The findings presented have notable applied implications for other SFD organisations, as well as those responsible for funding provisions and undertaking MEL processes. We call for those working in SFD to challenge and resist the neoliberal structures that limit their necessary and important work, and adopt alternative approaches that allow them to address complex objectives, demonstrating this in participatory and innovative ways, and maintaining productive and collaborative partnerships. Of course, we are not the first to do so. With a focus on MEL processes, Jeanes & Lindsey (2014) have previously advocated for a move away from collecting evidence towards an approach that prioritizes the development of understanding, as this is more likely to enhance practice and recognise the contributions of SFD in the broader development effort. Yet, we also acknowledge that these recommendations are dependent upon access to resources and funding, and therefore this must be adopted from the top down, beginning with those that are the gatekeepers of these valuable assets.

Conflicts of Interest

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Original Research

Community sport, Australian sport policy and advocacy: Lobbying at a localized level

Charles Mountifield

Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, Australia

Corresponding author email: charles.mountifield@canberra.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This article explored rural Australia's community sport policy process, focusing on policy development and implementation issues alongside advocacy for community organizations involved with 'grassroots' sport. The analysis focussed on the significance of the relationships between community sport clubs (CSCs), national sporting organizations (NSOs), government, and other actors in the community sport policy process. Through an intervention, a group of CSCs (*n*=9) formed a coalition to lobby for their collective issues and needs. The research drew attention to the hierarchical nature of the community sport policy process, the implications for collaboration, and the role of CSCs in policy creation. Incorporating the evaluation of partnership theory in conjunction with the Advocacy Coalition Framework, a meso-level policy framework the overall objective herein was to assess the potential for advocacy structures in community sport through an ethnographic action-research approach based on observing a group of CSCs coalescing. It is posited that a localized coalition can offer CSCs a voice in the policy process and lead to a more accurate and equitable understanding of the policy landscape.

Community sport, Australian sport policy and advocacy: Lobbying at a localized level

This article comprises observations based on an intervention in a town (hereinafter 'the town', for deidentification) in a rural setting in NSW, Australia, involving creating a localized advocacy group for community sport. Some critical relationships between community sport clubs (CSCs) in the town, along with national sporting organizations (NSOs), government, and other local stakeholders, were

highlighted to assess the potential of an advocacy group that might contribute toward more effective localized policy implementation and simultaneously promote the interests of CSCs and the local community. The research focussed predominantly on CSCs – the implementers of sport policy (Skille, 2008) – and their observations and concerns, and the potential for advocacy for organizations involved with 'grassroots sport': an oft-used term denoting the elementary level of community sport (Cuskelly, 2004; Green, 2007; Hartmann, 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Phillpots et al., 2011). In Australia, rudimentary issues impacting community sport include scant resources, decreasing participation levels, sustainability issues, organizational capacity, problematic policy matters (Eime et al., 2016; Jeanes et al., 2022; Nichols et al., 2015; Rossi et al., 2023; Shilbury, 2000; Shilbury et al., 2020), and plummeting volunteering rates (Bradbrook, 2022; Curtis, 2022; Davies et al., 2021; Mountifield & Sharpe, 2022). Within such a complicated backdrop, this paper aims to explore the potential for how CSCs might contribute to policy development, and go beyond the *sausage sizzle* (Crundall, 2012; Fechner et al., 2021) as a means to address, for example, funding issues. Accordingly, the specific research question addressed herein is: *In the Australian regional context, how can forming a community sport coalition help address the strategic challenges of CSCs and influence the policy process?* In addressing the question, this article contributes to a greater understanding of sport policy processes and issues from the perspective of CSCs in a *real-world* context.

For community sport, to make it more accessible and stimulate participation levels, sporting organizations can benefit from collaboration based on networks involving various stakeholders and individuals at a local level, particu-

Keywords: advocacy, coalition, community sport, partnership, policy

lar the members of CSCs (Bolton et al., 2008; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Ibsen & Levinsen, 2019; Meir & Fletcher, 2019). Historically, the concept of collaboration and partnership in policy processes, in general, has proved unclear, inconsistent, and imprecise (Hall, 1999; MacDonald et al., 2022), a situation echoed in sport (McDonald, 2005; Misener & Misener, 2016). Further, the policy process is ordinarily subject to political control (Colebatch, 2020) and overt top-down strategies and influence that impact the interests of marginalized stakeholders (Berkhout et al., 2018). In addition, policy issues cannot be adequately addressed by a single organization; it is necessary to consider the views of multiple stakeholders, invoking the concept of collaboration and partnership (MacDonald et al., 2022). Addressing the interests of disenfranchised stakeholders and establishing their involvement in a more collaborative policy process requires consideration of advocacy, especially in the community sector (Hancock, 2020). The potential for collaborative decision-making determines the capacity for forming a partnership (MacDonald et al., 2022) and a meso-level approach to policy processes that includes the appropriate mechanisms to advocate on behalf of all stakeholders involved in a partnership (Rufín & Rivera-Santos, 2013). In policy processes, there are meso-level frameworks that consider the relevance of partnerships (Willis et al., 2016) with a significant emphasis on community-level stakeholders and the consideration of their micro-level issues (Hampton et al., 2024).

In applying meso-level analytical frameworks to the policy process, there is the potential to understand better the importance of collaboration (Weible, 2023). Stakeholders – or actors – in a policy subsystem can be affected by relatively stable parameters, which, in turn, shape the structure of the subsystem (Schlager, 2019). Policy actors in the community sport subsystem – namely CSCs – are influenced or manipulated by external exogenous institutions such as the government (Goodwin & Grix, 2011; Parnell et al., 2019). Policy subsystems emerge as areas in which actors coalesce to enact strategic plans, coordinate the use of resources, and form part of an advocacy structure to provide potential solutions to policy problems (Sabbe et al., 2021; Stenling & Sam, 2019). In so doing, this investigation points to the potential for fashioning an advocacy structure – an *artefact* (Hevner et al., 2004) – to serve the relationships and lobby for interests in localized community sport.

Relationships and connections are crucial to effective policy implementation (Bryson et al., 2015; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Where sport is concerned, organizational member involvement in partnerships and the relationship to

coalition success is an area of research in its relative infancy (Bornstein et al., 2015; Hylton & Totten, 2006). A theoretical model such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) that acts as an interface between the various stakeholders in community sport may cater to the interests of CSCs. The ACF is a theory of policy-making (Skille, 2008) that has been widely applied in the sport policy domain (Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021). Research in sport policy has demonstrated the potential for theoretical pluralism and the consideration of the ACF alongside partnership theory (Harris, 2014) and the ACF is linked with the notion that practical policy analysis needs to include all stakeholders (Chikowore, 2018; Fahlén et al., 2018). Thus, in sport policy, CSC involvement in a collaborative policy environment facilitated by a meso-level framework such as the ACF offers the potential for a more nuanced (Osei-Kojo et al., 2022) understanding of policy issues and connections between stakeholders (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Houlihan, 2012). Indeed, evaluating the relationships with stakeholders and the potential for CSCs to coalesce and influence typically top-down community sport policy processes may provide a boon for community sport.

