

Pike, Elizabeth (Ed.)

## **Research Handbook on Sports and Society**

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The *Elgar Research Handbook on Sports and Society* is a collection edited by Professor Elizabeth Pike (Head of Sport, Health and Exercise at the University of Hertfordshire, UK). Twenty-seven chapters by 33 contributors comprise the book. All but one of the contributors is based at a European, North American, Australian or New Zealand University or research institute. The UK features prominently here. Notwithstanding, many of the contributors have a global research profile and/or experience of working in 'non-Western' contexts. Nearly two-thirds of the contributors use he/him pronouns, with the remaining third using she/her and one contributor using they/them.

Compiling a handbook to cover the study of sports and society is always an ambitious undertaking. Since the first published papers to recognise the social significance of sport to society (for reflections on the development of the discipline, see Pike, Jackson and Wenner, 2015), a maturing divergence of interrelated and interdependent themes, topics and issues have been critiqued, theorised, analysed, reflected upon and challenged. It would be implausible to include all of this content though admirable attempts can be found in examples of Readers, Handbooks, and undergraduate student textbooks in Western universities, where upwards of seventy different topics can be covered (see Coakley and Dunning, 2000; Coakley and Pike, 2014; Jarvie, 2018; Houlihan and Malcolm, 2016; Tomlinson, 2007).

This Handbook is different. Less focus is paid to engaging in broad descriptions of each of the book's topics, though each chapter is filled with an array of topic-focused empirical, theoretical, peer-reviewed published research. Instead, authors were encouraged to 'weave together their personal research journeys with significant social issues and controversies in sport' (p.1), reflect upon their approaches and the state of their research field, and, particularly, identify any links between scholarship and activism. As such, people who have followed in the footsteps of those who worked to shape the field are afforded the opportunity to reflect upon and explore their contribution to the maturation of the social study of sport. It differs from Smith and Waddington's (2014) collection of honest and illuminating reflections on the processes involved with undertaking particular research projects or methodologies by reflecting upon whole careers and trajectories.

The book is separated into six parts to provide a 'holistic understanding' (p.3). The usual suspects of such handbooks appear (including mega sport events, media, marketing, pain and injury, gender inequity) along with contemporary avenues such as personal research journeys and interactions with policy, insights into the sociology of women's sports on the African continent, mental illness, the expansion of betting companies into data science, and terrorism and sport. It is important to add that each chapter

was written at a time 'in which the [Covid-19] pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement exposed social issues and fragilities, and the ways that these were played out in sporting arenas, whether physically or virtually' (p.1). Most authors make a nod to these influences.

Some chapters are raw, complex, multi-dimensional autobiographical reflections from scholars who have grappled with sport, power and society throughout their lives and, in interacting with the sociology of sport, began to unpack and challenge their own and others' predispositions of the concept of sport and its impact. For example, after locating himself in the complex interplay of politics, division and sport in Northern Ireland, David Hassan articulately explores how the sociology of sport enabled an 'intellectual restlessness that necessitates the telling of an alternative perspective' (p.12) – one that has guided his work ever since. Jorid Hovden recalls of her youth that 'fast, aggressive girls like me were regarded as "problem kids" rather than football talents' (p.23). Similarly, Lucy Piggott notes how, when playing football at school, she 'was not playing by the same social rules as the boys' (p.160). Experiences such as these have influenced their careers in challenging how the social construction of gender interplays with cultural manifestations of leadership within sports organisations. Megan Chawansky's reflections of involvement within the Sport Development and Peace sector as a researcher, worker, volunteer and consultant drive the crux of her chapter.

She writes about interactions with relocation, heteronormativity, national identity, neocolonialism, and efforts in teaching a new generation about these experiences. And in writing about mental illness and sport, Michael Atkinson strikingly states that, 'becoming aware that sport itself, a place where I thought only magic happened, would be replete with depressed people disenchanted it forever to me but provided a strange sense of solace that depression may affect anyone' (p.353). As such, aside from the topic they write about, many authors grapple with their own identities and those of others in their writing.

