

Social roles of sport organisations: developments, contexts and challenges

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Social roles of sport organisations: developments, contexts and challenges

Introduction to the special issue

Sport organisations are increasingly expected and encouraged to take up a wider social role. They are thought to foster social capital, social inclusion and democratic participation among organisational members, and to strengthen social cohesion in local communities. An increasing number of public institutions cooperate with sport organisations because of these supposedly positive spill-over effects. Next to these social roles for members and local communities, a number of sport organisations have explicitly begun to take up their social responsibility through taking an active position in combating organisational problems such as exclusionary practices or violence both on and of the pitch. While previous research has paid attention to these developments (e.g. Mutz & Baur, 2009; Spaaij et al., 2014; Vandermeersch, Vos, & Scheerder, 2015), several authors have underscored the need for a more focused discussion which centres upon the social roles of sport organisations take in modern society. This is particularly needed with the ever more high expectations sport organisations find themselves confronted with, and which pose serious challenges for both organisational members and policymakers in the sports domain (Coalter, 2007; Haudenhuyse, 2017).

Related to these developments, and based on the articles in this issue, we emphasise three major organisational and policy challenges for sport organisations and other agents in sport policy development. The first challenge to be considered is one of *implementation*. In particular, sports clubs have claimed an important social role in public welfare ever since the establishment of the sports clubs movement in the nineteenth century. Since sports clubs have the ability to bring people together through development of social networks, there is widespread belief that sports clubs can promote social cohesion in modern European societies (Waardenburg, 2016). The EU emphasises the high relevance of sports clubs in different sports policy documents (EU, 2007), particularly because of the large size of the voluntary sports sector. From a policy evaluation point of view, more knowledge is needed which outlines the actual impact of sport organisations' social roles. This could, for example, focus upon their (potential) contribution to the development of social capital or social integration (Albrecht, Elmoose-Østerlund, Klenk, & Nagel, 2019 this issue; Østerlund & Seippel 2013). Whilst existing research demonstrates an ambivalent picture of the social role of sports clubs, several studies have shown that sports organisations can reduce social differences and create social networks and friendships (e.g. Janssens & Verweel, 2014), whilst simultaneously the potential of sports clubs to promote social integration has been questioned by studies which highlight exclusionary practices as well as their ability to respond to challenges such as homophobia or discrimination against ethnic minorities (e.g. Bovens & Trappenburg, 2006; Elling & Claringbould, 2005).

A second yet related issue is what we term the *distribution challenge*. Alongside voluntary sports clubs, there are an increasing number of other sport providers that could play an important social role in modern societies, for example commercial gyms (Cardone, 2019 this issue). This raises a significant policy questions for forthcoming years: how can we

distribute social roles across the broader organisational field of sport organisations? How can governing bodies of sport, municipalities and other relevant actors balance their expectations towards, for example, voluntary sports clubs, whilst simultaneously realising their objectives through multiple types of sport organisations (e.g. voluntary, private, public and start-up)?

Third, we identify a *legitimacy challenge* as an issue with regards the social roles of sport organisations. As a consequence of the increased connection between sport and public issues, sport organisations and clubs in particular tend to be pulled into complex interorganisational relations. This results in new challenges for their legitimacy and identity (e.g. Stenling & Fahlén, 2016). These expectations can require sport organisations to (re)establish their organisational legitimacy, exhibited in recurrent issues and challenges such as the demand for ‘social responsibility’ or ‘good governance’ (Breitbarth, Walzel, & van Eekeren, 2019; Pedersen & Rosati, 2019). Such considerations raise questions about the way in which sport organisations can gain, maintain or repair their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), and which strategies organisational members can use to manage their identity concerning their social role in their community and in wider society.

Together, these challenges provide an exciting avenue for further research in the sociology and management of sport, and towards which the articles in this special issue provide a fresh contribution.

This special issue is dedicated to developments and challenges for sport organisations, particularly regarding their social role, at multiple scales (European, national and local). The issue developed as a follow up to the Sport Organisation Research Network sessions during the fifteenth European Association for the Sociology of Sport (EASS) conference in Bordeaux, France. This special issue also builds upon and progresses a previous special issue on challenges for sport organisations in the *European Journal for Sport and Society* (Nagel, Ibsen, & Scheerder, 2016). This previous special issue drew attention to the implications that a shifting landscape had for sport organisations as a result of societal transformations and significant developments in the world of sport. While this broad perspective resulted in a much needed examination of organisational developments in sport, it did not explicitly address the topic of social roles of sport organisations.

