

Original Research

Guiding qualitative inquiry in sport-for-development: The sport in development settings (SPIDS) research framework

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ABSTRACT

The burgeoning field of sport-for-development (SFD) is witnessing a steady increase in experience-related empirical investigations. To support academics—and in particular young and emerging scholars—with a rigorous framework for investigating social and cultural phenomena in different SFD contexts, we propose the process-oriented sport in development settings (SPIDS) research framework. SPIDS represents a guiding framework that advocates a qualitative approach to researching SFD projects in which multiple methods are combined for a holistic in-depth investigation. In this paper, we apply practical examples from the SFD field to the SPIDS framework and discuss its individual sections in a step-by-step manner. Specific focus is placed on aspects of reflection and reflexivity as distinctly important and underpinning aspects of qualitative SFD research.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the area of sport-for-development (SFD) has received significant attention from practitioners and researchers around the world (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). SFD encompasses sport-based projects focused on supporting disadvantaged communities and their members in areas beyond sport itself, including health, education, social inclusion, gender equality, and socioeconomic development (Levermore &

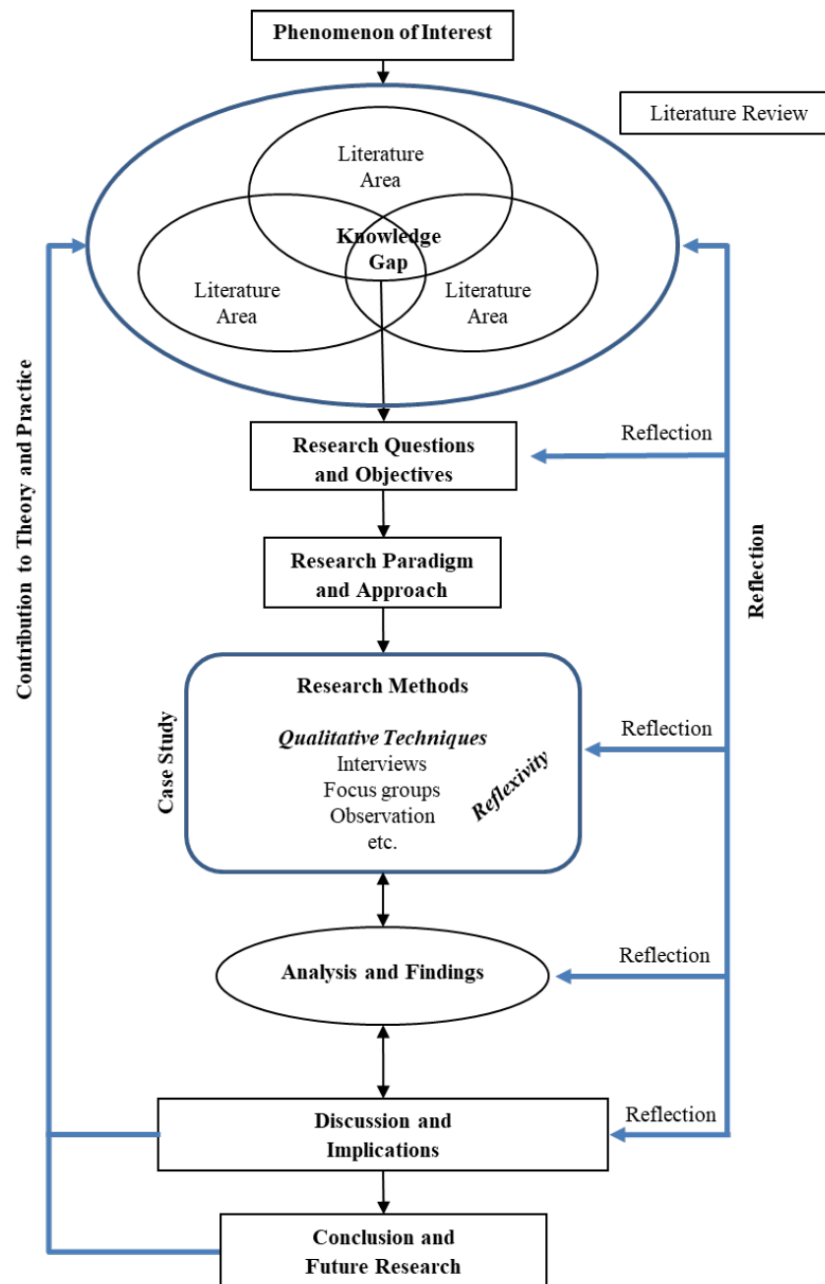
Beacom, 2009; Richards et al., 2013). The constant rise in organizations that use sport as a vehicle for development has been accompanied by academic studies that investigate, monitor, assess, or evaluate SFD projects. Scholars from diverse backgrounds including management, sociology, politics, anthropology, cultural studies, community development, health promotion, psychology, pedagogy, disability, and gender research utilize a variety of research approaches to address critical development issues (see, e.g., Darnell, 2012; Giulianotti, 2011a; Richards et al., 2014; Schulenkorf et al., 2014; Siefken et al., 2015). With universities and research institutions starting to incorporate sport (for) development subjects into their curricula, the number of researchers including higher degree research (HDR) students in the field of SFD has been increasing. As emerging scholars, HDR students comprise honors, master's, and PhD candidates who are designing their dissertations/theses around SFD projects and often embark on a journey that combines practical experiences with research.

