

REFLECTIONS ON SOCIOLOGY OF
SPORT: TEN QUESTIONS, TEN
SCHOLARS, TEN PERSPECTIVES

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 10

**REFLECTIONS ON
SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT:
TEN QUESTIONS, TEN
SCHOLARS, TEN
PERSPECTIVES**

EDITED BY

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INTRODUCTION

Kevin Young

Following quickly on the heels of, and conceptually tied to, Volume 9 of *Research in the Sociology of Sport* (*Sociology of Sport: A Global Subdiscipline in Review*), this volume now completes the ‘double celebration’ of this book series as the sociology of sport subfield turns 50.

Ten recognized and influential scholars from around the world (five women and five men) have been invited to reflect on their respective academic journeys. Specifically, they have been asked to couch their experiences and to frame their papers around the following ten questions, grouped into four main themes: *About the Author* (Who are your Mentors and Influential Figures? What is your Research Trajectory?); *About Sport* (Why does Sport Matter? How Should Sport be Studied? Is Sport a Panacea for Social Problems?); *About Practising Sociology of Sport* (Is Teaching Sociology of Sport Easy? Do Sociologists of Sport Like Sport? Is the Sociologist of Sport a ‘Public Intellectual’?); and *About Sociology of Sport in the Academy* (Does Sociology of Sport Face Institutional/ Industry Barriers? What is the Future of the Sociology of Sport?).

To my knowledge, this sort of approach has never been taken before. While the ten questions are salient for everyone in the academy irrespective of field of study, they seem particularly trenchant for sociologists of sport as the subfield reaches a chronological milestone and continues to undergo its own ‘growing pains’ and maturation (as discussed at more length in the Introduction to Volume 9). The underpinning objective is thus plainly serious but, in style, the volume (often written in a conversational first-person tone) is definitely ‘lighter’ than a conventionally scholarly empirical or theoretical research approach. It is nevertheless suitably celebratory of, and introspective towards, the subfield. Once again, it represents a fitting complement to RSS9 where 23 chapters written by recognized scholars summarized the subdisciplinary ‘state of play’ across the globe in the most substantial and inclusive set of subfield summaries ever collated in one source. To avoid any perception of priority or proportional ordering, the ten chapters in the current volume simply follow an author surname alphabetical protocol.

When I acknowledged (with then co-editor Joe Maguire) in 2002 that *Theory, Sport & Society* is the opening volume in a new series entitled *Research in the Sociology of Sport*, I could never have imagined that 15 years

later I'd be writing similar prefatory comments for the 10th volume of the series. Clearly, the series has progressed at a respectable pace and, cumulatively, has offered up a valuable catalogue of information about the sports process. Over the past 15 years, the previous nine volumes have dealt with a wide diversity of sociological matters: theory; sports injury; the Olympic Games; sport subcultures; cultural diversity; qualitative methods; indigeneity; sport, social development and peace; as well as the status of the subfield across the globe. Including this volume, well over 200 authors have contributed their ideas culminating in, at this point, an impressive corpus of research papers and knowledge. The future looks equally rosy, with Volumes 11 (on sport and forms of mental illness) and 12 (on sport and risk, pain and injury) already 'in the works'.

It is an absolute pleasure to introduce Volume 10 of *Research in the Sociology of Sport*, and it is my hope that you enjoy these careful, contemplative and sometimes cautious 'reflections' as much as I have in earlier preparatory stages. My guess is that wherever and however you approach 'sport', these ten chapters will resonate with you and, in them, you will find many of your own experiences mirrored.

Once again, Happy Anniversary!