Other chapters consider the role of neoliberal agendas prevalent amongst scholars based in higher education of Western nations, and how they must adhere to funding/performance-related reviews of what research is and its purpose. Consequently, the concerns with protectionism of the value of sociology arise. Andy Smith uses the lens of his work with a community football project in the UK to reflect upon the challenges with the long-term, ongoing enterprise within British higher education of 'sustained impacted and outcome production' (p.47). In the penultimate

chapter, Ramon Spaaij recounts his research journey across the fields of security, violent extremism, and sport and social inclusion. He ends by demonstrating the impact of his research and its use by transnational and domestic governmental and non-governmental organisations, academia, and the media. The neoliberalist notion of combining evidence into a case for impact is critiqued by Lombe Mwambwa and Pike too: 'this is not limited to state and business actors, even activists across movements are employing the discourse of making the case, signalling our acceptance that the dignity and human rights of women is not reason enough' (p.271). As such, the final chapter by Jay Coakley considers the ongoing debate about neoliberal 'ideals' of measurable evidence and impact to justify the importance (and shaping) of the study of sports and society. Particularly, he considers a purpose and survival strategy that encapsulates Burawoy's (2005) dissection of professional sociology. Here, Coakley questions how viable it is for individual scholars to be activists, 'especially when their positions are opposed to those representing powerful private interests or deep-rooted oppositional ideologies' (p.386). He asks how professional organisations, such as the International Sociology of Sport Association, can support individual public sociologists. During a time of more visible and mediated athlete activism in and beyond sport, this challenge carries extra weight.

Each author also contemplates the challenges and opportunities within their research area. Leanne Norman (improving gender equity in sport coaching) and John Horne (sports mega events) acknowledge how their fields are reaching points of saturation and would benefit from maturing into new lines of study. Others, such as mediasport expert Lawrence Wenner, also identify 'well-worn pathways' (p.122) in relation with gender, events, identity and fandom, yet he acknowledges evident 'growing pains' (p.118), especially with mediasport 5.0 and digital media study. Andrew Grainger goes further and is critical of the isolationism and methodological bias in the study of sport, advertising and promotional culture. In identifying the increasing production and consumption of audience experiences, whilst advertising and promotion become more interactive, he highlights 'important questions about whether "new methods" are needed for "new media"' (p.106). Extending this, Simon Darnell, Sabrina Razack and Janelle Joseph call for intersectional analysis of digital media by social movements, particularly "'research into activism" and "research as activism"' (p.64), as the rapid technological advancement of movements continues.

As such, the Handbook affords the opportunity to read a personal side to academics on issues currently

affecting the discipline (albeit, with reasoned judgement where necessary). It is a rich, valuable, cathartic and affirming read for those in the sector, particularly when recognising the rewards and challenges encountered by others may in fact mirror those experienced by yourself. Notwithstanding, beyond this, it is tricky to appreciate the intended audience of the book. Some chapters appear more suited to introductory student textbooks (i.e. the chapters provide definitions of key terms and broad reviews of literature), others are denser and much more complex (i.e. chapters offer consideration of advanced theoretical propositions), whereas some have little or infrequent recollections of research journeys and influences. There is a sense of a lack of consistency in the content of chapters here. Not every author in the collection is an esteemed professor, but this does not mean that other research journeys are not important. When engaging with this Handbook, most undergraduate students may be better suited by engaging with the summative textbooks identified earlier in my review. Keener undergraduate and postgraduate students will certainly benefit and broaden their knowledge and empathy for those who do research. Indeed, this Handbook provides an overwhelming sense of humanising academics away from the 'colder', 'scientific' writing style of peer-reviewed publications. Whether this is enough to be accessible for practitioners too remains to be seen.

As noted, incorporating all topics from the relationship of sport to society would be an arduous task. Nevertheless, the focus on scholarship and activism could have encompassed contemporary dialogue around transgenderism and sport, public response to sporting scandals (e.g. organisational corruption; systemic abuse of athletes; examples of cheating), athlete activism, and the role of sport in contributing to/combating climate change, for example. Also noted previously was the authorship imbalance to-

ward Westernised knowledge bases. Anima Adjepong maps significant works 'that examine women's sport in Africa and the diaspora as a complex and contested cultural terrain for articulating identities, resisting social inequalities and forming new ways of being in the world' (p.285). Their voice, as well as Mwambwa's, are in the minority. Scholarship and activism from other areas of the world would have broadened the valuable contributions of the book further.

In summary, this Handbook is a novel addition to a field that has an existing array of sport and society handbooks. The rationale of reflecting upon scholarship and activism leads to important, personal insights and additions to knowledge by leaders across various topics in the study of sports and society. In places, this intention varies, yet perhaps aligns to what Coakley notes in the final chapter about the expectations, constraints and opportunities that exist for academics to engage in change.

## References

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