With the diversity of SFD programs implemented and the great variety of local and international stakeholders involved in SFD, there is a need to provide scholars with guidance and support for their research endeavors. In particular, when SFD researchers access unknown territory and engage with local communities to conduct their investigations and assessments, they need to be well prepared. From an academic perspective, this requires scholars to be equipped

Keywords: sport for development; process-oriented; qualitative methods; research design; reflexivity

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Figure 1. Sport in development settings (SPIDS) research framework



with a relevant and meaningful research design. In other words, scholars are expected to undergird their study with a rigorous research framework that builds on sound and engaging research methods—particularly if they conduct qualitative research in disadvantaged, marginalized, or otherwise fragile communities (Sherry et al., 2017; Sugden et al., 2019). These aspects are indeed critical for SFD as a field, as recent literature reviews and theoretical appraisals have hinted at concerns about academic rigor, including a lack of research quality and conceptual vagueness that may impact negatively on the credibility and reputation of the field (see Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Blom et al., 2019, Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Boutet et al., 2019; Darnell et al., 2019; Welty Peachey, Schulenkorf, & Hill, 2019). Thus, the

purpose of this paper is to provide academics—and in particular young and emerging scholars—with a guiding methodological framework for conducting rigorous, empirically based qualitative SFD research.

THE SPORT IN DEVELOPMENT SETTINGS (SPIDS) FRAMEWORK

Research design provides scholars with the necessary guidance regarding the most appropriate procedures to employ when conducting a scientific study. It involves a clear focus on the purpose of a study and its methodology; it also outlines the information required to answer the research questions along with the strategies for obtaining

that information (LeCompte et al., 1993; Yin, 2014). In practice, emerging scholars often struggle to find a framework that will outline a clear pathway toward a coherent and rigorous inquiry (Perry, 1998/2002), a problem that is no different in the burgeoning field of SFD. In responding to this issue, we propose the sport in development settings (SPIDS) research framework (see Figure 1).

SPIDS represents a holistic and flexible research framework in which the content and focus of the investigation can be adjusted to suit the particular context of inquiry. The framework encourages self-reflection to enable a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon; indeed, reflection and reflexivity are distinctly important elements of the framework throughout all stages of the research process (see Sherry et al., 2017; Sugden et al., 2019; Willig, 2013). As such, aspects of reflection and reflexivity relate to the project itself, the research and engagement process, as well as the generation and interpretation of data as it is collected, analyzed, and discussed. With this in mind, in the following sections we discuss and reflect on the different stages of the SPIDS framework in relation to contemporary research in the area of SFD.

PHENOMENON OF INTEREST

Academics engage in research projects for a number of different reasons. In addition to extrinsic factors that may relate to institutional pressures or opportunistic approaches toward funding prospects, intrinsic factors include a genuine interest in a particular phenomenon that is relevant and meaningful to the researcher(s) and the target audience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Perry, 1998/2002). Generally, the introduction section of a paper or thesis sets the stage for the particular phenomenon or topic to be explored; it should be brief, describe the current status of the research related to the wider topic, and justify the proposed study (Martín, 2014; Singer & Hollander, 2009). The introduction follows the logic of an “inverted pyramid” by going from the general to the specific. In other words, after highlighting the wider problem to be addressed, the introduction leads to a narrowed focus of research, which can be used to explain and justify the specific topic under investigation. For example, within the wider area of community development, sport has gained significant research traction over the past 15 years (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). One particular subfield of what is today known as SFD is “sport in divided societies”—the intentional use of sport projects as vehicles for conflict resolution and peace building between disparate ethnic, cultural, or social communities (see, e.g. Giulianotti, 2001b; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2011; Sugden, 2006, 2010). As such, SFD in divided societies serves as a good example

for a particular phenomenon of interest, and we will return to this specific topic as an illustrative example throughout this paper. It should be noted, however, that the SPIDS research framework can also be applied to any other focus area.

LITERATURE REVIEW, KNOWLEDGE GAP, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND OBJECTIVES

Literature reviews are an important way of building a strong theoretical foundation on which to base the research (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Singer & Hollander, 2009). Literature reviews demonstrate the author’s thorough understanding of the field. As such, they provide an important orientation to readers regarding the current knowledge base of a particular topic and also indicate critical research gaps. In short, they facilitate the establishment of a theoretical frame and methodological focus, and they justify the reason for the proposed research study (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Drawing on parent disciplines and ensuing theoretical developments in the focus area, the literature review tests the research question against what is already known about the problem. In the context of a study on SFD in divided societies—the guiding topic used in this paper—literature could for example be combined from the areas of peace and conflict studies, community development, intergroup relations, social capital, identity theory, or project management. As indicated in the SPIDS framework, a comprehensive and critical review of the chosen literature would highlight the knowledge gap and lead to the development of research questions or objectives that can set the stage for subsequent investigations and analyses (see Perry, 1998/2002; Veal & Darcy, 2014).

A promising way of identifying the knowledge gap is by combining relevant literature areas from both the immediate and parent disciplines into a conceptual map or theoretical framework. This is particularly relevant for larger projects such as Honors or PhD theses. For example, Schulenkorf’s (2009) dissertation on the role of sport events in contributing to social development between disparate communities in war-torn Sri Lanka identified a gap within the literature that required the incorporation of social identity theory, community participation, and intergroup relations theory. Similarly, Siefken’s (2013) thesis on a health promotion initiative in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu combined literature from cross-cultural health management, physical activity research, and social marketing into a framework that facilitated the examination of outcomes, opportunities, and challenges for sustained behavior change among urban Ni-Vanuatu women. Both these examples highlight that the specific research focus identified for a thesis requires an integration of theoretical