Overview of the special issue

The six articles in this special issue address several important developments and challenges concerning the social roles of sport organisations. Each presents different aspects of social roles that sport organisations can or cannot play in society. The special issue starts with a contribution by Albrecht et al. (2019), who take a European perspective on the role of sports clubs for promoting social integration for people with disabilities. The authors compare the degree of social integration of members with and without disabilities, and analyse individual and structural factors relevant for social integration of members with disabilities. Findings are based on the European project ‘Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe’ (SIVSCE), which was the first to collect large-scale comparative data on sports clubs with a particular focus on social integration and volunteering. The authors show that context matters, as people with disabilities who practice sport only in a separate group with other people with disabilities score significantly lower with regard to ‘interaction’ than people who practice sport together with people without disabilities.

The second article in this issue sheds light on the social role of for-profit sport organisations through Pia Cardone’s work in an ethnographic study conducted in a commercial gym (Cardone, 2019). She explores how cultural diversity in gyms is experienced and which

practices gym members use to address cultural diversity in their everyday interaction by using the figurational approach and the concepts of the 'established' and 'outsiders' (Elias & Scotson, 2008). This approach has further explanatory potential for both in- and exclusionary practices in sport, and demonstrates how cultural differences in a gym play out in both exclusionary behaviours and gym-specific, habitual principles of mutual help which can bind members and transcend cultural differences.

In the third contribution to this special issue, Claudia Stura (2019) draws our attention to another specific group that several sport organisations have increasingly begun to focus actions upon; refugees. In the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis', sport policy actors as well as local sport organisations have been required to formulate actions which help refugees feel at home and integrate in their host societies. Here, Stura illustrates that integration is a dynamic two-way process of mutual learning for refugees as well as members of sports clubs. Moreover, she also identifies a major challenge for the inclusionary ideology behind such programmes. She highlights how, in her case study, inclusion only seemed to be reached to a partial degree, and only if the refugees' performance level matched the club's level of competitiveness and their involvement went beyond sports participation. The study shows that simply participating in sport alone may not generate feelings of belonging among refugees (see also Spaaij, 2015; Waardenburg, Visschers, Deelen, & Liempt, 2018), and that sport organisers should be aware of multiple affects that processes of marginalisation and assimilation in sport activities can have when targeted at refugees.

The issue continues with three articles that demonstrate how a social role for sport organisations is something that should not be taken for granted. These articles raise several issues which question the social roles that governments and other actors ascribe to voluntary sports clubs. In the fourth article in this issue, Van Haaften (2019) critically explores the idea that sports clubs are easy and effective vehicles for creating and maintaining cohesion in an ethnically heterogeneous society. Using a unique, longitudinal dataset on amateur football club membership in the Netherlands, he highlights a substantial level of ethnic segregation between clubs. He concludes that even when widely popular, sports organisations face limitations in their potential to bring people of different backgrounds together. He also highlights the need to temper and carefully (re)consider our expectations of sports' potential for social integration.

Fifth, and with a clear connection to Putnam's (2001) *Bowling Alone* Burrmann, Braun, and Mutz (2019) question the social role of sports clubs as playgrounds for democracy and for the development of social capital. Using a German case as illustration, they show how evidence to support of the notion that sports club members are 'better democrats and citizens' than non-members are limited. The authors discuss their observations in relation to the backdrop of alleged tendencies towards professionalisation and consumer orientation.

The issue closes with a contribution by Ibsen and Levinsen (2019), who analyse the relationship between sports organisations and public institutions. They show that there is widespread collaboration between sports clubs and public institutions in Denmark and clubs have a positive attitude towards collaboration. Collaboration with a public institution is for most sports clubs, however, a relatively marginal activity in terms of priority and the vast majority of clubs did not support the idea that associations should contribute to the resolution of politically defined tasks. This finding resonates with other studies that are critical of the idea of sport clubs as policy implementers (Skille, 2011; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016).

With these six articles this special issue develops the current debate on social roles of sport organisations further, showing that they do and can play a social role in society. However, it also serves as a warning against overly optimistic expectations. Many sport

organisations see and fulfil their social role as a kind of 'side-effect' in relation to their core activity of delivering sport activities. This is where most sports organisations can have and create public value. Yet, an expectation that all sport organisations should explicitly contribute to public issues, is something with which caution should be exercised.

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