

Sport for Social Change: Bridging the Theory–Practice Divide

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Practice cannot be blind to theory, and theory cannot be blind to practice. This is simple to say yet immensely difficult to do. (Morrison & van der Werf, 2012, p. 400)

Theory development around sport for social change agendas has received greater attention from scholars over the past 10 years. Yet, it remains underdeveloped when compared with theoretical advancements and innovations in other aspects of the sport industry (Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2015; Welty Peachey, 2015). Scholars have wrestled with the appropriateness of theory in this context, whether theory should or even can drive interventions and change agendas, and how management practice can advance theory development in this field (Coalter, 2013a; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011, 2018; Schulenkorf, 2012; Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2015). Sport for social change, broadly speaking, captures change that occurs both in and through sport. Social change is universal and therefore difficult to grasp. Sport for social change is primarily considered from two perspectives: initiatives and programs that aim to achieve change in sport structures, systems, and processes; and sport-based interventions that are designed to deliver microlevel and/or macrolevel outcomes such as social inclusion, social capital, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, crime reduction, gender equity, and community development, among others (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). Scholars engaged in sport for social change work often collaborate with industry and practitioners and are thus well positioned to make essential contributions to the nexus between theory and practice.

There has been some limited yet important theory building in this field of study from both theory to practice and practice to theory perspectives (e.g., Coalter, 2013b; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2012; Schulenkorf & Siefken, 2019; Sugden, 2010). Still, there are concerted calls by scholars for more theoretical work in sport for social change to ground practice in theory and to consider contextual influences and challenges to theory development (Coalter, 2007, 2013b; Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2015). This is particularly relevant for sport management scholars who examine the strategies, mechanisms, and contexts of sports programs and services to achieve meaningful outcomes for all stakeholders.

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Giving voice to these important considerations, this special issue answers calls to explore the nature of theory development within the sport for social change landscape. It invited scholars to explore and consider how theory can inform practice in sport for social change and vice versa. This special issue builds upon, extends, and progresses two previous special issues in the field of sport for social change: a 2015 special issue of *Sport Management Review* on managing sport for social change (Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Chalip, 2015) and a special issue of the *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, also in 2015, on sport for development and peace theory building and program development (Welty Peachey, 2015). These two previous special issues made significant contributions to the field, but they did not specifically address the nexus between theory and practice within sport for social change. Thus, as a logical next step, this special issue specifically brings to light some of the most recent conceptual and empirical work exploring the theory–practice connection in the field of sport for social change.

Interplay Between Social Change and Sport for Development

The articles included in this special issue cover a wide range of topics and collectively advance our understanding of the theory–practice nexus. Although challenges certainly exist in theory building in sport for social change and in bridging the theory–practice divide, in conjunction these articles provide an important contribution by actively and constructively engaging with and exploring the theory–practice nexus from multiple perspectives. Of particular interest is the conceptual interplay between social change and sport for development (SFD), which we attempt to define and address in our reflections on the articles in this special issue. Below, we offer our rendering of the philosophical underpinnings of these articles and position them within three lenses for exploring the sport for social change field.

Three Lenses for Exploring Sport for Social Change

An important takeaway from this special issue concerns the philosophical understanding of social change and the associated