CHAPTER 1

STORIES FROM AN ACADEMIC LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON BEING/ DOING/THINKING/TEACHING IN SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

Toni Bruce

INTRODUCTION

My first real exposure to organized sport did not happen until high school, partly because I grew up on a sheep farm with no near neighbors. This isolation left my sister and me to create our own recreational activities grounded in the natural environment: exploring and swimming in streams, sliding down clay banks on flattened cardboard boxes, or swinging on supplejack vines. Even holidays at my grandparents' beach house focused more on water-based play than anything resembling organized sport. Arriving at boarding school, aged 13, knowing no-one, I was drawn to team sports by the sense of instant community. I discovered that I was physically competent, and tried all the available sports, finally settling on basketball, through which I have had opportunities to travel, coach and referee, and to connect with people whenever I arrived in a new place. Many of my strongest memories, both good and bad, are tied to sport. For me, sport was a powerful space of learning about myself and others, about leadership, friendship, and resilience in the face of failure or (perceived) unfairness, about gender, racial difference, sexuality, and many other social issues. What eventually led me to the sociology of sport was working on summer camps in the United States with underprivileged inner city children, which ignited a desire to gain an undergraduate degree in sport or physical education.

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At university I discovered a love of learning that eventually led to a scholarship for postgraduate study in the United States, where my interest in the social aspects of sport and previous experience in news and sports journalism set me on the path to study the sociology of sport and issues of sport media representation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mentors and Influential Figures

Mentors have come in different forms throughout my career. Some appeared in formal roles, such as my MSc and PhD main supervisor, Susan Greendorfer, who ensured I was well-grounded in the history and recent developments in sociology of sport, and taught me fundamental research skills, including the importance of systematicity, detail, and the non-negotiability of accurate referencing. Sue also weathered and supported my unsettling and emotional shift from a positivist desire to learn *the one right way* to do research and then return home and apply it, to embracing fundamentally different ontologies and epistemologies in cultural studies and feminisms.

Other mentors came in the form of teachers, such as Syndy Sydnor and Norman Denzin, who fostered and validated different ways of representing research (e.g., Denzin, 1996; Kohn & Slowikowski, 1998; Sydnor, 1998) and introduced me to the work of C. Wright Mills and Laurel Richardson. Larry Grossberg provided a strong grounding in cultural studies (e.g., Grossberg, 1992, 1996) and introduced me to Stuart Hall's writings, which have become the bedrock of my theoretical approach to, and interpretation of, sports media representations. All of them challenged me to think differently than I had before, and introduced me to concepts and ideas that I hold close, that act like points of light, orienting my research. For example, through Hall's work (e.g., 1984, 1985, 1997a, 1997b; Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013) I came to understand that media stories teach us *how* to think about aspects of identity, such as gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity, nationalism, and dis/ability, by establishing the boundaries within which we *can* think. I continue to find the cultural studies concept of articulation a particularly valuable way to make sense of some of the intractable discourses of difference that permeate sports media. My work attempting to challenge dominant discourses that marginalize, de-legitimate, and reduce groups to stereotypes is also firmly grounded in the belief that such articulations, discourses, and stories have real effects and affects on people's lives and possibilities. I have long drawn inspiration from Richardson's belief that "stories that deviate from standard cultural plots provide new narratives" and that hearing such narratives "legitimizes replotting one's own life" (1990,

p. 26). For her, “The story of the transformed life, then, becomes a part of the cultural heritage affecting future stories, future lives” (Richardson, 1990, p. 26).

Other mentors came in the form of peers at the University of Illinois, Pirkko Markula, David Andrews, Nancy Spencer, Bob Rinehart, Jim Denison, Steve Jackson, Jeremy Howell, Lesley Fishwick, and others, with whom I spent many hours drinking beer or coffee as we debated the finer points of the theories and methods of sport sociology, cultural studies, postmodernism, and feminisms. In the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) I found an academic home, which exposed me to multiple perspectives, fierce debates, and senior academics who encouraged and supported graduate students. After moving back to New Zealand from the United States, the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA) conferences became a second home and started me down the path of international collaborations, seeking patterns and differences in multiple cultural contexts (e.g., Bruce, 2016a; Bruce, Hovden, & Markula, 2010; see also Markula, 2009).