Table 1. Characteristics of positivist and interpretive modes of inquiry

Positivist Mode of Inquiry	Interpretive Mode of Inquiry
<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social facts have an objective reality ▪ Variables can be identified and relationships measured 	<p>Assumptions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reality is socially constructed ▪ Variables are complex, interwoven, and difficult to measure
<p>Research purposes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Generalizability ▪ Causal explanations ▪ Prediction 	<p>Research purposes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contextualization ▪ Understanding ▪ Interpretation
<p>Research approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Begins with hypotheses and theory ▪ Uses formal instruments ▪ Experimental ▪ Deductive ▪ Component analysis ▪ Seeks the norm ▪ Reduces data to numerical indices ▪ Uses abstract language in write-up 	<p>Research approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May result in hypotheses and theory ▪ Researcher as instrument ▪ Naturalistic ▪ Inductive ▪ Searches for patterns ▪ Seeks pluralism, complexity ▪ Minor use of numerical indices ▪ Descriptive write-up
<p>Researcher role:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive involvement ▪ Objective portrayal ▪ Detachment 	<p>Researcher role:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal involvement ▪ Empathic understanding ▪ Close connection and concern

Note. This table is adapted from Glesne (1999).

perspectives that determines the knowledge gap and allows for research to be conducted in a relevant and meaningful way.

The identified knowledge gap, and the researcher's perspective on the phenomenon of interest, will then influence the type and style of research questions or objectives. As will be discussed in the following section, qualitative research is underpinned by paradigms that aim to understand the "how" and "why" of a particular case. Hence, a qualitative SFD researcher will formulate research questions and objectives with adequate qualitative terminology, such as exploring, investigating, examining, analyzing, or identifying (instead of the quantitative options including measuring, testing, proofing etc.). To use the previous example of SFD in divided societies, possible research objectives are (a) to investigate the development of

social relationships between or among participating communities, or (b) to examine the role of program managers in facilitating cross-cultural engagement.

RESEARCH PARADIGM AND APPROACH

To inform and guide research methodology, design, data collection, and analysis, researchers are required to consider how they see the world around them. As such, a philosophical research paradigm is required to undergird their scientific inquiry (Kuhn, 1970). Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) have previously argued that most research paradigms have an underlying epistemological basis that is either positivist or interpretive. In short, positivism assumes that, like objects in natural science, social phenomena can be explained objectively and factually (Glesne, 1999). In other words, positivist research accepts that reality is

objectively given and that it can be described by measurable properties that are independent of observers and their methods. In contrast, interpretivism proposes that everyone brings their own interpretations of the world or construction of the situation to the research. As such, there is no “single truth,” and thus, the researcher must attempt to suspend prior cultural assumptions and be open to participants’ attitudes and values (Elliott & Lukes, 2008). Interpretive research—with its origins in phenomenology—is based on the philosophy that reality is socially constructed and interpreted through language, consciousness, and shared meanings.

Table 1 presents a detailed comparison between the positivist and interpretive epistemology by (a) highlighting the differences in assumptions and purposes guiding the research, (b) clarifying the overall purpose of the research, (c) comparing the underlying approaches to scientific enquiry, and (d) clarifying the researcher’s role within the process.

Research on the (social) experiences of participants and other stakeholders involved in SFD projects is often located within an interpretive epistemology informed by qualitative methods—an approach to research that represents an engagement between the researcher and participants focusing on what is unique and particular about the human, social, and cultural situation. This approach allows research participants to narrate their own experiences of life and decide for themselves what is significant and meaningful within the given context. As expert knowledge is often situated in local cultures and imbedded in interactional sites (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), researchers interact and talk with participants about their perceptions. They often take an “inside view” from participants’ perspectives to interpret their various inputs. Neuman (2013) concluded that an interpretive researcher wants to learn what is meaningful or relevant to the people being studied, and such learning experiences can only be achieved through an in-depth, qualitative approach to research.

Seminal education scholar Elliot W. Eisner (1985) used the metaphor of a rose to explain the advantage of qualitative research in exploring the deeper meaning and value of a specific phenomenon. He stated, “To know a rose by its Latin name and yet to miss its fragrance is to miss much of the rose’s meaning. Artistic approaches to research are very much interested in helping people experience that fragrance” (Eisner, 1985, p. 198). For Eisner, truth can only be achieved through flexibility, prioritizing the subjective over the objective, intuition over the rational, interpretation over measurement, and surprise over the predictable. As such, the qualitative researcher is seen very much like an

artist at various stages in the research process, who—in line with Weber’s concept of *Verstehen*—tries to establish an empathetic “understanding” to discover different realities and multiple truths that are suggested by numerous individuals.

In the context of SFD—and by inference in the related areas of sport, exercise, and health—qualitative research can help scholars to understand processes, programs, and communities in greater detail—something that is important for organizational learning and subsequent project design and delivery (e.g., Darnell, 2012; Spaaij, 2012; Spaaij et al., 2018). For example, honors, master’s, and PhD candidates have used their dissertations and theses to explore the social, cultural, and health-related outcomes of SFD projects (Hoekman, 2013; McSweeney, 2017; Mwansa, 2010; Siefken, 2013). Recent investigations have also included studies on the management, capacity building, and institutional work around SFD initiatives, as well as the development of (sustainable) intergroup relations and intercommunity engagement on and off the sporting field (see, e.g., Hippold, 2009; McSweeney, 2017; Schulenkorf, 2009; Sugden, 2017; Wright, 2009). All of these studies show that when examining SFD projects in disadvantaged and/or divided social settings, the views, attitudes, and opinions are often divergent, conflicting, contested, and controversial. Hence, for a holistic picture of contemporary life to emerge, all perspectives need to be considered. The best way to do so is through rigorous qualitative research around a particular case.