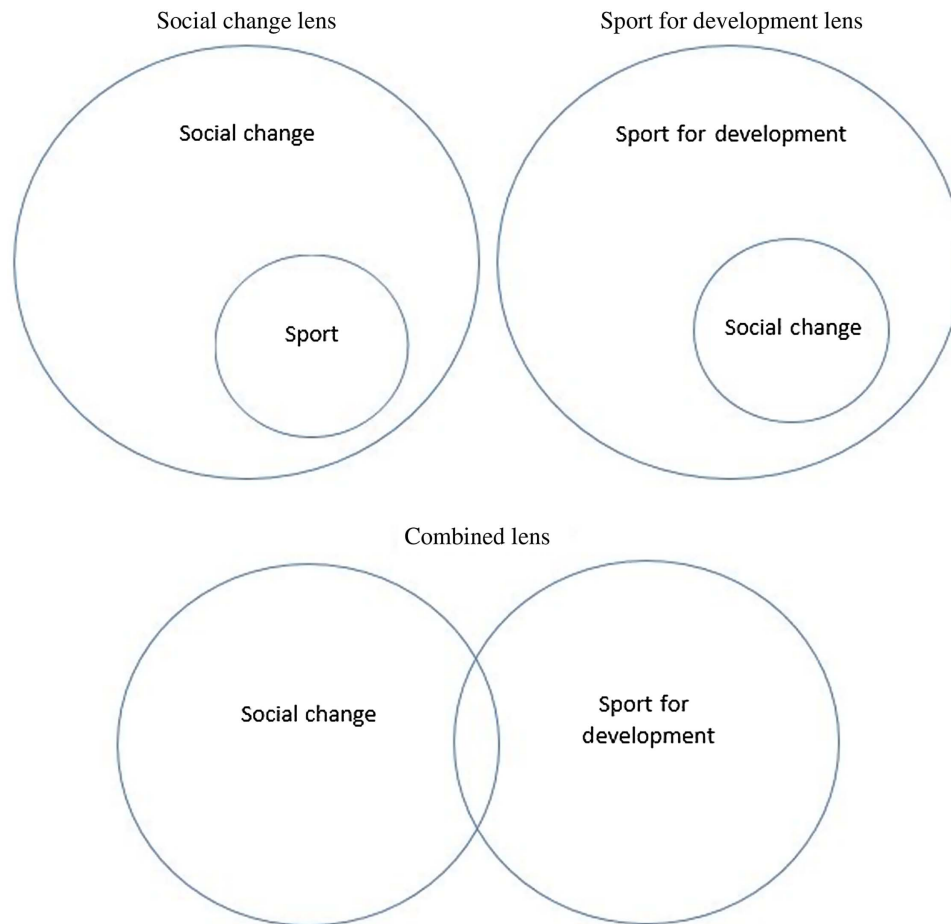


Figure 1 — Sport for social change perspectives.

research perspective taken by sport for social change scholars. In particular, there are three distinct lenses for investigating sport for social change, which we visualize in Figure 1. First, scholars with a *social change lens* tend to discuss sport as an element of community (sport) development, including opportunities for leisure and recreation. In other words, social change provides the broader frame around sport-specific social development activities that form part of a wider agenda or portfolio that goes beyond sport (see in this issue, e.g., [Chen & Mason, 2019](#); [Robertson, Storr, Bakos, & O'Brien, 2019](#)). Second, scholars with a SFD lens define sport for social change as one specific area of exclusively sport-focused development efforts that are conducted in disadvantaged settings—in addition to, say, economic or health-related initiatives (see in this issue, e.g., [LeCrom, Dwyer, & Greenhalgh, 2019](#); [Hapeta, Stewart-Withers, & Palmer, 2019](#)). In other words, social change presents merely a subtheme of sport-specific aid and development work (see [Sherry et al., 2015](#)). Third, scholars have treated social change and SFD as separate but interrelated schools of thought, which happen to overlap in specific scenarios. In such cases, a *combined lens* is taken which is influenced by both theoretical perspectives that underpin a particular study or project.

The differences in perspective are visually presented in Figure 1. It becomes clear that the starting point for investigations—and associated philosophical underpinnings—are different. In the first instance, sport is enveloped by social change, whereas in the second, sport has a more dominant position and envelopes social change as

one area of specific focus (SFD). Finally, the third perspective places the two constructs on the same level which, in turn, has implications for the (sport and nonsport) theories and approaches used in scholarly investigations.

Social Change Lens

This special issue features three articles that adopt a social change lens. For example, [Schaillee et al. \(2019\)](#) discuss the knowledge translation strategies and practices performed in two applied research projects that sought to promote social change in and through community sport. Their analysis draws attention to the ways in which well-designed academic industry collaborations can contribute to the societal impact of scientific research and its uptake in policy and practice. Embracing a social change lens to address knowledge production, [Chen and Mason \(2019\)](#) argue that an epistemological shift is necessary in sport management in order to mobilize social change. They posit that the field must acknowledge its embedded position in settler colonial societies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand and that settler colonialism should no longer remain invisible in sport management research if broader social change is to be achieved. They challenge the field to acknowledge that sport management is situated in the sociohistorical context that involves settler colonial processes, which may then impact how we teach and conduct research, and propose potential ways forward to engage with settler colonialism in praxis.