Beyond research, Norm Denzin embodied a form of teaching practise that I embrace, one that values the knowledge and experiences students bring to learning, recognizes and makes visible the tentative and limited nature of academic knowledge, and values debate and discussion, alongside immersion in personally relevant topics. Similarly, Vicky Paraschak and I have shared many 5:30 am morning walks at NASSS, discussing our shared philosophy of strengths-based, student-centered, teaching practise (e.g., Paraschak & Thompson, 2014).

Rather than unintentionally ignoring some of the many colleagues, supervisors, teachers, and peers whose words and ideas have helped me navigate my way into and through an academic career, I finish instead with a story. At a recent writing retreat, we were asked to imagine ourselves in a room facing a writing problem, then to imagine a knock at the door. Our task was to explain our problem to the writing mentor we found standing outside, who would give us the answer. Opening the door, I “saw” Laurel Richardson and Norm Denzin holding hands, and together they said, “Write from the heart.” I treasure these four powerful and inspirational words as a foundation upon which to build the rest of my research, writing, and teaching career.

Research Trajectory

Throughout my career, I have been engaged in what another mentor, journalist and writer Don Murray, called exploring “the questions that itch” our lives (Murray, 1991, p. 73). As with many researchers, my early questions emerged from my own biography (Richardson, 2001) as a female basketball player and sports journalist. I began with small-scale feminist and cultural studies-informed studies of various aspects of sports media, including women basketball fans’

experiences of watching televised coverage of women's games and women sportswriters' experiences covering men's college and professional sport. Since then my work has expanded into issues of mediated nationalism, masculinity, and dis/ability. The diversity of topics – gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, nationalism, and disability – is held together through my focus on the power of dominant cultural discourses to include or exclude, to reify or marginalize, and a desire to create spaces where silenced or marginalized voices and experiences can be heard.

Right now, I am trying to understand two key issues. The first is the remarkable historical and global continuity in sports media narratives. I am asking questions such as: under what conditions and in what ways do different forms of difference matter (or are *made* to matter), and what effects does that “mattering” have on the possibilities for making sense of sport, sports media, and various forms of identity? The question that has been “itching” me asks what kinds of articulations would need to emerge for sportswomen and other marginalized groups in sport to become part of the mediasport furniture, so to speak? Cultural studies allows me to imagine even potent articulations as unstable and (potentially) able to be articulated in different ways. This leads to a focus on instabilities within the default settings of mediasport.

The second key issue involves investigating the spaces in which “normal” media discourses are (usually temporarily) disrupted: the moments when those who are usually marginalized, such as sportswomen, cross the boundary into respectful public visibility. My search for positive disruptions, resulting from frustration at the persistent mainstream media marginalization of sportswomen, led to analyses of the possibilities of the Web 2.0 environment for sportswomen and supporters of women's sport to create and circulate new narratives. This new focus led me to Margaret Wetherell's work around emotion as a social practise (Wetherell, 2012), and Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin's work around third-wave feminism (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), which influence the way I am looking at the changing nature of female sporting embodiment and (self-) representation (e.g., Bruce, 2016a). I am increasingly interested in the diversity of representation and its ambivalent nature; the way that, in Hall's (1997b) terms, difference “can be both positive and negative” (p. 238) – along with the conditions under which it falls into either category (or both at once).

I am simultaneously saddened by the failure of women's sport advocates to make any significant impact on the amount of coverage of sportswomen, and troubled by why this is the case. Given the cultural studies insistence on strategic intervention, I question why advocates for women's sport (and I would include those fighting for “better” representation of disabled, racial or ethnic minority and LGBTI athletes) have failed so miserably to dis-articulate sport (and sports media in particular) from cultural ideals of heterosexual, able-bodied, white masculinity. It appears that part of the failure is to find the right layers or levels at which to intervene in mediasport's role in reifying and

constantly re-articulating the relationship between sport and masculinity. In an interview, Grossberg proposed that

if you keep fighting battles and you keep losing (on all sorts of sites and fronts, including institutional and popular struggles), it must be that there is something wrong with the story you are telling, the story from which you are deriving political strategies. Somehow, you don't understand the rules of the game, you are not playing the right game, you are not playing on the right field ... You don't understand what's happening well enough. (Liang, Wong, Wong, & Chan, 2005, para. 13)