THE CASE STUDY

Empirical work in SFD is often case-study based, which means that specific sport programs, projects, or events are thoroughly analyzed from a number of angles and perspectives (Cohen et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2016; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Whitley et al., 2013). Yin (2014) describes the case study as an empirical investigation of a phenomenon within its natural context, where contextual conditions are highly specific to the investigated phenomenon. A case study approach is therefore delimited by its subjective nature yet empowered by the same as it captures the uniqueness of a particular situation from an insider’s perspective (Neuman, 2013). Based on his experiences in leisure research, McCormick (1996) outlined four key advantages of the case study approach. First, case studies allow the researcher “to see in contextualized action how theories . . . are enacted” (p. 367). Here, case studies presume that “social reality” is created through social interaction in particular contexts and histories (Patton, 2015; Stark & Torrance, 2005). A thick description of the case study and its specificities is therefore

an important element of a qualitative study. This means that in the context of a SFD thesis, the presentation of the case study context is of great significance; it may feature as a stand-alone chapter (e.g., Mwansa, 2010; Schulenkorf, 2009) or be integrated in the introduction and/or methodology section (e.g., Hoekman, 2013; Siefken, 2013; Wright, 2009).

Second, case study research offers multiple lines of action to the investigator, who can continually develop and refine parts of the research to deal with unexpected findings and changes in research objectives. Gall et al. (1996) noted that case studies have an “emergent” quality that larger quantitative studies do not possess. In line with the interpretive paradigm recommended to underpin qualitative research work, this suggests that themes or categories do not need to be fully predetermined but may arise from SFD fieldwork. As a consequence, new insights and “new knowledge” will be created.

Third, the case study allows a sense of time and history to develop. One assumption of the case study is that it is not possible to develop a deeper understanding by looking only at the contemporary situation (Stake, 2000; Stark & Torrance, 2005). This is of great importance in many SFD studies—particularly those that are focused on divided societies, as outlined above. These studies are often conducted in contexts where intergroup conflict or tensions between or among communities, social, or ethnic groups are prevalent. Tensions have often developed over a long period of time but are likely to play an important part in understanding contemporary hostilities. Testimony for this are SFD case studies conducted in Israel and Palestine (Sugden, 2006; Stidder & Haasner, 2007), Sri Lanka (Schulenkorf, 2010, 2013), Liberia (Armstrong, 2004), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Gasser & Levinsen, 2004), and across the Pacific Islands region (Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016; Sugden et al., 2019) where peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts on the community level are strongly influenced by wider sociopolitical developments on the macrolevel.

Finally, the case study permits the confirmation/disconfirmation and the refinement of existing theory, as well as the extrapolation of key findings to other contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 2000). While a simple generalization from case specific knowledge should not be undertaken (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Smith, 2018), researchers can carefully extrapolate information from the studies conducted and make modest forecasts on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar conditions (Golafshani, 2003; Hoepfl, 1997; Patton, 2015). Smith (2018) goes even further by suggesting that specific

types of generalizations including naturalistic generalization, transferability, analytical generalizability, and intersectional generalizability are in fact important aspects of qualitative research, and as such, they should be encouraged by the academic community. Overall, in qualitative SFD case study projects it seems indeed critical for scholars to find a balance between the two extremes of oversimplification and restrictiveness when proposing theoretical and practical implications from their case study findings. In other words, only if done sensibly can an extrapolation of findings be of significant benefit for the design and implementation of related SFD projects and research studies, as well as the development of knowledge in the SFD field overall.

It should also be acknowledged that case studies have distinct weaknesses and may not always be the best choice in qualitative research work. For instance, case studies have been accused of remaining largely descriptive without sufficiently addressing the aspect of transforming practice (Corcoran et al., 2004). Moreover, the complexity inherent in analysing a particular case is difficult to communicate by researchers given the limited scope provided in academic outlets. In other words, there often is too much data for an adequate analysis and representative (and transparent) account of findings. In such instances, larger qualitative studies such as integrative reviews or case syntheses across selected SFD settings may be more appropriate, especially if the focus of the study is less on the specific contextual detail but on wider lessons learned (see, e.g., Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Blom et al., 2019, Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Boutet et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the ability to investigate one particular case in significant detail has often provided a nice “frame” for HDR students in their dissertation work, and the significant number and high quality of publications with a case study approach confirms that if employed strategically, case studies will continue to have a meaningful future in SFD research.

RESEARCH METHODS

In the pursuit of achieving a deep understanding of the meaning of a so far partially known phenomenon, researchers have suggested collecting information from different positions and perspectives and combining more than one research method in one study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Neuman, 2013; Stake, 2000). There are a variety of qualitative data collection techniques available to researchers (see, e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Veal & Darcy, 2014), and the choice of data gathering techniques is to a great extent influenced by the nature of the research problem and associated questions. In recent years, there have also been increasing calls for new

and innovative approaches to research across sociomanagerial aspects of sport (see Hoeber & Shaw, 2017), including SFD-related investigations that feature Indigenous methodologies, participant action research, autoethnographies, photo or video documentations, children's drawings, reflective journal pieces, or different forms of art, drama, and dance. For mere illustration purposes, in the SPIDS framework, we have opted for a combination of qualitative methods that have traditionally been used for SFD-related in-depth investigations (including theses and research projects): (a) focus group discussions, (b) observation *in situ*, and (c) semistructured interviews. This can, of course, be adjusted to meet the needs of any future studies.

The combination of these three methods allows for an analysis of a specific case from different yet complementing perspectives. This is particularly important for the investigation of SFD projects in divided societies, in which stakeholders often come from different geographical, social, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds; may have varying socioeconomic status; may possess and employ disparate levels of authority and power; and tend to be influenced by opposing political fractions of society on a regular basis (Darnell, 2012; Sugden, 2006, 2010). An additional advantage of triangulating different methods is the ability to link “involved” research (i.e., focus groups and interviews) with unobtrusive research (i.e., observations)—a combination that will add to a holistic in-depth understanding of a particular case (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A more detailed overview of the suggested methods and their implementation in an SFD context now follows.