In addition, Robertson et al. (2019) investigation of the trajectory of lesbian inclusion in Australian cricket is another representation of the social change lens. Against the backdrop of wider societal changes with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex rights and inclusion, the authors explore how institutional arrangements and the actions of institutional entrepreneurs enable or constrain the promotion of an inclusive sports environment.

Sport for Development Lens

In this special issue, the majority of contributions take a specific SFD lens through which authors examine the theory–practice links of social change programs and suggest future developments in the field. LeCrom et al. (2019) outline barriers to theory development in SFD and to bridging the theory–practice divide that are primarily the result of methodological and contextual challenges resulting from the myriad types of SFD initiatives. The authors clearly adopt an SFD-focused lens to provide concrete suggestions for SFD scholars and practitioners to navigate challenges to theory development, including better and more effective forms of collaboration between academics and practitioners, creativity and diversity in methodologies employed for evaluation, and longitudinal data collection efforts involving multiple stakeholders and local voices. Relatedly, Hills, Walker, and Dixon (2019) use the SFD organization Magic Bus as the context to explore how failure to create and align with a theory of change in the practice of expanding its operations from India to London resulted in limited effects of the program, particularly because the organization failed to identify and strategically attempt to mitigate a local social problem. Importantly, through an SFD lens, this work provides evidence that a theory of change is critical to potentially achieving desired social change outcomes in practice.

Exploring the theory–practice connection with regard to social change outcomes, Svensson and Loat (2019) build on their lived experiences in SFD to identify ways in which multistakeholder SFD initiatives can be better leveraged to achieve lasting outcomes and systemic social change. In particular, the authors build on theory from the areas of SFD as well as organizational studies and nonprofit management to arrive at a practical yet flexible framework designed to generate improved synergies among contributing stakeholders. In this contribution, Svensson and Loat (2019) clearly position their work in the context of historical and recent SFD developments; as such, they take an SFD perspective aimed at making a distinct contribution to the SFD literature.

Similarly, Zipp, Smith, and Darnell (2019) contribute to theory advancement in the SFD space by placing a specific focus on gender. The authors discuss, apply, and subsequently develop Robeyns' (2005) capability approach model with a specific gendered lens that is expected to assist researchers and practitioners in examining and developing SFD programs aimed at girls and women. As such, they merge an existing framework with a critical feminist approach in order to “bridge the gap” to better understand gender and SFD.

Considering a sociomanagerial focus, Dixon and Svensson's (2019) contribution engages specifically with an SFD organization in Kenya, and it is informed and influenced by a combination of theoretical perspectives that go beyond sport. In particular, the analysis of Highway of Hope's response to institutional complexity is underpinned by literature related to institutional logics, hybridity (models, tensions, and management), and a previously developed conceptualization of hybridity in SFD specifically. Thus, the

recommendations provided herein aim at informing the future design, management, and delivery of SFD projects, especially those that are faced with dealing with hybridity processes. Raw, Sherry, and Rowe's (2019) article makes a similar contribution to theoretical and practical understandings of organizational hybridity in SFD. Their study suggests how an SFD organization's hybridity can transform over time due to tensions between institutional priorities and logics.

Finally, although Hapeta et al. (2019) frame their research through an SFD lens, they critically interrogate this lens, and existing SFD work, from the perspective of indigenous theory and practice emanating from Aotearoa New Zealand. From this perspective, theory and practice are inextricably intertwined and coconstitutive, whereby practice is an embodied expression of theory. The authors urge scholars and practitioners to adopt a sport for social change approach that embraces Indigenous principles to create meaningful transformation in sport.