Within a more equitable policy creation process, input from a bottom-up perspective – a fundamental tenet of the ACF (Mountifield, 2024b) – has merit. Understanding what constitutes best practice for an advocacy coalition and how a partnership can provide opportunities for strategic alignment and organizational coordination and allow CSCs to have input, from a bottom-up perspective, into the policy process presents a potentially positive outcome (Bornstein et al., 2015). That is not to say that the ACF is the only analytical framework that might be relevant to community sport policy (Houlihan, 2005). For this paper, however, the ACF provides an opportunity to take the 'first steps' toward a community sport coalition in the town and to gain a more complete picture of the sport policy process (Bergsgard, 2018). Indeed, the ACF offers the potential for modifying top-down policy directives on a more localized level (Doherty et al., 2022) and provides a "valuable starting point for the development of analytical frameworks capable of illuminating the sport policy area" (Houlihan, 2005, p. 174). Thus, from the policy development perspective, community sport can be considered as the "point of departure" (Skille, 2008, p. 181) and a position from which to work in an *upward* direction (Hill & Hupe, 2009). Indeed, those directly involved in the process of implementation– in this case, CSCs – should be the commencement point in terms of any process to understand the reality of policy implementation (Elmore, 1982; Elmore, 1979, 1985; Sætren & Hupe, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature addressed in this investigation is considered essential for the raw elements of a coalition's formation process. After some initial background on advocacy in sport, the key foci are partnership theory and the meso-level ACF.

Background

Advocacy in sport is multifaceted and takes many forms. By way of examples over the last two decades, Green & Houlihan (2004) examine the process of elite sport policy change in swimming and track and field athletics in Canada and the United Kingdom, Bergsgard et al. (2007) explore activities of advocacy coalitions and consider meso-level frameworks for research in sport, and Comeau & Church (2010) compare women's sport advocacy groups in North America. There are examples of the role of health advocates in addressing inequity by way of an advocacy framework (Hubinette et al., 2014), advocacy for athlete rights and the responsibility of sport organizations (Heil, 2016), research seeking a better understanding of advocacy and political influences impacting sport (Stenling & Sam, 2020c), and advocacy relating to concussion issues in paralympic sport (Purcell et al., 2024). With direct reference to grassroots sport and physical activity, there are numerous examples of research relating to advocacy and the need for more effective government policy (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Lindsey, 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Stenling & Sam, 2020b).

Given that increasing physical activity levels in conjunction with sport policy is a notable consideration for governments (Green, 2007; Österlind, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2019; Varela et al., 2017) – evident in Australia based on the Australian Sports Commission's (ASC) focus on factors influencing participation in sport (Australian Sports Commission, 2024) – it follows that attention is given to instruments to achieve this (Sam & Jackson, 2004; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). To facilitate an approach to understanding the potential of analytical frameworks in the sport policy space, it is critical to enhancing awareness of important community sport stakeholders, the role they play, the level of influence they have and whose interests they serve (Brockett, 2017; Henry et al., 2014; Marsh & Stoker, 2002). With that in mind, there is value in considering advocacy at a localized, community level (Bradbury et al., 2020; Kohl et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Stenling & Sam, 2020a). Such an approach would comprise a coalition of CSCs – a "cluster of competitive, but not high-performance sports" (Green & Houlihan, 2004, p. 400) – to lobby for involvement in determining sport policy from the bottom up.

From a macro-government perspective, Houlihan's (2016) reference to policy residue translates as delegating community sport policy to other areas with limited knowledge and understanding of sport sector policy (Hoye et al., 2010). Indeed, the sport policy creation process represents an unplanned cluster of activities, initiatives and programs created by default, inadvertence, and spill-over from other sub-sectors (Houlihan, 2016). The consequences and resultant problems revolve around inconsistent policy development based on constant shifts in political, economic and cultural circumstances and influence linked to policy creation (Bellew et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2004), producing a complex policy situation for community sport. Further, the national sport policy in Australia ultimately relies upon CSCs for policy implementation (Brockett, 2017; Skille, 2008; Stewart et al., 2004), yet the policy process evolves due to significant political influence (Hoye et al., 2010; Sam, 2009; Weible & Sabatier, 2007). Indeed, CSCs lack input into a process in which they play a fundamental role primarily because national policy concerns take precedence over local matters (Adair, 2017; Shilbury et al., 2020; Skille & Stenling, 2018; Skille, 2008). Such a scenario gives rise to the potential for CSCs to form partnerships to lobby for their interests.

Partnership theory

Partnership theory was initially considered a transient outlier concerning public policy (Giguère & Considine, 2008). It was mainly associated with tackling severe local problems and as a potential solution to ongoing social problems (McDonald, 2005). Further, it was suggested that "local governance involves multi-agency working, partnerships and policy networks" (Wilson, 2003, p. 336) and that "partnership bodies are being created to manage the complexities of policy networks" (Skelcher, 2000, p. 9). From a government perspective, the significance of partnerships rested upon the assertion that they "represent a more effective, democratic, and participatory form of service delivery" (McDonald, 2005, p. 580). Partnerships are now considered inherently attractive to policymakers because collaboration can help deal with complex problems (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). From a normative perspective, partnerships were considered progressive (McDonald, 2005) and related to a concept that "makes things sound exciting, progressive and positive" (Finlayson, 2003, p. 63). Collaborative relationships are a product of networks in public policy. They are generally accepted to have five main benefits: trust, shared knowledge and resources, innovation, agreed goals, and a return more significant than the sum of the parts (Jones, 2004;

McDonald, 2005). Further, as further justification, the concept of partnership allows for the pooling of resources and creates an environment of efficiency and cooperation amongst key stakeholders focused on delivery to consumers (McQuaid, 2000).

In sport policy, partnerships emerged to become the critical mechanism of service delivery (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009) which reflects the influence that government exerts over the strategic development of sport policy. Broadening governmental power, however, sits at odds with devolving power to local communities, but ideologically and in terms of implementing policy, partnerships were advanced across many areas of public policy as a tool for connecting policy areas and as a response to organizational fragmentation. At the community sport level, aspects of the justification for cooperative relationships include consolidation of capital, the more effective engagement of non-financial resources (e.g. facilities and volunteers), and the benefits of working collaboratively with other organizations (Harris, 2014; Mackintosh, 2011). Partnerships offer a platform for a "resource-efficient, outcome-effective, and an inclusive-progressive form of policy delivery" (McDonald, 2005, p. 579), themes relevant to the community sport policy process (Harris & Houlihan, 2016).

With the contemplation of such a platform and a more inclusive approach to sport policy, there is merit in linking partnership theory with a meso-level policy analysis framework (Harris, 2014). The utilization of policy frameworks is fundamental to research in sport (Edwards et al., 2002; Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021; Levermore, 2009; Sotiriadou et al., 2008)), mainly because there are examples of the potential to develop more inclusive policy processes and better manage the impact on various stakeholders (Hampton et al., 2024; Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Thus, to enable policy input from CSCs, the emphasis needs to be on a policy framework that facilitates a partnership for localized lobbying as a starting point, hence consideration of the ACF to better understand policy processes in community sport and including bottom-up perspectives as part of the process (Fahlén et al., 2018; Houlihan, 2005; Skille, 2008).

ACF & Top-Down/Bottom-Up Synthesis

In terms of considering the significance of meso-level theories and sport policy, the ACF is an analytical framework that emerged in the 1980s that has been applied to studies of public policy in a wide range of developed countries – both Western and Eastern nations (Jang et al., 2016; Pierce et al., 2017; Sabatier, 2007; Weible & Jenkins-Smith, 2016) – and increasingly so in developing nations

(Kukkonen et al., 2018; Li & Weible, 2019; Osei-Kojo et al., 2022). The ACF is a contemporary framework in the policy analysis discipline with the potential to evaluate numerous and varied interconnected processes (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Funke et al., 2020; Green & Houlihan, 2004; Houlihan, 2005; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Weible & Sabatier, 2018). The framework provides a method to analyse the behavior – including attitudes and beliefs – of myriad actors by clustering them into *advocacy coalitions*, defined as people from various positions who (i) have similar beliefs and attitudes and (ii) demonstrate levels of coordination over time (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1999).