Focus Groups

SFD projects are often staged in a local community context. For all researchers—and in particular those external to the community—it is important to get as close as possible to the real-life situations where people can discuss, formulate, and modify their expectations and experiences (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Focus groups are one of the best methods to achieve this. Once convened, they can take a life of their own, which gives researchers the chance to step back and observe how individuals within groups react to the views, expressions, and ideas of others, and how people seek to defend or enforce their own views (Veal & Darcy, 2014).

Importantly, researchers need to secure a variety of voices during the focus group sampling process; moreover, during the actual discussions, all members need to be given equal opportunity to express their views. In her SFD study on a health promotion initiative for overweight and obese women in the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu, Siefken

(2013) conducted three different focus groups that featured eight participants each. The first group contained international health experts and staff of the World Health Organization, which allowed for an external view on pressing health issues around noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. The second focus group consisted of local health workers and health promotion officers who engaged with local communities on a daily basis; they had the cultural knowhow around local health issues, customs, and processes. The third group included women from the local community who represented a wide spectrum of people young and old, married and not married, fit and unfit. The community group was able to contribute a local voice and discuss the causes and risk factors for NCDs in their particular social context. They also provided ideas and expectations for positive lifestyle change, including increased physical activity and a specific change of diet. Overall, the mix of perspectives resulted in a holistic investigation of health promotion activities, development opportunities, and challenges from which recommendations could be drawn.

Observation in Situ

Observation in situ is a classical approach to collecting data in the field. The method enables researchers to learn about the perspectives of people within the context of their natural setting and everyday life (della Porta & Keating, 2008). Observational data are used to describe settings, activities, people, and atmospheres from the perspective of the participants (Hoepfl, 1997; Jones & Somekh, 2005). Moreover, observation can add to a deeper understanding when combined with interviewing or focus group techniques, as both verbal and nonverbal cues as well as changes to behavior can be monitored, identified, and presented (Mackellar, 2010). Hoepfl (1997) argued that observation can have different formats, ranging from an “outside perspective” over a “passive presence” and “limited interaction” to “full participation.” Whereas the first two strategies are mainly used to conduct unobtrusive, noninteracting research studies, the latter two focus on engaging with people and the phenomenon under investigation. Based on our experiences from SFD projects around the world, a *limited* interaction approach can be recommended. It restricts the researcher's power and influence and instead sees the communities in charge of project development. However, a (minor) involvement in the sport activities is of value as “becoming part of the group and immersed in its activities is the obvious way of studying the group” (Veal & Darcy, 2014, p. 263).

In an SFD context, the observation method may allow

researchers to see things that sporting participants or SFD administrators themselves are not aware of or that they are unwilling to discuss. This can for example relate to specific power dynamics in the field of SFD—something that becomes increasingly important when trying to understand relationships between international and local stakeholders in the context of “glocalized” SFD programs (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Sherry et al., 2015). People tend to express their attitudes and relationships by how often and how closely they engage or how they position themselves in a group. As such, social communication and (the development of) group cohesiveness can be read by noting how people are standing together, if they are looking relaxed or concerned, how they are interacting, if they are making eye contact, and so on. In Schulenkorf’s (2009) sport for peace study in the ethnically divided Sri Lanka, observations with limited participation were conducted. Here, social interactions between Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim groups were observed at predetermined places, and photographs were taken every half hour throughout the entire SFD project. The strategic collection of observations and images allowed for the project’s atmosphere to be captured over a period of time, focusing on both verbal and nonverbal communication on and off the field. As such, photographs assisted in the capturing of social settings, and they added visual proof to the researcher’s observations and field notes. It should be remembered, however, that the use of media such as photo cameras and video equipment is not always suitable or culturally appropriate; as such, researchers are required to respect ethical standards in all their media endeavors.

Overall, engaging in observation often sounds much easier than it actually is. A significant amount of planning and regular data collection is required for observation to be relevant and meaningful. However, if observation around SFD projects is clearly structured and well organized, it can reveal important contextual and nonverbal information that focus group discussions or interview methods cannot provide.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews have previously been described as the most promising method to find out the “real” about contemporary cases and phenomena (Hoepfl, 1997). Beginning with a general list of themes to be discussed, this technique allows for flexibility in including additional open-ended questions for capturing new and unexpected issues and information as the research evolves (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Hence, semistructured interviews permit the researcher to probe and explore. At the same time, they result in a systematic and comprehensive interviewing

process within a limited time frame (Hoepfl, 1997; Patton, 2015).

In comparison to preconceived formats, semistructured interviews can reduce the researcher’s dominance and power over the participant (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Topics and questions are not strictly reinforced but allow for meaningful development. The researcher’s role can primarily be described as listener within the conversation, which can lead to a reduction of interviewees’ insecurities and suspicions (Patton, 2015). In the context of SFD investigations—particularly those conducted by Westerners in low- and middle-income countries—it is paramount that the researcher accepts the interviewee’s culture as equally legitimate, which ensures that both can communicate across sociocultural boundaries (see Sugden et al., 2019). This seems obvious but is easier said than done, as it generally requires in-depth knowledge of the cultural context, history, and contemporary situation of a place, community, or society. Critical reflection and self-reflection is constantly required and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

When selecting interview partners for a research project, qualitative researchers apply *purposeful sampling* as their dominant strategy (Hoepfl, 1997; Patton, 2015; Stark & Torrance, 2005). Purposeful sampling implies that the researcher specifically chooses participants who are best suited to providing greater depth and understanding of the phenomenon under question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Neuman, 2013). In an SFD context, applying a purposeful sampling strategy ensures the integration of voices from *all* stakeholder groups that are impacted by the sport projects—both positively and negatively—which in turn contributes to a holistic and realistic picture of the case. For example, in his investigation of a SFD project for disadvantaged street kids in Vietnam, Hoekman (2013) described how purposeful sampling helped to select key interview partners including program organizers, the media, sponsors, key informants, and the wider community. After the first round of interviews, a *snowball sampling* strategy was employed to address further candidates. This approach uses the initial interview participants as an information source to provide suggestions or recommendations for other suitable interview partners with required attributes (Berg, 2004). In Hoekman’s (2013) study, this also led to the integration of voices from children and parents who had previously left the SFD program, and it provided evidence of the specific reasons for their departure, which in turn became valuable information for SFD managers and implementers.