He suggests that if we gain “a better sense of the state of play on the field of forces in popular culture and daily life,” this opens up the chance to “see more clearly where struggles are possible and, in some cases, even actual. Then we can try to find ways to oppose them, or help articulate them, to nurture and support them and perhaps, to bring them into visible relations with other struggles” (Grossberg, 1992, p. 66). It was these words that created the space in my thinking to write a novel exploring these issues in women's sport (Bruce, 2016b), “to take risks and go places that would not be possible” in other forms of writing (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). If we need to find ways to create new narratives or tell new stories, as Richardson (2001) and Grossberg (see Liang et al., 2005) advocate, then a novel seemed one way to liberate possibilities that research had not yet brought into visible relations.

Yet, the still-unanswered question remains: How can we tell new stories and create new connections to help journalists and media workers articulate femininity, disability, and homosexuality to sport, and present all athletes, no matter their race, ethnicity, or nationality, in nuanced and non-stereotypical ways? Certainly, this is no simple task of informing sports media outlets and journalists that they are inequitable and/or discriminatory (as so many disability and gay rights activists, and women's sport researchers, foundations and organizations, and even government departments have tried and failed to achieve). Instead, we need to understand how and where to make strategic alliances that make a difference. What seems to be missing is the ability of advocates for women, disabled, and LGBTI athletes, and those fighting against the echoes of racial stereotyping, to find ways to build new coalitions and create alternative articulations.

ABOUT SPORT

Why Does Sport Matter?

Sport matters because it has physical, social, psychological, community, economic, political, and national effects and affects. In Arnold's (1992) words, sport is “a culturally valued human practise” organized by its own rules that, like other forms of cultural activity, constitutes the “source of our possibilities”

and understandings of “what it is to be a person” (p. 237). For Arnold, sport helps create “a meaningful pattern of life in which individuals can both find and extend themselves” through initiation “into the ways, customs and practises of a given culture,” which include the need for co-operation to achieve shared goals, an ethical framework within which to play, and value of passing on sporting knowledge to future generations (1992, p. 253). Similarly, in sociology of sport’s most-used text book, the authors explain that

we study sports because they are given special meaning by particular people in societies, they are tied to important ideas and beliefs in many cultures, and they are connected with major spheres of social life such as the family, religion, education, the economy, politics and the media. (Coakley, Hallinan, Jackson, & Mewett, 2009, pp. 15–16)

Whether individuals love or hate sport, the cultural visibility and impact of elite and professional sport is undeniable. So, too, is the impact of sport in the lives of families and communities, whose weekends are often organized around their children’s sporting activities, including driving, coaching, managing, refereeing, planning half-time sustenance and awards, and washing and repairing uniforms. Participating in sport can contribute to the maintenance of cultural and ethnic connections (Hokowhitu, 2007). It can profoundly impact individual, community, and national identities, bringing people together and/or dividing them. It also matters because, in the right contexts, it can achieve some of the many things it is believed to do: integrate, provide purpose, and teach culturally valued skills such as teamwork, perseverance, the value of hard work and resilience. The economic impact of sport, which includes sales of sport and sports team merchandise and equipment, building of stadia, hosting international sports events, television rights, ticket sales to sports events, and player and coach salaries, is also undeniable.

How Should Sport be Studied?

