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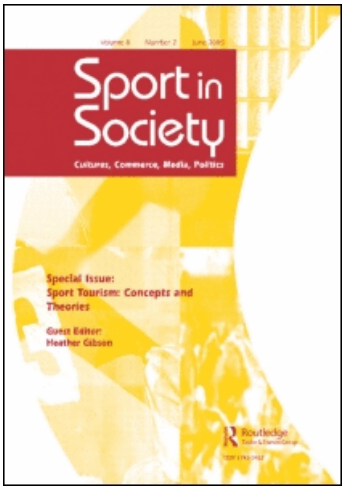

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Personal and social change in and through sport: cross-cutting themes

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Personal and social change in and through sport: cross-cutting themes

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The ten essays that make up this special edition of *Sport in Society* serve as a starting point for examining the ways in which sport contributes to, or inhibits, particular social outcomes. In this epilogue I will address, in a concise and exploratory way, the main cross-cutting themes that emerge from the individual contributions as a basis for further discussion and research.

An issue that has been frequently commented upon is that social development through sport is focused disproportionately on Northern modern sports to the exclusion of indigenous games. The most used sport in sport-for-development programmes across the globe is association football (soccer), reflecting the game's global appeal.[1] Other often used sports, though to a much lesser extent, are volleyball, athletics and basketball.[2] In considering the contemporary academic and policy discourses on sport-for-development, it is critical to recall the instrumental use of sport during the colonial period. In their contribution to this volume, Meier and Saavedra explain how sport served as a means of 'civilizing' African societies through its disciplining nature, and as a regimen to teach hygiene, cleanliness and self-control. It could be argued that besides representing modes of (neo-) colonial domination and social control, Northern modern sports carry with them certain 'dysfunctional' aspects of the societies in which they originated, such as a fixation on competition and winning and related practices of violence, cheating and corruption.[3]

The contributions to this special edition appear to challenge this view in two ways. Firstly, they point to the much wider range of sports that may act, in certain circumstances, as agents of personal and social change. Burnett, for instance, discusses the uses of indigenous games, gymnastics, aerobics, netball, rugby, cricket, handball and other games in South Africa. The project in Bam, Iran, also included table tennis and karate in its combination of several sports. Kunz found that children's interest in traditional, indigenous games was very low and that some of these games are not well-suited for children (i.e. certain combat sports). The essays by Spaaij and Hallinan and Judd pay particular attention to the role and influence of Australian football, not only for Australians of Anglo-Saxon descent but also for Indigenous Australians. The latter essay nevertheless paints a rather grim picture of race relations progress in Australia, showing how the Australian sport system, especially the Australian Football League, generates a form of organizational practice that contains and stereotypes Indigenous ambition and performance. This and other contributions highlight that the transformative capacity of

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sport cannot be taken for granted, and that sport often reproduces or reinforces social inequalities rather than fundamentally contests or resists them.

Secondly, as Kunz points out in her analysis of the Bam project, sport development workers and coaches often seek to modify the sporting environment from one that is based on competition and individual performance to one that focuses on respect, tolerance and inclusiveness. She argues that without these modifications sport would not have contributed such positive effects in the aftermath of the Bam earthquake. In other words, while sports carry particular symbolic and cultural meanings in a globalizing context, these meanings can be transformed and contested at the grassroots level and are therefore always contextual. This, in turn, raises important questions about which sports and sports processes produce what outcomes, for which participants and in what circumstances.[4] While the competitive aspect of sport may 'work' for some people and some purposes, as Klein's essay shows regarding Major League Baseball's impact on economic and community development in the Dominican Republic, it may not work for others. For example, certain sports seem better suited than others to address or change gender relations and to empower young women, facilitating a radical rethinking of things we tend to take for granted. The key, then, is to avoid naive and unrealistic generalizations about the transformative capacity of sport. Instead, we should examine the specific processes and mechanisms that produce beneficial outcomes in particular social, cultural and political contexts and establish the extent to which, and the ways in which, these practices (like those identified by Kay, Kunz, Vermeulen and Verweel, and Meier and Saavedra) are transferable to other contexts.