In the case of an SFD project in a divided society context, the combination of purposeful sampling and snowball

sampling is even more important given the tension-laden sociopolitical environment with which project organizers and researchers are faced. For example, in Sugden's (2006) research study with Jewish and Arab communities in Northern Israel, the importance of securing equal community representation was highlighted. This relates not only to the management and participation at the specific program but also to the research around the SFD initiative.

REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY

As "conscious learners" in unknown territory who seek to engage and see things from other people's perspectives, SFD researchers are required to be both reflective and reflexive. It is important to highlight the difference between the two terms here and explain how both reflection and reflexivity are important contributors to qualitative research. According to Bolton (2010), reflection is a state of mind and an ongoing constituent of practice. It may be described as "critically thinking about" something *after* an event has occurred. As such, reflection can enable scholars to learn from experience about themselves, their work, their research partners, and wider society and culture. Reflecting on actions may also provide strategies to illuminate new things and frame more appropriate research questions or approaches in the future. Bolton (2010) concludes that reflection challenges assumptions, ideologies, social and cultural biases, inequalities, and personal behaviors.

Reflexivity, by contrast, involves more immediate, dynamic, and continuing self-awareness in situ (introspection). Being personally reflexive means considering your own mental state, emotional being, thoughts, and motives *within* a specific context. As such, reflexivity is about finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions (Bolton, 2010; Reid et al., 2018). For researchers who are striving to understand their often complex roles in relation to others, being reflexive means to examine, for example, how they are involved in creating social or professional structures counter to our own value (Dodgson, 2019). A good example here is the status and perception of researchers from high-income countries who are conducting work in low- and middle-income settings and the associated imbalance of power during interview and engagement processes (see, e.g., Darnell, 2012). Reflexivity also relates to becoming aware of the challenges and limits of one's knowledge and how people's behavior or practices might marginalize certain groups or exclude individuals (see, e.g., Dodgson, 2019; Reid et al., 2018). Overall, being reflexive means coming as close as possible to an awareness of the way the researcher is personally experienced and perceived by others in practice.

Researchers in international SFD settings are meant to be both reflexive and reflecting, particularly in regards to their own self-awareness and cultural background and their capacity for interpretation in foreign environments. According to Willig (2013), "personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research" (p. 10). Importantly, opportunities for reflexivity and reflection are heightened when the researcher can spend an extended period of time with local communities and in personal contact with the participants, activities, and operations of the case (Golafshani, 2003; Stake, 2000). As local knowledge and contextual experiences are considered key ingredients for successful SFD research, scholars are expected to familiarize themselves with a particular social setting and immerse themselves in new environments (Spaaij et al., 2018). However, "as this full immersion can be rather intense, the researcher is recommended to go in and out of the field at regular intervals in order to take a step back and reflect efficiently on the situation under study" (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 304). Reflection thus becomes a crucial element throughout the different stages of empirical SFD research. In short, the process of reflection is increasing the chances of identifying the most relevant, practical, and effective approaches to research and the creation of reciprocal engagement, rapport, and trust with communities and interviewees (see Sugden, 2017; Sugden et al., 2019; Spaaij et al., 2018).

The explicit inclusion of reflection as a key element sets the SPIDS framework apart from previous models or frameworks in the sport (for) development space. So far, different authors have used frameworks as support mechanisms to evaluate, measure, or assess the various impacts, outcomes, and legacies of sport and event projects (Bob & Kassens-Noor, 2012; Vierimaa et al., 2012), while others have used *ex ante* frameworks designed around youth programs aimed at health promotion and community empowerment (Laverack & Labonte, 2000; Petitpas et al., 2005). To date, however, none of these frameworks integrate the critical element of reflection—and reflexivity—into their design (for a notable exception see Sherry, 2013). The process-oriented SPIDS framework with its focus on research design addresses this current shortcoming by allowing for both a proactive and reflective approach to the different stages of SFD research.

The SPIDS framework allows us to illustrate the importance of reflection in an applied way. First, once the empirical investigation of any SFD research project has commenced, reflections on the theoretical and practical aspects of the chosen case study are critical. This includes a

(re-)visiting of the research questions, objectives, and methods, plus engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and research partners for a potential adjustment of chosen foci. For instance, in her study on the impacts of increased physical activity for female public servants in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, Siefken (2013), in close collaboration with local partners, reflected on the best approach for motivating more women to participate in the development program. After an initial engagement period in country and “local learning,” she redesigned the project’s practical components and related research techniques to allow for specific group-based approaches across all phases of the project. In short, her reflections led to the instalment of team-based physical activities and focus group discussions that were considered culturally more appropriate than individual exercise regimes and one-on-one interviews.