The ACF is based on two fundamental aspects: (i) a macro-level notion that the policy process occurs within sub-systems involving actors influenced by political and socio-economic factors (Sabatier, 1988; Wellstead, 2017) and (ii) a micro-level consideration of issues impacting actors such as resources issues, a common problem for community sport (Grix et al., 2021; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). For the analysis of sport policy, the ACF offers a more extensive approach than many meso-level frameworks and is more proportionate in actor representation than solely catering to top-down policy architects (Houlihan, 2005). Further, the ACF provides for the bottom-up influence of the policy process, viewed as essential to facilitate a synthesis with the more established top-down process (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994; Pierce et al., 2020; Wellstead, 2017). For example, some studies examine dominant top-down decision-making, negotiation between coalitions, and bottom-up inception (Li et al., 2024), with the bottom-up aspect being a key consideration for ACF studies in complex policy systems (Angst, 2020; Pierce & Osei-Kojo, 2022). Further, there are instances where the ACF has been applied to help build knowledge about policy processes impacting coalitions, mainly about political influence at the subsystem level of analysis (Jang et al., 2016), alongside recommendations for longitudinal studies to empirically explore challenges to collaborative action over time (Nohrstedt & Olofsson, 2016).

In sport, there are examples of the application of top-down and bottom-up management techniques in the policy process (Hylton & Totten, 2013), procedures that illuminate issues leading to implementation failure, most noticeably the contrast between macro-political objectives and the reality of implementation (McDonald, 2005), and the policy creation process and the conflict with the actual capacity of the policy implementers (Hudson et al., 2019; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). For example, a top-down process relies upon implementer – CSC – compliance with successful policy implementation (Durazzi, 2020; Halpin, 2002;

Heidbreder, 2017). In contrast, the bottom-up process generally supports the dominance of the policy implementation settings and actors (Hjern, 1982; Hjern & Hull, 1982; Hull & Hjern, 1987; Lipsky, 2010). This approach allows for the examination of the perspectives of grassroots implementers, as these actors have a decisive influence on policy implementation and its success or failure.

Within this subsystem, however, there is a sharp contrast between macro-level objectives and micro-level concerns. Further, there is a dearth of consistent application of theoretical frameworks in sport policy analysis (Houlihan, 2005) and a lack of universal agreement among policy scholars on a robust approach to policy analysis in sport (Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021). Similarly, there is scant research on community sport (Skille, 2008), particularly about the issues that CSCs face in their role as policy implementers (Doherty et al., 2022; Harris & Houlihan, 2016; May et al., 2013). The resultant impact is that the opinions of community sport stakeholders do not feature prominently in policy processes, and, indeed, said views are given only cursory consideration concerning policymaking. Within that setting, introducing a meso-level framework to examine actors' behaviour requires forming an advocacy coalition (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Houlihan (2005) opines that for public policy for sport, the ACF "has a broader focus than many of its rivals and has the potential to illuminate aspects of the policy process beyond a preoccupation with agenda setting" (Houlihan, 2005, p. 174), a position supported in more recent research involving the ACF (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Funke et al., 2020; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018; Weible & Sabatier, 2018).

To summarize, based on advocacy, the potential for partnerships, and a meso-level framework like the ACF to emphasize a more inclusive, coalescive environment incorporating bottom-up influence, policy processes in sport have the potential to be improved. Such an approach would rely upon a case study– based on a *real-world* intervention – to test the potential of a collaborative approach amongst CSCs focused on common objectives. Accordingly, there is utility in a bottom-up approach to the policy process – the starting point (Elmore, 1982; Elmore, 1979, 1985; Hill & Hupe, 2009; Sætren & Hupe, 2018; Skille, 2008) – through a localized advocacy structure, based initially on a partnership (Harris, 2014), to illuminate the reality of implementation.

METHOD

The intervention was based on an ethnographic action-research method incorporating the observation of the

formation and growth of a community sport advocacy group and comprised the following four sections: *Design, Participants, Data Collection, and Data Analysis.*

Design

Adopting an ethnographic action-research approach, the process for the analysis relied upon observing a sequence of meetings between the participants over three months, including the output from the meetings in terms of stages of development of the group dynamic, their observations, and the potential to achieve their objectives. Observing and evaluating community sport programs is primarily output-driven (Coalter, 2007), and the impact on the ability of the group of CSCs to influence policy and address their concerns was paramount to the study. The observations focused on (a) the numerous connections between CSCs and other participants and (b) the potential for forming robust relationships based on a broader network between the coalition and third parties. In this regard, the researcher guided the creation of the coalition and undertook the role of researcher (Robson, 2002), a position that included observing and improving the organizational direction of the CSCs through a bounded case study (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Yin, 2012). Further, establishing authenticity of the process in connection with a constructivist approach (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Schwandt, 2001) was facilitated by the researcher's intricate role as an overt insider to the group (Homan & Dandelion, 1997; Strudwick, 2019).

The researcher's insider role was crucial to the process and helped create the structure for the coalition. The design commenced with the researcher's initial contribution of coordinating the early stages of the alliance formation. Guidance was offered on how the CSC members could form a partnership and was based on (a) the researcher's relative expertise in management and administration, and (b) an existing connection between the researcher and the CSCs linked to previous research (Mountifield, 2024a). The second essential contribution from the researcher was setting a timetable for meetings of the CSC coalition and to guiding meetings by way of (a) producing meeting agendas and (b) guiding discussions. Throughout the process, the researcher documented and recorded events as part of the data collection objectives.

Given the short time frame involved in this research, there was a need to swiftly build trust between CSCs and establish common ground and objectives. Based upon the developing relationships amongst CSC members, the researcher considered it important to ensure the engagement between CSCs was uncomplicated. The researcher gathered opinions from CSCs in a narrative form, partly due to the

aforementioned time frame and also for the ease of analysis. Narrative research is a method of theorizing social phenomena that offer helpful insight into real-world experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2017), and has been applied in the context of sport and physical activity (Carless & Douglas, 2011; Douglas & Carless, 2014).

Participants

Participants for the advocacy group were selected from a cluster of CSCs in the town. With a population of circa 7,000, the town is non-metropolitan, with proximity to the coastline and a quiet, largely rural character surrounded by bushland and national parks. The town has a range of CSCs involved in cricket, mountain biking, netball, rugby league, skateboarding, soccer, swimming, surf lifesaving, and tennis. It has a distinct feature in that most of the town's CSCs practice and compete on or adjacent to a centralized facility comprising a pool, skate park, cycle track, rugby and soccer fields, netball courts, and cricket ovals. In addition, many of the current sponsors of many of the CSCs are based only a short distance from the sport fields. The town falls within the local government area (LGA) of a local metropolitan council, which plays an essential role in establishing and maintaining sporting infrastructure (Wicker et al., 2009; Wicker et al., 2013).

The recruitment of participants commenced with the unsolicited expression of interest from a CSC president (the 'initial president') in forming a local coalition. Said interest resulted from previous research, which included the initial president (Mountifield, 2024a). A purposive sample was subsequently drawn from the population of CSC presidents of individual and team sport in the town. The president of each CSC – the leader in charge of administrative and control tasks during meetings (Cuskelly et al., 2006) – was either known to the researcher through previous studies (Mountifield, 2024a) or introduced to the researcher by the initial president.