In regard to these processes and mechanisms, the second issue that cuts across several contributions to this special edition is the way in which sport activities, at least in targeted initiatives, are often intimately connected to other services, such as education and health. Burnett demonstrates how in South Africa a health programme (HIV/AIDS education and training) and a gardening project were developed under sport club leadership. Kay's essay describes how GOAL staff deliberately fostered a structure in which giving and receiving information was integrated with the netball activities, creating a more informal and reflexive educational platform. These practices underline the recognition that it is not about sport itself, but rather about the social issues people seek to address by means of sport activities. There is a strong feeling here that while sport participation is important as an end in itself (i.e., in terms of its intrinsic significance), one needs to 'add things to it' to enhance opportunities for sport to act as an agent of personal and social change. This finding verifies Crabbe *et al*'s conclusion that 'it is the adoption of a personal and social development model which is sacred to sport-based social inclusion programs rather than sport'.[5]

Based on the contributions by Klein, Stokvis, Spaaij, and Vermeulen and Verweel, it can be concluded that such wider connections do not necessarily require elaborate design and planning. Vermeulen and Verweel conclude that both bonding and bridging social capital is found in organized sport clubs as well as in more informal sport activities in public playgrounds. From a different perspective, Klein emphasizes the economic and social capital resources that accrue from the growing baseball industry in the Dominican Republic. Stokvis takes this point further by revealing the significance of US high school athletics in limiting drop-out rates and in creating a feeling of collective identity and common purpose among staff and students despite their increasing heterogeneity.

Looking more closely at the sport-related processes that generate positively perceived personal and social change, the role and the influence of role models and peer leaders, and their personal and social closeness to participants, become evident. The contributions by Meier and Saavedra, Burnett, Kunz and Kay all consider the ways in which role models or

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peer leaders (especially young women) are involved in sport-for-development programmes at various levels. Their investigations carry forward the growing body of literature which stresses the vital contributions peer leaders and embedded role models can make in social development through sport.[6] They identify some of the conditions necessary for peer educators to have a positive social impact as part of on-going processes of socialization and social communication, and raise important epistemological and methodological questions that will stimulate academic and policy debates on sport as an agent of personal and social change. Meier and Saavedra in particular argue that it is important to be very specific about how sport-based development projects can use role models as a tool or a focusing device for staff and participants, as individuals will not necessarily be receptive to a positive role model which requires a path of individual risk. The predisposition or the particular regulatory focus of an individual and community must be considered when evaluating the use of role models.

More generally, this special edition stresses the need for theoretically and methodologically informed considerations of the social impact of sport. The contributions highlight the multitude of theoretical and methodological frameworks that can be employed to study personal and social change in and through sport, each offering a different, yet not necessarily mutually exclusive, perspective on the subject. Echoing wider calls for engaging with Southern and postcolonial modes of knowledge and experience,[7] some of the contributors explicitly challenge the biases of Northern theories and methodologies, arguing for a radical rethinking of sport-for-development research. Others employ more 'orthodox' theories and methodologies but apply them in novel ways, considering the subject matter from a different angle and generating interesting, often counter-intuitive, insights into the social impact of sport in society. These different approaches help us, each in its own distinctive way, to better understand the ways in which sport contributes to, or inhibits, personal and social change, the directions these changes take, and the circumstances and wider social conditions in which they occur.

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Notes

[1] Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*; Giulianotti, *Football*.
[2] Levermore, 'Sport-in-International Development', 42.
[3] E.g. Maguire, *Global Sport*.
[4] Coalter, *A Wider Social Role for Sport*, 2.
[5] Crabbe *et al.*, *Knowing the Score*, 19. Compare Danish, Taylor and Fazio, 'Enhancing Adolescent Development', 102.
[6] E.g. Nicholls, 'On the Backs of Peer Educators'; Crabbe, 'Avoiding the Numbers Game'.
[7] E.g. Connell, *Southern Theory*; Young, *Postcolonialism*.

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