Similarly, Sugden (2017), in his research on sport and integration in Fiji realized that an in-depth approach toward local engagement was needed to understand fully the local sporting and civil society contexts. Engaging in what he labelled “short-term ethnography,” his immersive in-country research journey was designed to gain in-depth local knowledge across the community, institutional, and decision-making levels to develop and reflect on a holistic impression of Fijian sport and society. For this, he designed a research strategy that included conducting an initial reconnaissance journey, spending several weeks living with Indigenous and Indian Fijian families, observing active training sessions with local rugby and football teams, and learning about the local ways of “Talanoa” knowledge sharing in-country. He also engaged with Fijian academics and Pasifika colleagues to critically reflect on his journey in an attempt to seek constant support and guidance during this process.

The two examples highlight that engagement, open-mindedness, and critical reflection are central ingredients for inclusive and well-designed SFD research. Importantly, reflection and reflexivity also remain critical components during the latter stages of research projects where findings are analyzed and outcomes are discussed. Here, “epistemological reflexivity encourages reflection upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that have been made during the course of the research, and to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings” (Willig, 2013, p. 11). In other words, as reflexive learners, researchers must take into consideration the sociocultural context for the interpretation of data and reflect on the specific circumstances that may have influenced the research environment. From a theoretical perspective, constant reflection on supporting research

literature, including theories and past studies, will further shape the analysis and subsequent presentation of findings. Moreover, critical reflections on findings will increase the likelihood of a well-informed discussion section that may illicit practical and theoretical contributions and advancements in the area of SFD and beyond (see Welty Peachey, Schulenkorf, & Spaaij, 2019).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Once the qualitative investigation of an interpretative study is completed, the data analysis process begins; it aims at identifying and presenting findings in relation to the proposed research questions. There is a myriad of analysis approaches available to qualitative researchers (for a detailed overview, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), including new and innovative approaches specifically related to the field of sport management (Hoerber & Shaw, 2017). There are pros and cons to all these approaches, and careful deliberation—and reflection—are required to arrive at the most suitable choice for any specific study.

Some of the most common approaches in the qualitative world include narrative analysis, content analysis, and thematic analysis (Veal & Darcy, 2014). In short, narrative analysis allows researchers to interpret texts and conversations in a storied form. This is done within the social context of the research and with the intention to understand and communicate the way people create meaning in their lives (Herman & Verwaeck, 2019). Meanwhile, content analysis studies a variety of artifacts or documents to systematically examine communication patterns. As such, the approach does not necessarily require the collection of empirical data and can thus remain more detached and objective (Krippendorff, 2004). Finally, thematic analysis can be described as an ongoing discovery of data—including from the previously mentioned interviews, focus groups and observations—in which the researcher examines and construes findings according to emerging themes. In Bogdan and Biklen’s (1982) words, thematic analysis means “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145; see also Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). With this in mind and in line with the interpretive paradigm introduced earlier, authors read, reread, and carefully examine their qualitative data to identify and code emerging themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Coding describes the developing and refining of interpretations of data, which allows for data reduction, organization, and categorization into themes and subthemes (see Neuman, 2013). According to Willis (2006), coding can take on two main forms: open and axial

coding. Open coding is carried out first and involves assigning the initial set of open codes to a piece of text. Axial coding follows and involves the organization and rearrangement of the existing codes. As such, the process involves splitting codes into subcategories, identifying relationships between codes, or combining codes that are closely related (Neuman, 2013; Willis, 2006).

When research projects or theses/dissertations build on a significant amount of qualitative data, it is recommended to use a computer software program to support the data analysis process. For example, software packages such as ATLAS.ti, Leximancer, or NVivo can assist with the integrating, shaping, coding, and “understanding” of large quantities of qualitative data (Marshall, 2002; Veal & Darcy, 2014). Within NVivo, the processes of open and axial coding are reflected in the creation of free and tree nodes. While free nodes can be described as containers for storing data that “do not assume relationships with other concepts” (Bazeley & Richards, 2000, p. 25), tree nodes are those that allow for hierarchical organization into themes and subthemes. Tree nodes are therefore useful for axial coding and the reorganization of existing free nodes.

In the context of a fictional SFD research project designed to facilitate social engagement between disparate communities in a divided society, one of the research objectives could be linked to an investigation of social relationships between participating groups. In this case, the researcher may identify themes such as “trust,” “engagement,” or “tensions.” As a next step, the researcher is encouraged to ascertain if themes can be categorized into subthemes that can allow for the creation of potential connections and hierarchies between/among them. Using the theme of “tensions,” for instance, there may be subthemes of social tensions, managerial tensions, physical tensions, etc.

Once the data analysis and coding processes are completed, findings can be presented. While there are many different ways of presenting qualitative research findings, and one size does not fit all (Reay et al., 2019), it is fair to say that researchers who use dominant interviews and focus group techniques embed direct quotes from participants in the text with the attempt to “tell a story.” Often, these quotes are structured and presented in line with the respective research questions and according to the established themes and subthemes. Here, researchers select those quotes that are poignant and/or most representative of the research findings. Moreover, they also make sure that different perspectives are heard (Anderson, 2010). As such, the findings are grounded in interviewees or respondents’ contributions and their perceptions of reality. In this

context, Anderson (2010) critically reminds us that research participants do not always state the truth. Instead, they may say what they think the interviewer wishes to hear. This aspect is certainly a factor in SFD research where all too often, evaluators are faced with scenarios where respondents provide answers in line with their funders’ expectations or in support of predetermined program goals. In other words, in a competitive SFD funding environment there have been cases where inflated numbers are provided to satisfy particular participation targets, or impacts have been exaggerated to indicate wide-ranging program benefits (see Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014). A good qualitative researcher should therefore not only examine what people say but also consider how they talk about the subject being discussed, for example, the person’s emotions, tone, nonverbal communication, and so on. Moreover, the analysis and presentation of nonverbal information obtained from observational research, photographs, videos, document analysis, and so on can provide important contextual evidence in an attempt to triangulate comments with alternative, perhaps less subjective data.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The discussion section is considered the heart of a thesis or paper; it serves the purpose of interpreting the research findings and explaining their meaning, implications, and distinct contribution to knowledge (Singer & Hollander, 2009). Examiners are likely to spend a significant amount of time reviewing this section, and hence, the researcher must discover springs of interest and creativity to make the discussion worthy of the rest of the paper/thesis. In other words, unless researchers can put their findings into a relevant form and context, tell a cohesive story, and explain why people should care, reviewers will struggle to be convinced. Supporting this claim, Phillips and Pugh (1987) noted that the discussion section “is the single most common reason for requiring students to resubmit their theses after first presentation” (p. 56).