For the first meeting, presidents from six different CSCs (mountain biking, netball, senior rugby league, senior and junior soccer, and surf lifesaving) participated. Two further stages of participant recruitment followed as critical stages in the formation and growth of the coalition: (i) to establish impartial leadership for the coalition, the process required the recruitment of an independent party and (ii) as this group increased in number over time, based primarily on 'word-of-mouth' spreading to CSC presidents who were initially unable (or unwilling) to participate. Therefore, the CSC coalition's representation increased in size and diversity, adding three CSCs – touch football, tennis, and junior rugby league – to the total (*n*=9). By way of a very

general overview, some details for each CSC are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Details of the town coalition CSCs

Mountain biking	Over 200 members with a range of events from five-year-olds to adults, and a list of local sponsors
Netball	Very active social media profile, numerous connections with sponsors, predominantly female membership but seeking male competitors.
Junior rugby league*	Teams range from U6 to U16 with an active social media profile
Senior rugby league*	Competition from U18 to senior, including women's league, and with an extensive and relatively sophisticated network of sponsors
Junior soccer*	Teams from U5 to U16 with emphasis on pathways to senior competition
Senior soccer*	Over 500 members with a vast array of sponsors
Surf lifesaving	Member of Surf Lifesaving Australia with membership from Nippers through to adults, along with a significant number of sponsors
Tennis	An essentially social membership with local competition for all age groups
Touch football	Over 400 members with a range of competitions for men, women, and mixed groups.

Note * Whilst not necessarily the case in other regions, there are very distinct management structures, organizational activities, and representative duties for the division of these sports

In addition to the CSCs making up the central membership of the coalition, it is crucial to note the connections with three other parties. Firstly, representatives of the local council and NSW Sport, the lead NSW government agency for sport and physical activity (New South Wales Office of Sport, 2024). To get engagement with government, the researcher requested the attendance of two key personnel from the local council and NSW Sport, who had direct responsibility for community sport in the LGA. The invitations were well received and said representatives joined in at various stages during the coalition discussions. As noted later in the findings, this development was considered a significant achievement and fits with crucial tenets of the ACF policy process, for example, the multipartite membership of a coalition (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1999). Secondly, the local Lions Club (an international organization that actively promotes the welfare of local communities) was included, as noted in the findings, from a coalition leadership perspective. Finally, the local Member for Parliament (MP) was kept abreast of the coalition activities by the initial president, with whom there was a close relationship. Although the MP did not become directly involved, support for the project was voiced in principle.

Data Collection

Data collection was based on ethnographic observation (FitzGerald & Mills, 2022) and occurred over three key stages: (i) meetings of participants who came together to establish if the coalition was desirable; (ii) the creation of independent leadership and an organizational structure; and (iii) noting the milestones of the burgeoning coalition over an initial period of three months. Data was collected through meeting minutes, audio recording, and observational field notes, all undertaken by the researcher. These methods facilitated the collection of rich, insightful data (Coghlan & Jacobs, 2005) by way of CSC members conveying their opinions, thoughts and experiences as part of the process toward collaboration (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). In this respect, ethnographic action-research can play an essential role by helping groups make informed decisions based on results (Ledwith, 2020). Participants were informed that all aspects of the research were confidential, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. The study was approved by the ethics committee at the University of Canberra.

Data Analysis

The analysis process was based on examination of the coalition formation, including ethnographic observations of coalition member interaction, and progressed to identifying critical issues for the CSCs in narrative form. When measuring a coalition's success (or otherwise), an inductive approach provides an overview of the formation of connections between CSCs and third parties and factors that impact the potential for effective partnerships. Qualitative research often follows inductive reasoning, which involves shifts from specific observations of the phenomenon to developing broader generalizations (Patton, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The researcher was responsible for driving the formation of the coalition and the subsequent data collection, and thus able to highlight key stages and identify pivotal points raised by coalition members. The data analysed was based upon meeting minutes, field notes, and audio recordings. The audio recordings were not transcribed but were replayed to (a) ensure meeting minutes and field notes were correct and (b) identify any points the researcher may have missed due to, for example, the need for the researcher to facilitate aspects of discussions. Further, specific quotes from the participants were identified in the audio recordings and formed the supporting narrative in the following findings.

FINDINGS

In the first instance, owing to the nature of the ethnographic action-research approach adopted for this paper, the discourse for this section necessitates supporting detail to explain aspects of the narrative. The findings are based principally on the stages that the members of CSCs went through to form a coalition, inclusive of supporting commentary throughout. The three key stages were: (i) establishing the coalition; (ii) coalition leadership and structure; and (iii) observations of the coalition activities. As part of the observation process, aspects of each stage elicited thematic sub-sections outlined as part of the findings. These stages address crucial elements of the research question by highlighting how the formation of the coalition, inclusive of the focus on independent leadership, lead to activities demonstrative of collaborative ability to address some immediate challenges, and the potential for to influence policy over time, a fundamental tenet of ACF theory (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1999).

Establishing the coalition

When considering the steps to establish a coalition, it is essential to present the background relating to fundamental aspects of applying policy in community sport, as opined by the CSC presidents. Successfully developing a coalition requires the partners to have shared goals and the potential to mobilize resources to influence policy decisions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In many cases, the coalition partners are likely to have competing priorities, so there will be pressure to adopt sometimes divergent goals. Therefore, the coalition's success depends on accepting an overall strategy that tracks outcomes over time.

Building a community sport coalition requires careful attention to every process involved in the coalition timeline. In this case, the coalition president showed knowledge of the coalition structure and recognized warning signs of potential problems, thus increasing the chances for success. Upon forming the coalition, the president held a local press conference after every meeting to publicly confirm the commitment of the CSC to engage in the policy process. Furthermore, the alliance developed binding agreements between all CSC stakeholders. Three key emerging themes were pertinent to CSCs: (i) the nature of the policy process from creation to implementation; (ii) the degree to which CSCs believe they can play a role in a cooperative process; and (iii) CSC beliefs in their individual and collective capacity to attain constructive and long-term outcomes for their sport and the community.

The character of the policy process

Government-led policy development and implementation processes were not new to the coalition participants. This

situation, however, drew attention to the potential for a more comprehensive commitment from CSCs, a factor embodied in the notion that the government should assess the capacity of the community to take on a degree of responsibility for their future welfare. For the town coalition, the prevailing opinion regarding the policy process for community sport was that government and NSOs set the agenda for policy input, with limited, if any, capacity for policy implementers (CSCs) to influence the proceedings. In short, the process was considered hierarchical – *top-down* – and controlled by a narrow coalition of power: "It's clear that we [CSCs] are pawns in the policy process, which is dominated by more powerful groups".

This viewpoint echoed concerns about sport-related policies, for example, the NSW Active Kids policy (a NSW Government policy initiative which helps families meet the cost of their children accessing sport and recreation activities, which suffered from low promotion). From the town CSC perspective, there had been an absence of consultation involving state government policy strategists, regional government, and CSCs, along with an absence of resources offered to aid the implementation of the policy: "I think the Active Kids thing is a good idea, but we only found out about it through word of mouth. Nobody from our NSO told us about it, and it wasn't advertised anywhere".

The primary concern with the above comment is that the policy was viewed as whimsical and not meticulously transmitted to CSCs. Indeed, rather than a systematic, evidence-based method based on a consultative strategy, the approach was 'a good idea' but enacted unilaterally. For CSCs, encouraging evidence-based practice, innovation, and capacity building are all matters ultimately based on resources. Policies such as Active Kids were said to have the potential to incentivize and encourage strategies associated with improving participation or performance. Where resources are concerned, however, CSCs must first address the 'chicken and egg' scenarios relating to the intent of policy and the potential for achieving it: "Sometimes the government doesn't think about how us clubs might actually do things our end. Sure, get the numbers up but giving money to parents but what about giving money direct to clubs so they can improve capacity?".