A short answer would be that sport should be studied systematically, in depth, with a sense of curiosity, and from multiple perspectives. Like every important element of society, sport is far too complex, layered, and multifaceted to be studied in only one way: there is no one-size-fits-all way to understand sport. I support Lather’s (2006) exhortation to embrace multiplicity and proliferation in methods and theories, as we seek ways “into a less comfortable social science full of stuck places and difficult philosophical issues of truth, interpretation and responsibility” (p. 52). As a field, sociology of sport has periodically been through major debates about appropriate and valid ways to study sport. Although one of the advantages in sociology of sport research is the diversity of theories and methods, some intractable issues may require us to work in a more cross-, inter-, or trans-disciplinary manner (e.g., Lather, 2006; Thorpe, 2006), much as we see in the burgeoning field of pleasure, emotion, and affect

(e.g., Pringle, Rinehart, & Caudwell, 2015). The priority is that sociologists of sport conduct high-quality research, no matter which paradigmatic, theoretical, or methodological approaches they embrace, driven by a concern with how our research can be useful, how it can “ask what might be thought and done otherwise” (Lather, 2006, p. 45). Thus, the field would do well to reflect and foster openness toward different approaches, even ones that fundamentally challenge our individual ontological and epistemological commitments.

Is Sport a Panacea for Social Problems?

As with so many questions about sport’s connection to broader society, my answer is yes *and* no. Sport, in its many forms and dimensions, has the *potential* to contribute positively to society, as structural functionalists have always maintained, often based on an unshakable belief that sport builds character (Coakley, 2015; Crabbe, 2000; Sugden, 2015). Increasingly, global organizations like the United Nations have shown interest in mobilizing sport’s potential to address “social ills” to meet Millennium Development Goals (Burnett, 2015). One example is UNESCO’s learning values through sport campaign, which identifies “Equality, inclusion, respect, and fairness” as “core values triggered by sport” and supports “using sport in order to empower learners to be self-determined, responsible, and contribute to society” (United Nations, 2016, para. 2). It further argues that “Not only is sport a bridge between individuals and nations, it can also be an active tool for overcoming stereotypes, rising above exclusion, and fostering citizenship” (United Nations, 2016, para. 5). Although such aims are laudable, the “problem” occurs when this belief is accepted in an unquestioning, taken-for-granted way. Such beliefs negate the need for critical analysis and engagement with what sport *actually* does, rather than focusing on what it is *believed* to do (see also Coakley, 2015; Sugden, 2015). Perhaps because of the “uncritical stance of practitioners and funding agencies about assumed impact,” there appears to be only limited evidence of the effectiveness of programs using sport to increase physical and psychological well-being, teach life skills, improve educational outcomes, increase safety and reduce crime or drug use, regenerate communities, and create positive economic impacts (Burnett, 2015; Crabbe, 2000). This is not to argue that such programs have no effect but, rather, that there is little systematic or holistic evaluation that captures the complexity of outcomes, power relations, relationships, and local struggles (Burnett, 2015). Despite the need to challenge the widespread and taken-for-granted beliefs about sport as a panacea, I agree with Sugden (2015) that we need to think seriously about how, as sociologists of sport, we can use our knowledge in hands-on ways, including working toward “practical interventions that may help sport play a role in saving the world” (p. 611).

ABOUT PRACTISING SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

Is Teaching Sociology of Sport Easy?