In the discussion, researchers analyze their findings and put them into a broader scientific context. In relating back to the literature and research questions posed at the beginning of the inquiry, the discussion and implications therefore outline how the research has furthered the understanding of a certain research problem or how the insights gathered through qualitative analysis inform or challenge current understandings of certain phenomena. Against this background, the discussion section of a qualitative investigation explains why and how research findings are important. It also highlights the distinct implications and contributions to knowledge regarding theory, praxis, methodological approach, and/or practical application.

In the context of an SFD project in divided societies, the discussion could, for example, link back newly derived findings on relationship building to established literature or previous studies on intergroup relations and network analysis. Other areas for discussion could be the management of SFD projects and the roles that organizers take within the change process, as well as the leverage potential of SFD and potential benefits to the community at large. For example, Schulenkorf (2009) critically discussed the importance of international “change agents” within SFD projects in divided societies. Relating research findings back to theories of intergroup relations and community management, he highlighted the specific responsibilities of international organizations and aid workers in the development process. In particular, change agents are often required to initiate and support SFD projects, but at the same time, they have to be wary of the right time to pass on management control and power to local communities. As such, findings like these lead to important implications for SFD practitioners regarding the strategic planning and consultancy engagements around SFD projects, and they are also critical for our theoretical understanding of SFD as well as wider “mainstream” management and community participation literature.

In the SPIDS framework, these considerations are highlighted with two separate but interrelated feedback arrows: on the left hand side, there are the contributions to practice and theory that flow back from the study’s discussion and conclusion to the previously identified knowledge gap; and on the right hand side, the two-way arrows highlight the procedural aspects of making sense of new findings and research implications, namely the requirement for researchers to constantly reflect on the different aspects of their overall research design and approach to generating knowledge.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The conclusion flows from the discussion and implications section and should stress the importance of the research and its findings; it should give the paper or thesis a sense of completeness and leave a final impression on the reader (Martín, 2014). An effective conclusion synthesizes (rather than summarizes) the content and gives the reader something to think about; as such, it may also include a call to action or recommendations for how to use findings in the real world. In contrast to the introduction, the conclusion goes from specific to general. This way, the “bigger picture” can be painted and key findings or takeaway messages can be linked back to the wider body of knowledge and the broader field of study presented at the beginning of the thesis/paper. For example, in their case

study on a sport for coexistence project in Israel’s Galilee region, Stidder and Haasner (2007) concluded that not sport per se, but rather specific physical education and orienteering activities—in conjunction with cultural off-pitch engagements—contributed to the development of positive social relationships between Jewish and Arab children. The authors suggested that in the context of SFD, adventurous outdoor education should become a critical part of project curricula. They further suggested that on a wider scale, outdoor education could also complement other peacebuilding initiatives that do not focus explicitly on sport as an active and supportive vehicle for development.

In addition to key takeaways, the conclusion section should also outline future research opportunities based on the findings and (de)limitations of the research undertaken. For example, a number of qualitative SFD projects have suggested more quantitative research to follow-up and/or test the initial explorations for verification purposes (see, e.g., Giulianotti, 2015; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2013; Schulenkorf, 2010). Other case studies have advocated for long-term investigations into the development of intercommunity relationships over time or an analysis that tracks past SFD participants that now contribute in different social roles in their communities (see Hoekman, 2013; Hoekman et al., 2019). Such follow-up studies would provide evidence (or otherwise) for the long-term value of SFD programming and suggest that investment into SFD can indeed lead to sustainable outcomes. Generally, the future research section is written to make other researchers think about new avenues of inquiry—it builds on the key messages identified and aims to stimulate other scholars to further develop and/or diversify existing research.

SUMMARY

Planning and conducting a major research project presents an exciting yet challenging task, particularly for young and emerging scholars such as HDR students and early-career researchers. In the area of SFD, many qualitative scholars go on a journey of exploration to better understand a particular phenomenon of interest. With the intention to support scholars on this journey, in this paper we have proposed and presented the SPIDS research framework that offers a process-oriented and flexible research instrument for examining sport-related development projects. We have argued that the SPIDS framework with its focus on engaged and reflective research can be used as a guiding tool for knowledge creation, and we have done so by providing an overview of what is required for each stage of the framework by drawing on practical examples from the field of SFD.

The element of reflection presents a distinctly important aspect of the SPIDS framework that should be considered during all stages of the research process. In short, reflection—as well as reflexivity—are particularly important in the field of SFD where researchers are often exposed to unfamiliar social settings with complex cultural expectations and local norms. We argue that without adequate reflection and the ability and willingness to be reflexive, any attempts to truly understand social processes especially in disadvantaged, marginalized, fragile, or divided societies are set up for failure. As a guiding support instrument, the SPIDS research framework may assist scholars prevent such negative outcomes and instead help to realize coherent and rigorous academic inquiry in sport-related disciplines. We hope that other academics, and in particular, young and emerging scholars, will benefit from using and/or developing the SPIDS framework on their journey toward conducting empirically based qualitative SFD research.

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