Some CSCs considered the pressure to adhere to top-down expectations too great, particularly in often short timeframes. In keeping with ACF guidelines on the time required for policy learning, the findings pointed to concerns that the period necessary to support policy edicts

was insufficient:

We get instructions from the NSO or the council that say we need to do things in a certain way or that things need to change quickly. We can't always cope and end up having to improvise which is not good for anyone.

CSCs also noted that there were several unintended consequences of the policy, including the definition of and what construed community sport policy and the erratic nature of macro-political objectives that often dictate policy creation, supported by the idea that: "Some sports have better [political] connections and more power and weaker clubs from weaker sports miss out. Doesn't ever take community into consideration and we think it should".

An additional consequence of policy was the identified as the rivalry between sports, stated as: "We are always fighting over the same group of players".

Policy consequences suggest that policy decisions at a macro-level often ignore local needs and that the competition between sports, based on policy pressure, is contrary to community objectives.

The level that CSCs form a valuable component of a unified system

CSCs were quick to champion ideals that would replace the top-down policy approach. CSCs ordinarily feel marginalized – *side-lined* – in the government's efforts to promote community sport and promote the associated social benefits. The consensus from CSCs was that collaboration is limited, and there was no specific community focus. The evidence indicated that the potential for practical cooperation is directly affected by the different strategies and priorities of CSCs: "I think we all agree why we're here. A coalition is a good idea and we're all about community. But some of us will struggle to see the benefits".

Differences in CSC objectives and those of the community at large create challenges concerning a unifying approach to attitudes and behavior. In some respects, these difficulties result from a power imbalance in community sport and, for some CSCs, impede a route to collaboration: "There's already a big difference between all the clubs. Some have more money than others because their sport is more popular nationally and their NSO can fund them".

The government and NSOs have the authority to determine the participants in the policy process, which amounts to exploitative power in dominating and coercing to secure

consensus (Curato et al., 2019; Lukes, 2005). This imbalance was said to be a matter that CSCs are acutely aware of and consider affects the prioritization of funding: "Because we don't have a say in policy, we don't have a say in funding. It's up to the top of the tree to decide and that's fine but it doesn't take in what's happening locally".

Furthermore, NSOs can influence CSC consensus on policy matters through top-down funding mechanisms for CSCs, along with performance reviews and details of CSC adherence to NSO policy objectives. Conversely, there is evidence to suggest a version of power relations that leans to one side is unsophisticated and that there is an omnipresent aspect of power that applies to local actors (Foucault, 1982). Indeed, CSCs can adjust, undermine, or defy NSO edicts: "Without giving the game away, we don't always do what we're told. Sometimes, it's just too hard and haven't got the manpower or just think the decision is bad".

The omnipresent power dimension emphasizes how CSCs might exercise power in the pursuit of their interests rather than feel they form part of a more altruistic, macro, NSO-led approach that benefits from a collective, unified system: "Doing our own thing is about survival. May not be in the community interest and definitely not the NSO interest".

The above complex power dimension partly results from the diverse participants contributing to community sport policy processes, a group that, at a macro-level, is continually pulling and pushing against policy initiatives. Equally, there are a variety of historically-rooted competing priorities and issues relating to the allocation of resources that impact the ability to align the objectives of all actors (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2017).

CSC member beliefs concerning the achievement of sport and community objectives

Aspects of the findings included details of CSC participant attitudes and a belief in their capacity for achieving increased membership and, thus, overall participation levels in sport. Based on a combination of NSO, government, and local objectives, CSCs outlined three challenges in achieving the community sport goals: (i) an insufficient level of resources, particularly that of funding; (ii) the requirement for more innovation to increase CSC membership; and (iii) the issue of capacity and a sufficient level of skills, combined with funding, to bring about change: "I think we need better access to resources, including money. We need to work together and come up with ideas if all the clubs are to benefit. That might mean

sharing skills amongst all of us and resources".

There was an acceptance that by focusing on the levels of participation and supporting the achievement of goals, the change would rely upon a level of pragmatism regarding what is possible. Equally, a realistic period, in keeping with lengthy time frames associated with the ACF (Sabatier, 2007), would be required to improve levels of support and to bring about a change in attitude and performance: "It will be actually really hard. How long is it going to take and how many of us really want this? I reckon it's possible, though".

Most CSCs believed that a relationship with the local government was most important for addressing the challenges associated with delivering community sport objectives. There was an assumption that local people wanted to be active, and that the government held the key for assisting CSCs, or a local coalition, to manage problems: "But I think the local council can really help, particularly with some of the things we've discussed".

Coalition leadership and structure

For the organization and administration of the coalition, the critical aspect was establishing independent leadership. This situation was facilitated by involving the support of the Lions Club to take on the role of Chair. Installing the Lions Club representative as Chair helped to avoid a hierarchical structure and to ensure equity in terms of advocacy. The CSC leadership focused on creating a committee – or board – that operated at a strategic level. Each CSC president joined the coalition board and provided various skills across the board's membership. Of the nine CSC coalition members, seven worked in business/commerce and had connections that offered potential links for an advocacy group. The board's key role was to create a governance structure for the coalition and create collective strategic plans. The board also offered a platform to debate operational matters and identify solutions to crucial problems.

Some vital operational matters included interacting with local community stakeholders, NSOs and local government. As a leader, the Chairperson's role was to offer collaborative direction, help identify priority objectives, and plan monthly coalition meetings. The Chairperson also agreed to an action plan for the coalition and delegated specific action to the coalition member most suited to advocate for the alliance (usually based on the CSC president's existing network and the connections that developed through the Lions Club).

Observations of the coalition activities

This section provides some critical observations of coalition group processes and advocacy based on the emerging themes of *Coalition relationships* and *Sentiment*. The overall relevance of these observations rests on the potential for a process that leads to successful outcomes of the advocacy group initiatives.

Coalition Relationships

The findings proved that CSCs have a network of relationships that an advocacy group can exploit for the coalition's benefit. Across the group, CSCs took part in numerous unique relationships, with as few as one fundamental connection (e.g., with a sponsor) to as many as eight (based on an entrepreneurial CSC president seeking to build capacity for the applicable CSC). An essential matter for CSCs related to the acquisition of physical or pecuniary resources. As noted by a CSC representative, the most common were relationships with sponsors and involved support for equipment, facilities, and playing kit: "Most of the money from our sponsors goes toward running the sport. I know some of us pay players, but I guess we're spending most of the money on kit and getting the pitch ready".

Facilitating the deployment of these relationships as a collective responsibility was an example of connections based on the ACF. Such relationships relied on a collaborative process and gave rise to the potential for improving communication between actors (Doherty & Misener, 2008; Putnam, 2000). One statement suggested that connections between the town CSCs resulted from leveraging existing relationships and establishing new contacts, thereby expanding their collaborative network: "I can connect you with [them]. They will be able to help at least two clubs here. Just tell them I put you in touch and they will look after you".

Historically, partnerships relied upon CSC representatives approaching third-party organizations, either locally or further afield. These connections with these organizations resulted from existing CSC membership (e.g., volunteers connected to the CSCs). A member of the town advocacy group indicated that they were able to put a mechanism in place for expanding these connections through a more collaborative and professional approach: "Let's get a contact book or something together. This can be coordinated by the Chairperson, and we can all get access when we need it".

