Exploring Sport for Development and Peace through a Participatory Evaluation Methodology

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Sport for Development - Other (International Sport)  Thursday, June 7, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  11:40 AM
Abstract 2018-036  Room: Annapolis C

This presentation explores the use of a participatory evaluation (PE) approach to analyzing Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) organizations. PE implies that, when doing an evaluation, researchers, facilitators, or professional evaluators collaborate in some way with individuals, groups, or communities who have a decided stake in the program, development project, or other entity being evaluated. As there continue to be recommendations in both SDP research and within SDP program implementation to apply participatory methods this paper adds to the methodological conversation by bringing forth another element of participatory research. I suggest PE as a suitable methodological framework in which research can be done because it allows researchers spaces to evaluate, work with, and be informed by those who organize, participate in and benefit from SDP programs.

Cousins and Earl (1992) describe PE to mean applied social research that involves a partnership between trained researchers and organization members with program responsibility. Furthermore, Suarez and Harper (2003) define that PE is rooted in participatory action research where there is the active participation of stakeholders in the evaluation process, but also a sharing of control related to critical decisions. In PE, local people and outside researchers share evaluation responsibilities in pursuit of both understanding and improvement of what is being studied (Fawcett, 2003). The direct involvement of many different participants ranging from SDP project staff members, physical activity coaches, children and other community members will heighten the ways in which knowledge is created and processed. Similarly, King (2005) has stated that “participatory evaluation is an overarching term for any evaluation approach that involves program staff or participants actively in decision making and other activities related to the planning and implementation of evaluation activities” (p. 291). As we imagine PE taking shape in SDP, processes would be inclusive ranging from those that deliver programs and those stakeholders that are at the receiving end.

By incorporating a PE approach SDP projects can begin to explore with its target populations any miscommunications, weaknesses, and areas of improvement that will benefit programs and policies. Participatory research in SDP can offer theoretical, substantive, and reflexive research lenses in seeking practical solutions to SDP (Darnell, 2014). The voices of intended beneficiaries have been missing in decision-making, policy and knowledge production, and the move to socially focused, participatory concepts of development, therefore, represented a significant step towards recognizing local knowledge (Kay, 2012, p. 896). Therefore, SDP organizational research could potentially have a key role in supporting local stakeholders, both practitioners, and indigenous researchers, to generate such knowledge and ensure authentic local voice within research through a participatory framework (Kay, 2009).

Darnell and Hayhurst (2010) have stated as much as participatory approaches to development research were promised to create autonomy and voice in for participants’ development, little progress has been made. There needs to be more work with participatory methodologies that is conscious of putting the ‘participatory’ in the research (Frisby et al., 2005) and then furthermore taking ‘action’ (Reid, Tom & Frisby, 2006) with the data that are collaboratively worked upon. I would argue that PAR and research that is participatory are not the same things; too often participatory researchers are more interested in the ‘R’ than the ‘A’ and are most likely not creating spaces for action and change (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2009, p. 217). Henceforth, there may be a need for a concrete methodological approach to research like PE.

If in the end, SDP organizations aim to provide a space where the lives of human beings are improved through the avenue of sport then it will only be beneficial to consider the knowledge and experiences of those who establish, distribute and partake in programs. Thus, the main argument of this presentation is that while there has been recent research applying participatory methods SDP organizations may better be served using a form of PE that is a bottom-up and top-down where SDP beneficiaries (e.g., children) and project staff members work collaboratively to
inform the workings and processes of organization in itself.

Thus, this presentation will draw on empirical data that was collected during an eleven-month ethnographic study with an SDP project in Vietnam. Situating this presentation in sports management scholarship, the researcher in his time in the field worked as a volunteer for the SDP project where he undertook a PE with staff members of the project. For eleven months he worked as an official volunteer in an organizational capacity where he was exposed to the day-to-day operations of an international SDP project. Stories will be provided that illustrate the successes, failures, and results of carrying out a PE with an SDP project. In doing so this presentation hopes to bring attention to the complexities and transparency in doing research with people in the area of SDP for it is important to discuss methods as it allows us to see the many ways in which scholars have examined SDP and how incorporating a PE approach is worthwhile.