Teaching of any kind is never “easy” but teaching sociology of sport is one of the great joys of my academic life. It literally changes some students’ lives, as they come to understand how the stories we tell ourselves as a society – often circulated through media – intersect with their own experiences and understandings. Turning a sociological lens on sport provides students with some distance to think about why they think and act the way they do. A focus on cultural discourses and their impacts on people’s lives enables students to locate their own experiences into a bigger picture. Because I teach in sport and physical education programs where most students are sport fans, there is never a shortage of current and relevant examples of all kinds of issues that provide sources for fruitful discussion and student-selected content for assignments. Teaching similar kinds of students 33 years ago, McKay and Pearson (1984) argued that teaching a sociologically critical view of sport “is usually a difficult task” because students “often react in an incredulous or hostile fashion” when their taken-for-granted assumptions are debunked (p. 134). More recently, Dart (2015) also reported initial reluctance from “students who enjoyed sport at school” (p. 9) to engaging with critical viewpoints. In contrast, my experience has been very different. Perhaps because I have taught for the past 15 years in programs underpinned by critical perspectives, I find students are usually willing to consider alternative perspectives. As a result, I have not faced the challenges of sociologists of sport interviewed by Dart (2015) who reported that their work sat “uneasily alongside” other disciplines “that taught ‘sport’ in an uncritical fashion” and faced the “constant risk of exclusion” because their courses acted “as a dissenting voice” in more positivist programs (p. 10). It appears that I have been in “a rare, but advantageous position” in programs that value interdisciplinary and critical perspectives (Dart, 2015, p. 5). Over time, I have developed a pedagogical approach that explicitly structures the course as a discussion between students’ lived experiences and the results of systematic sociological research. This approach validates students’ experiential knowledge and simultaneously provides them with additional resources to make sense of what they see and experience. Like Blinde (1995), my focus is on applying rather than memorizing information, and embraces a reciprocal approach in which “the teacher and the students learn from each other” (p. 267). An early example that both reflects, and reinforces, this commitment resulted from the objections of undergraduate students to the conclusions of a published analysis of racism in basketball commentary. In response, I initiated a summer research project in which I interviewed basketball commentators and analyzed racial ideologies in a televised commentary of 43 men’s college

and professional basketball games. The results supported the students' rather than the researchers' explanations.

My overall aim is to facilitate a psychologically safe and supportive learning community where the students are comfortable with me, the content of the course, and with each other and, most importantly, "feel that their ideas are respected and encouraged" (Bonk & Khoo, 2014, p. 45). Authentic learning requires a classroom climate and assignments that are "open and active, involve genuine tasks, respect students' ideas, and embed student-driven activities" (Bonk & Khoo, 2014, pp. 45–46; Cochrane, 2014). I measure the success of this approach through course evaluations and students' responses, including their reported use of course content and assignments in their own teaching practise. In recent years, students in my sociocultural foundations course have described it as "the life course" because they see the learning as directly relevant to their everyday lives.

Do Sociologists of Sport Like Sport?

Bairner (2009) identifies two kinds of sociologists of sport: the "many" critical scholars who have an antipathy for sport, and others "who truly enjoy the aesthetic pleasure and the emotional engagement that sport can offer" (p. 118). From my experience, most sociologists of sport do like sport, or even loved it before they encountered critical theory, but somehow our published research seldom makes this clear. Most likely reflecting the theoretical turn toward critical questions about power, inequality, and difference, much sociological research on sport leans strongly toward critiquing existing structures and discourses. It is only recently that we are beginning to see a broader shift back toward investigating why so many people invest so much time, money, and emotion playing and/or consuming it via media or merchandise. This shift encourages us to remember that joy, pleasure, challenge, and self-, or group-actualization are among the many reasons sport can be a positive influence in people's lives, and to consider exploring these possibilities in more depth. At the same time, as someone who takes great pleasure in playing and consuming sport but has also been described by a sports journalist as at risk of being seen as one of the great killjoys of our time, I agree with Bairner (2009) that sports fandom and being a critical sociologist creates an "inevitable tension" between loving and consuming mediated sport while recognizing its problematic aspects (p. 118). I also believe he is correct that balancing these two competing intellectual and experiential positions places us in "a more advantageous position than those who are anti-sport to critique and potentially to combat those aspects of the sporting world that are morally and ideologically unacceptable to us" (Bairner, 2009, pp. 118–119), even if it takes greater than normal efforts to establish our pro-sport credentials. In my case, after widespread coverage of

my research critiquing the dominant discourse that all New Zealanders loved rugby, a newspaper journalist decided to start a profile piece like this: “Let’s clear one matter up. Toni Bruce likes footy. ‘I was raised to be a rugby fan,’ says the sport sociologist” (Stone, 2015, paras. 1–2).