Coalition members also gave examples of new connections

derived from contacts previously unknown to the CSC. One unique model, but a logical one for the advocacy group to exploit going forward, arose from a CSC representative contacting another CSC to explore a mutually beneficial arrangement relating to a competitive fixture: "The relationship with [them] happened because we had joined the council and the local paper to coordinate some advertising where they talked about our event".

The concept of a mutually beneficial arrangement was evident in many cases, with one of the CSC representatives indicating that there were opportunities for various 'win-win' scenarios where CSCs could take advantage of each other's assets: "Lots of possible angles here. I can see you need [that] and [they] can help a few of us".

Development of longer-term connections

The connection between CSCs results from the idea that the potential for developing associations through sport fits with the very nature of sport, with individuals and teams participating in a series of competitive structures with existing networks (Zakus et al., 2009). Such scenarios led to the formation of friendships where CSC representatives benefited from increased knowledge, deeper alliances, and an improved ability to coalesce – all signs of solid social links (Zakus et al., 2009). Observations from the initial stages of the coalition formation suggested that friendship was an unexpected but welcome benefit. For example, a CSC president referred to mutual gains arising from a specific relationship with another CSC that occurred due to communicating within the advocacy structure: "I met them after you suggested it. Good bunch and we're going to do a bit more with them. But we should all do it together to get a better price".

When considering CSCs and contributing toward community issues, the advocacy group created a platform for a collective voice to influence change at policy creation at a local level. For them to achieve this platform and improve the coalition governance, there was a need for a strategy that would enable them to bring about changes to the organizational culture that impacts the mindset and beliefs within local government: "With the council involved, we have got the potential to change things or at least have our voice heard".

Effective community leadership relies upon a strategic relationship with local government and other organizations with authority in the community governance process (Darlow et al., 2007). Evaluating the connection between local government and the advocacy group was necessary to measure this potential, particularly when considering the

efficacy of coalition objectives. This process followed a gamut of variables, including symbolic gestures to evidence of dedication to achieving outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014; Bolton et al., 2008) and needed to address issues relating to structures, culture, and processes throughout the engagement process. One statement indicated that adopting such criteria required robust evaluative potential of the long-term effectiveness of the process in the town: "I know the council were a bit wary at first but I think if we continue to work with them, they will continue to support the idea of our group".

Noting that the coalition was in the early stages of its journey, the above comment pointed to the council's initial caution which was based on (a) the connection with town CSCs *en masse* being a new development and (b) the need for the council to be impartial, certainly initially.

DISCUSSION

This research sought to illuminate the issues facing CSCs concerning matters relating to community sport policy and the significance of an advocacy structure, as well as assess the ability of CSCs to form a coalition to advocate for their needs. Based on the research question – *In the Australian regional context, how can forming a community sport coalition help address the strategic challenges of CSCs and influence the policy process?* – this study provides valuable data identified in an ethnographic action-research process. From an initial interpretation of the findings above, given the nature of the ACF and the emphasis on understanding actor attitudes and beliefs, the view of the participants points to the potential for a practical application in the *real world*. The research outcome demonstrates that the data gained from the observations blend with that identified in the literature. Further, there is a proper alignment with the research aims due to support for a practical intervention through localized advocacy.

As an overall example of the appetite for localized advocacy, the early stages of the coalition formation demonstrated general CSC willingness and support for a more collaborative approach to community sport policy, along with the involvement of the researcher. Indeed, based on the outline provided in the methodology section herein, there was an aspect of direction required to drive the initial formation of the coalition. This guidance, however, was rationalized on the basis that (a) given the voluntarist nature of CSC members (Cuskelly, 2004; Skirstad et al., 2017), it would be challenging to leave the CSCs to form a coalition without instruction and (b) it reduced bias in terms of the CSCs that formed the coalition. Observing and improving organizational capacity of the CSCs through a bounded

case-study (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Yin, 2012) and establishing authenticity of the process in connection with a constructivist approach (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Schwandt, 2001) was facilitated by the researcher's role within the coalition (Homan & Dandelion, 1997; Strudwick, 2019). This insider role was central to the methodological approach adopted and allowed for considerable benefits of context within the process as it unfolded.

Most data presented herein adds to the existing literature on community sport and provides significant avenues for application to the intervention in the town. For example, from a macro perspective, the intervention highlighted the disjointed nature of the policy systems on community sport (Charlton, 2010; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Jones et al., 2018), a disparity in power and the connections between actors (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Grix & Phillpots, 2011), the strain related to policy implementation (May et al., 2013; Rich & Misener, 2019), and often unrealistic or unclear expectations of community sport policy (Houlihan & White, 2002; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009). The opinions from the participants' testimonies include (i) the lack of policy clarity at the local level, (ii) widespread resource deficiency and dependency, (iii) an inordinately multifaceted community sport policy system, (iv) a lack of participation in policy creation and implementation; and (v) the dominant position of NSO and government-driven strategies versus community-lead and focussed strategies.

From a micro perspective, the experience of the coalition in the town unearthed community attitudes and beliefs relating to localized, collective action. The observations highlighted challenges typical to CSCs, included the voluntary nature of participation, CSC members with time restrictions and who were initially unwilling or unable to join the coalition, and the overall resource issues so common in community sport. Further, there was evidence of tension, including general attitudes toward the hierarchical nature of sport policy, the dominance of NSOs, perceived inequities between sports, and gaining the trust of the local council and NSW Sport. It was the formation of the coalition, however, along with the achievement of initial objectives, that demonstrated the most positive attitude from CSCs that contributed to the traction in the coalition's construction process. The key achievements are threefold: (1) the majority of CSCs in the town has willingly entered into a structure to advocate for issues that impact community sport locally; (2) a strategic partnerships with the Lions Club has been realized, offering independent leadership, additional skillsets, and an understanding of community issues; and (3) a robust connection with local council and NSW Sport has been established, giving greater credibility to objectives of the town CSC and legitimising the coalition. Although further

observations are needed to outline and assess future coalition activities, the overall initial benefit to the town is that the coalition has been created and is taking steps to address immediate issues with a longer-term goal to improve policy from the bottom-up.

Although the research only provides details of the early stages of the coalition formation, the achievements nonetheless substantively outline the alliance's relevance to community sport in the town and its application on a broader scale. In balancing partners' needs across sectors and developing connections with and through community sport, CSCs can conceivably mitigate what can otherwise be a complicated process. Further, a positive relationship with local government enhances the coalition's status (Hylton & Bramham, 2007). While initial tensions were a common theme, this was expected and not something construed as harmful to the coalition formation process. There was, however, a concern that NSOs might react differently in the longer term, particularly as the coalition matured and extended its network. Relations between CSCs and NSOs were of varying strengths, and equally, NSO policy objectives would not always match with local community objectives. It was evident from the beliefs of the town coalition that there is a 'them and us' culture; comments such as 'we don't always do what we're told' and 'definitely not the NSO interest' pointed to a lack of alignment between NSO objectives and those of the community. The perception of the town coalition was that an increase in collective knowledge and connections, attaining a degree of power and gaining a form of political influence through improved relations with local government, would be a persuasive development in their relationship with NSOs, particularly in terms of securing the policy consensus of CSCs and avoiding the undermining of policy implementation objectives at a local level (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). This matter, however, was viewed as a step to address in the longer term and to try and create more resilient partnerships with NSOs based on the collective platform.

From an advocacy focus, the indications are that it is genuine for a localized cooperative initiative to challenge the fragmented community sport policy system (Berenskoetter & Williams, 2007; Misener & Doherty, 2013). Such potential results from the CSCs engaging in a collaborative process that involves connecting CSCs, the local community and local government into a cohesive network. Mobilising connections with multiple and diverse partners, potentially through an institution like an advocacy group, presents an opportunity for CSCs to achieve policy goals. As CSCs embrace these partnerships across various sectors, a coalition offers a platform to retain their values

and manage pressure relating to the objectives of key stakeholders (Berrett & Slack, 1999). Developing and nurturing the relationship between CSCs and several other organizations would make it easier to establish connections and reproduce social cohesion. This finding echoes the argument brought forward by Pierce et al. (2020) and Wellstead (2017) that the bottom-up approach to policy formation can aid inter-organizational relationships between CSCs beyond the traditional mandate of facilitating grassroots sport.

There is also the potential to provide an overall understanding of how CSCs might shape policy processes to address, for example, resource issues: collaboration between opposing clubs and different sports could help fill volunteer gaps (Bradbrook, 2022). To facilitate such a strategy, it is critical to enhance awareness of important community sport stakeholders, their role, their influence level, and whose interests they serve (Brockett, 2017; Henry et al., 2014; Marsh & Stoker, 2002). In the town's case, it was clear that the local community would benefit from contributing to the policy process (Hylton & Totten, 2006). The town CSCs were immersed in the process, from considering the initial concept and early discussions, through to by establishing the advocacy group, pointing to the potential for localized advocacy (Bradbury et al., 2020; Kohl et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Stenling & Sam, 2020a). From the ACF perspective, the success of an advocacy coalition is based on common attitudes and beliefs of actors and the separate but ultimately collective characteristics (Berger & Luckmann, 2017). At the local level, such an approach would comprise a "cluster of competitive, but not high-performance sports" (Green & Houlihan, 2004, p. 400) to engage in shaping community sport policy actively.

LIMITATIONS

Properly evaluating the potential of a local advocacy group revolves around power among coalition actors, the formation of policy from a top-down perspective, and the coercive nature of the influence of external actors in the policy process. Although acknowledging and understanding actor self-interest was essential to gain the support of CSC members, the revelation of external friction complicated the reality of creating a robust, stable advocacy structure through a coalition. In particular, some CSC members considered that the potential for collaboration and consultation with the community risked being stymied by a power imbalance perpetuated by administrative bodies such as NSOs and government. Problems associated with national actors like the ASC and NSOs can result in coercive pressure on local-level implementers like CSCs to

comply with the policy objectives (Agranoff, 2007; Durazzi, 2020; Heidbreder, 2017). Such coercion does not present a practical approach for national oversight of policy implementation. Thus, it is crucial to establish conditions that cater for positive connections between actors responsible for implementation (Scheberle, 2004). On the point of connections between actors, two notable attributes – mutual trust and involvement – emerged, and such characteristics are crucial to the efficacy of implementation partnerships (Cline, 2000; May et al., 2013; Scheberle, 2004).

Another limitation revolves around the level of involvement of policy creators at the top of the policy hierarchy, such as the ASC and NSOs. Such interest might involve funding, resource allocation, and the evaluation of policy processes (Scheberle, 2004). An elevated degree of interaction, however, might be considered unnecessary or intrusive and "could be counterproductive" (Scheberle, 2004, p. 21) in establishing highly effective working relations between implementing actors like CSCs. Further, creating harmonious professional associations is challenging, takes time, and relies upon an apparent dedication and focus from all actors involved (Scheberle, 2004; Song & Mayer, 2010). Indeed, functional collaboration does not exist in isolation and depends upon recognising that implementing actors (e.g. CSCs) have an essential role in the policy process (Scheberle, 2004). Hence, an analytical framework such as the ACF should be tested and address an aspect of implementation usually given scant attention in the policy process.

Future direction

The contribution of this study has the potential to illustrate how analytical frameworks such as the ACF may contribute to knowledge about Australian sport policy processes and the role of CSCs in coalitions. The study parallels and adds to the growing literature on sport policy networks and the realization of the significance of relationships in sport policy formation (Baiocco et al., 2018; Jeanes et al., 2018; John, 2013; Shearer et al., 2016). In this case, the ACF can predict the extent to which the beliefs and behavior of stakeholders are embedded within the networks guiding the policy-making process. Additionally, the participants in policymaking – such as CSCs, national governments, local governments, and NSOs – might try to convert their belief systems into policy ahead of opponents (Strittmatter et al., 2018). Based on the findings herein, any prospect of success necessitates searching for allies, sharing resources, and adopting complementary strategies. The interaction between CSCs illuminated a general willingness to work together and focus on achieving shared goals through a

formal partnership. The results imply that the growth of CSC partnerships, as part of forming an advocacy coalition, can benefit the wider community. The strength of any alliance lies in its membership making collective decisions while respecting that each CSC may also have a particular position on a matter (Harris & Houlihan, 2016). Arriving at this objective will help to fuse a core 'coalition belief' (Cairney, 2013) for effectively influencing collective reforms.

Based on the potential of CSCs to coalesce with a view to impacting the polity process, this research advances a re-conceptualization of community sport. The potential for a multipartite connection between CSCs, the local community, and other stakeholders like local government is recognized. This relationship shapes a rationale for applying a methodology for understanding sport governance structures incorporating bottom-up and top-down approaches. Merely by the example of an analytical framework – but one with significant support in the sport policy space (Chatzopoulos, 2019; Dodo et al., 2020; Hodgkinson et al., 2021; Tacon, 2018) – the ACF can enable this approach and, with the guidance of a coalition, help shift policy creation and implementation towards a non-hierarchical model for community sport. The utility of the ACF allows for explaining, illustrating, and evaluating the policy process as it affects community sport. Further, the ACF has found credence in the emerging analysis of sport policy as it provides a coherent understanding of critical factors and processes within overall policy processes. For the process of building a coalition, the experience in the town points to the potential for independence and input, and suggests that "the community and provider may become co-authors of destiny, or partners in policy and practice" (Hylton & Totten, 2006, p. 83). Based on the observations of the interaction of the CSC coalition in the town, there is merit in future research further examining the potential for lobbying for community sport at a local level.

In terms of recommendations, the first step would be to continue research with the town and adopting the same methodology, undertake longer-term observations of the activities, achievements, and influence of the coalition. On a wider scale, however, the research has provided a platform that is transferrable elsewhere, commencing in non-metropolitan environments. In the first instance, to improve service delivery and build collective interests, CSCs need to develop robust, sustainable alliances where mutual benefits outweigh self-interest, ideally guided by an independent body. In a localized context, CSCs should consider creating partnerships with appropriately placed voluntary and community sector organizations such as the

Lions Club. Secondly, such partnerships can serve as a first stage in creating better connected communities and eventually evolve into a coalition to lobby for collective interests and help address the power imbalance impacting marginalized stakeholders. Finally, to test the reality of this potential based on the experience in the town, there is a need to apply longitudinal studies (e.g. as per Nohrstedt & Olofsson, 2016) – in keeping with ACF timeframes – and conduct further research elsewhere in Australia. Such a suggestion may be a consideration for the ASC to better recognize the importance of the role CSCs and local government in the community sport policy system. Despite the governmental nature of top-down policy (Colebatch, 2020) and the ASC's politically-focused strategy of funding NSOs rather than local authorities (e.g. as per Jang et al., 2016), a more nuanced approach (e.g. as per Osei-Kojo et al., 2022) may be advantageous. Such an initiative would involve improving resources for local government to better support community sport, incorporating bottom-up input from local advocacy groups to inform future policy initiation (e.g. as per Angst, 2020; Li et al., 2024; Pierce & Osei-Kojo, 2022), and facilitating an environment where policymakers and policy implementers become 'partners in policy and practice'.