Is the Sociologist of Sport a “Public Intellectual”?

Not all sociologists of sport are public intellectuals but I believe at least some of us should be. We have valuable knowledge and research to share, and if we do not enter public debates then our knowledge is often excluded from the most powerful forums in which members of society gain their understandings, and decisions affecting how sport is practised and administered are made. Donnelly (2015) argues that not only does engaged and relevant sociological research have the power to change lives but that our work “*should* make a difference” (p. 422), in part through being shared beyond the academy. Pike, Jackson, and Wenner (2015) believe that sociologists of sport are already active as public sociologists, and argue that the field “has had considerable influence, playing diverse roles in policy development” and directing the attention of the public and media “to a myriad of pressing issues facing sport in society today” (p. 359). In contrast, Bairner (2009) argues that institutional constraints and the antipathy some critical sociologists of sport show toward their subject matter has made it challenging for sociologists of sport to “assume the mantle of public intellectuals” (p. 115).

Most higher education institutions espouse a belief in the role of academics as public intellectuals. Indeed, this role is embedded in New Zealand law, where the Education Act (1989) states that one of five characteristics of universities is that “they accept a role as critic and conscience of society” (p. 282). Until recently, that role involved active engagement with the most powerful storytellers of our time – the mainstream mass media – even though the level of support and training for us to enact that role varies widely. So why do so few of us actively engage in the rough-and-tumble world of public debate? Agreeing with Bairner (2009) that public intellectualism can negatively affect individuals’ academic careers, colleagues have reported fear of backlash from their own colleagues, including snide remarks about seeking public visibility, or raising questions about research methodology or quality, as journalists or commentators simplify complex ideas into simple, catchy, click-bait-enticing headlines. In addition, taking the role seriously almost inevitably reduces the quantum of researchers’ publications, which can pose a threat to tenure and promotion (Bairner, 2009; Dudding, 2016). Additionally, unlike our preparation in theory, methodology, and even teaching, few of us are taught media skills. Learning them requires training in how best to gain attention, how best to frame your

research for a public rather than academic audience, as well as an understanding of the increasingly cut-throat nature of media, a sense of humor, and thick skin (Bruce, 2014). Research that challenges deeply held cultural beliefs can attract negative and scathing public attacks. I have been variously described as an ugly bone-carving wearing woman of questionable sexuality, a tiny mind, a wet blanket, and as conducting sloppy research. At the same time, publicizing such research-informed challenges can be empowering for people whose voices were previously invisible. For example, responses such as those of the 80-year-old retired farmer who emailed me privately to share that hearing about my results “*made my day, as I feel almost main stream*” or the 45-year-old woman who wrote, “*Thanks for the opportunity for this survey, its fantastic for non rugby fans to have a voice*” validate the importance of publicly sharing research results.

As the mixed reactions above suggest, public intellectualism is not necessarily easy. Despite attempts to control your message, once you enter the mass media fray, the results are unpredictable. More often than not, mainstream media coverage highlights simplicity rather than nuance, and represents results in black and white terms rather than the shades of gray in which academics usually deal. However, in the Web 2.0 environment we now have more opportunities to share and control our messages (through blogs, tweets, Instagram, etc.), and many academics are taking up this opportunity, suggesting that being a public intellectual in the 21st century looks somewhat different from the past. Perhaps, like professional sportspeople, sport sociologists too are now in the position to bypass media gatekeepers and circulate our messages in our own nuanced ways – if we can build an audience, and our institutional policies value and allow this form of interaction.

ABOUT SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT IN THE ACADEMY

Does Sociology of Sport Face Institutional/Industry Barriers?