CONCLUSION

Through observations in the initial stages of an intervention, this paper has identified CSC views on various issues, including resource concerns, support with policy implementation, hierarchical policy edicts, and perennial funding problems. The investigation was embedded in a *real-world* context and evaluated the potential for CSCs to coalesce concerning issues that impact local sport and the community. Developing relationships with other stakeholders is one way for CSCs to increase knowledge, obtain resources, contribute to policy objectives, and improve community cohesion. The findings revealed concerns from CSCs but equally relationships based on trust, consistency, balance, and the potential for engagement in policy processes through collaboration. Specifically, in terms of theoretical and practical implications, the findings point to the importance of partnerships in the community setting and how an advocacy group based on unity regarding belief systems and shared goals increases the potential to influence policy. Further, when positioning the ACF as a meso-level theory for sport policy analysis, the outcome of this research helps inform the development of an 'artefact' to operationalize a more inclusive policy process. In addition, on a broader scale, the findings offer guidance for a transferrable program and the implementation of advocacy structures in other community sport settings.

Overall, the town experience provides substantive results to support further research. The critical contributions from this research can advance the theory and understanding of advocacy in sport in Australia and, from the perspective of all stakeholders in community sport, influence a more equitable approach to the policy creation process. There is the potential to produce robust output that will aid the comprehension of, from a policy perspective, the needs at community sport level. In turn, there is the ability to link the research findings to any subsequent development, specification and evaluation of a model for best practice for a localized advocacy coalition representing CSCs. As a theoretical point of departure in the policymaking and implementation process, the ACF can help illuminate, inform, and guide the situation facing CSCs. The research increases the understanding of how establishing a localized advocacy group might facilitate the first steps toward helping achieve local objectives in community sport.

Author Contribution

The author completed all stages of the research and writing independently and without input/contribution from third parties.

Ethics

Approved by the University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee (project number 20180310).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Book Review

Developing Sport for Women and Girls: First Edition

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Review by Rachel Elms[1]

[1]Department of Sport Management, Tarleton State University

Corresponding author email: elms@tarleton.edu

Developing Sport for Women and Girls First Edition

Developing Sport for Women and Girls is a unique and well-organized text, which grants readers a thorough analysis of contemporary sport development with a female-specific focus. Given the international growth of women's sport (media, participation and leadership roles, gender equity dialogue etc.), this one-of-a-kind book serves as a valuable addition to the existing body of research for scholars and sport for development practitioners. The book holds the global perspectives of authors from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom while providing cultural contexts for a range of national sport systems including the National Football League (NFL), One Day International (ODI), International Olympic Committee (IOC), and many others. The text divides the general concepts into three themes: participation and inclusion, development *through* sport (SFD), and development *of* sport (SD).

Theme one (chapters 3-10) begins with a discussion of the history of Title IX, future implications for sport participation for women, and the role of sport organizations in providing opportunities. The authors emphasize motivations and barriers for females in sport while elaborating on populations such as mothers with dependent children, girls and adolescents, older women, gender-diverse communities, women and girls with disabilities, indigenous women, and underserved communities. In this first section, readers will further understand the history of the challenges for females in sport as authors advise organizations to modify rules and allow for movement between higher and lower competitive levels. Overall, the authors skillfully compared sport systems across the globe while suggesting opportunities for future research that may be useful for enhancing one's

general understanding of female representation within an ever-changing industry. Concerning potential recommendations for this theme, in-depth, qualitative explorations of the impact of sport within underserved or indigenous populations may provide additional research used to improve SFD programming. For many of these populations, sport provides more than a healthy lifestyle. It is impactful for fostering positive self-esteem and combatting societal issues which may include reducing crime, providing a pathway out of poverty, or challenging negative stereotypes.

Theme two (chapters 11-14) contained an exploration of women's experiences in SFD programming in addition to proposing a theory of empowerment helpful for the improvement or revision of SFD programs. Not only is this a timely and relevant discussion, but it provides an introduction to the conversations highlighting underrepresentation in theme three. The authors include case studies such as The Girl's Empowerment through Cricket (GET) program which aimed to increase the self-efficacy of girls by empowering them through cricket participation. This particular program included educational sessions as well as opportunities for female staff to undertake leadership and management roles. The authors also encouraged the work of the Go Sisters program in Zambia, which utilized sport to empower disadvantaged young women. This theme excelled at providing a critique of education through sport. From a higher education standpoint, the information in this section contains valuable case studies and examples for those involved in the design of sport governance curriculum. For program development, authors imply that in addition to considering the achievement of outcomes, practitioners should tailor sport to encompass a wide range of movement forms (dance, etc.), while providing culturally sensitive

forms (dance, etc.), while providing culturally sensitive curriculum. It is suggested that programs should challenge the position of women in society while also educating others in the community (men and boys) to further the overall impact. The topic of gender, sport, and livelihoods is also necessary for understanding restrictions surrounding women's mobility. While both SD and SFD face challenges in creating employment, women often have dual roles which include domestic commitments in addition to income generation. The discussion here is important for issues of pay inequity, cultural restrictions, and the potential for home-based income activities. While the conclusion of this theme excels at providing direct, causal links between sport participation and health benefits, one recommendation would include an elaboration of culturally appropriate methodologies within the promotion of sport, health, and physical activity.

Theme three (chapters 15-20) includes the necessary discussion of the development of sport regarding the underrepresentation of females in leadership roles such as coaching and officiating. Chapter 15 begins with specific concerns regarding female high-performance athlete development. Concerning SD, the authors emphasize the importance of youth-level referees and umpires as fundamental to both sport systems and high-performance athlete development. Moreover, just as the goal of SD is to use sport as a tool for positive change, this section provided evidence of these benefits through programs that emphasize both gender equity and improving diversity. Future female coaches will benefit from an understanding of the gendered nature of coaching and the liberal feminism surrounding the development of women coaches. Similarly, this theme highlighted the need for sport programs to enforce policies and strategies to minimize bullying, performance detriments, and sexual harassment. As with these policies, the authors focus on debates surrounding the regulation of high testosterone in international women's sport. The research and insight here are not only useful for providing education but also awareness as groups such as the International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG) and the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) have already taken steps to demand change from sports' governing bodies.

As the authors highlight in this text, there are certainly improvement opportunities for solving current inequality issues in sport. Not only does this text support the international intersectionality of female roles in the industry, but it also provides a conceptualization of the two arms of sport development. While other textbooks and resources separately highlight sport development or the roles and marginalization of females in sport, this text

uniquely connects and combines the two topics in an applicable and pertinent format. As it is coherent and understandable in nature, sections of this text may be valuable for supplemental discussion within undergraduate or graduate settings in sport management or sport governance courses. Additionally, researchers and practitioners would benefit from the critical analysis and the application to theory and practice. As mentioned above, the book provides a variety of well-supported case studies that not only prompt future considerations but encourage feedback from global viewpoints. Lastly, regarding limitations, the authors openly admit to the need to apply updated frameworks to current concepts. A closing call to action reflects the work of Title IX, but draws attention to the recognition that participation and inclusion are the building blocks of sport development. Despite the ever-changing industry and persistent challenges of discrimination and inequality, this book delivers a respected overview of sport as a vehicle for female empowerment and societal change.

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