I suspect the answer to this question varies significantly by national context. In New Zealand, the research field seems in reasonable health, although sport-related Faculties and Departments around the country are undergoing significant restructuring and there is increasing pressure to do more with less. Pike et al. (2015) recently summarized the state of the field by arguing that

the subject does appear to be thriving in some institutions and countries, offering a legitimate research and career pathway, and attracting the critical scholarly gaze of academics from a wide range of disciplinary fields, including anthropology, communication, economics, gender, international relations and politics and even mainstream sociology. (pp. 358–359)

In many countries, sociologists of sport are valued as expert commentators on sport and regularly approached by media to comment on current issues. However, just as institutional rewards do not always advantage the public intellectual (Bairner, 2009; Dudding, 2016), they may also function as barriers to building connections with those working in professional contexts (e.g., coaches, marketers, media workers, policy-makers, or national and international sport federations and organizations). Building such connections takes time and does not always lead to fast academic publications, especially if the findings are designed to be directly useful to the organizations concerned.

Another barrier is that sport sociology research is often critical of current practises in sport, which seldom endears us to those working in those contexts. For example, in my main area of sports media research, researchers have faced significant challenges in trying to convince mainstream media workers to accept or act upon the results of our research (Fountainaine & McGregor, 1999; McKee, 2003). McKee (2003) – who describes many cultural studies researchers as wanting “to change the kinds of texts that are published, particularly by journalists in newspapers and in television news, wishing for texts which are less racist, less sexist, less homophobic, less capitalist” (p. 53) – has suggested that journalists resist our findings because they interpret them as suggesting they are sexist or racist, for example. New Zealand researchers attempting such work have had similar experiences, finding that sports journalists did not react well when researchers tried to bring inequities in sports media coverage to their attention. Such research was “persistently rejected as irrelevant” and the findings “often ignored or trivialized by news management and journalists” (Fountainaine & McGregor, 1999, p. 113). McKee (2003) suggests we might focus less on brow-beating media producers and, instead, apply our energies to providing widely accessible resources to enable the public to change how they interpret what the media produce. This is one form of intervention that is often embraced by those who would benefit from change (Bruce, Rankine, & Nairn, 2017). However, it still seems worthwhile to persevere with attempts to build bridges and collaborate with those working in sport, even if our institutions do not necessarily value it.

What is the Future of the Sociology of Sport?

In New Zealand we have a well-known saying: *He aha te mea nui o te ao. He tangata, he tangata, he tangata* (What is the most important thing in the world? It is the people, it is the people, it is the people). I begin with this saying because I fear that unless we can better connect ourselves to the actual field of play of sport and, in the case of sports media, build connections and conversations with mass media producers, we will end up speaking only to ourselves and our students. In the introduction to the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*

journal's fiftieth anniversary issue, the editors made a similar point, arguing that because sociologists of sport work primarily in sport-focused departments and publish in sport-related journals, this "may serve to limit their engagement with, and influence on, the wider community within and outside academia" (Pike et al., 2015, p. 358).

Many, if not most, sociologists of sport are drawn to research that identifies issues and strives to make sport a better place, whether that is more financially stable, better managed, more supportive of personal or community development, or more fair and equitable. However, unless we can find ways to enter into the conversations that matter, with the people who can enact the differences we believe are needed, our field runs the risk of being seen as obsolete or irrelevant "to the real world."

Although some sociologists of sport are already actively engaging in this way, it might be valuable to consistently host conference sessions on these issues in order to reveal the pleasures and pains, and provide signposts for success, of trying to build relationships, and make change outside the academy and beyond our classrooms. We may also need to develop a strategy for circulating our work more widely into other disciplines (Bruce, 2015; Pike et al., 2015). As sport has become increasingly culturally important, other disciplines have entered the fray, and many of these "newcomers" appear completely unaware that sport sociology exists. Nor do they cite the excellent research and theorizing that has already been produced by sociologists of sport, which suggests that our work still has to find its place in the broader sociological field. As Pike et al. (2015) conclude: "In order to effectively challenge the marginalization of the field and to transact more integrally with the worlds of sport and sociology, sociologists of sport will need to facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaborations with scholars working in other social sciences, sport sciences and mainstream sociology" (p. 361). Are we up for the challenge?

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