Combined Lens

Finally, this special issue does not feature any articles that can clearly be classified as taking a combined lens. Although a number of contributions infuse SFD research and programs with literature and theories from outside the SFD domain (e.g., Zipp et al., 2019 and Hapeta et al., 2019), systematic dual engagement of SFD and social change is yet to occur. We propose that the interrelation of these two areas—either around specific projects or in the context of wider policymaking—deserves to be studied in more detail. For example, the great variety of social change initiatives all over the world allow for comparative studies between sport-specific and nonsports programs, including their design; marketing; management; evaluation; and questions around leadership, collaboration, and sustainability. It seems that there may be important lessons to be learned from a more systematic cross-fertilization and synergy between the two fields. This would perhaps also bring the sports research community closer to answering questions around the specific value of sport in contributing to social change. Inspiration may be taken from the *Fields of Vision* initiative, which aims to bring practitioners and policymakers in dialogue with scholars and researchers across sport and the arts to collaboratively examine its potential economic, social, and cultural benefits (Long & Sandle, 2019).

How might such dialogue be promoted and supported in practice? As Schaille et al. (2019) demonstrate in their contribution, there is a need for greater boundary spanning and crossing to further integrate theory and practice. In other words, the specific knowledge and skills of sport for social change practitioners and their professional backgrounds are important factors influencing how the particular lenses are applied on the ground. For example, a sport administrator with a strong strategic management background is likely to approach sport for social change programs differently when compared with a community worker with social development expertise. Similarly, a sport development or SFD expert will bring yet another perspective toward social change projects. To some degree, researchers have started to investigate the opportunities and challenges—including hybrid approaches and role conflicts—around sport for social change programs and perspectives (see in this issue, e.g., Dixon & Svensson, 2019; Raw et al., 2019). However, more in-depth research is needed to establish a solid understanding of sport for social change perspectives and the associated managerial implications for training, development, leadership, program planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Future Directions for Bridging the Theory–Practice Divide in Sport for Social Change

The articles in this special issue make a significant contribution to the scholarship of sport for social change. They also reveal a number of key considerations that need to be considered in future research and practice. To further bridge the theory–practice divide, it seems critical that combined efforts between academics and practitioners should be reflected in both research and practice. Although this sounds rather obvious, the status quo looks different. Researchers have long called for a stronger and more sustained engagement with sport for social change programs and practitioners, which would importantly allow for the assessment of program impact over time rather than the often performed one-off, ad hoc monitoring and evaluation exercises. Here, the blame is often shifted to sport organizations and their lack of interest—and funding—to allow for long-term research-supported partnerships. But, the contribution by Schaillee et al. (2019) clearly shows that this is only one side of the story as academic institutions present their own challenges in facilitating authentic engagement with practitioners. For instance, in addition to administrative challenges and different expectations around research time frames, the current “publish or perish” research environment increasingly pressures academics to publish articles with the fewest number of coauthors possible. In other words, single-authored papers are looked upon favorably, whereas current performance measures disadvantage those who collaborate with colleagues from other universities and particularly with key contributors from “the real world.” In times where collaborators are increasingly required to “share” the rewards for their joint publications, practitioners are often omitted as coauthors in published journal articles. It seems that we still have a long way to go until we can speak of authentic and reciprocal collaboration between academics and practitioners.

In line with this, the value of academics being involved in practitioner conferences deserves to be discussed. The current situation tends to have sport industry and academic conferences as separate functions that provide little opportunity for engagement and reciprocal learning. Rather than trying to fix this divide through a simple amalgamation of the respective events (which has been tried before with limited success), targeted academic/practitioner conferences around specific topics—such as sport for social change—could make a positive difference. The article by Schaillee et al. (2019) in this special issue provides several practical examples of such knowledge translation activities. Their research sparked a series of integrated knowledge translation workshops and symposia that supported mutual engagement and learning, including the “Knowledge translation in sport management” workshop at the 2019 European Sport Management Association annual conference. In addition, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign hosted a conference in 2017 that brought SFD scholars and practitioners together to discuss partnerships and linkages in the field. More efforts such as these are needed going forward to approach sport for social change from a holistic and inclusive perspective.

It must also be acknowledged that most of the voices represented in this special issue, and in the sport for social change field more broadly, come from scholars based in the global north or high-income countries. In fact, only one contribution in the special issue has been authored by indigenous scholars (see Hapeta et al., 2019). This is problematic in many ways, in that our theory building and scholarship are not inclusive of indigenous colleagues or those from the global south or low- and middle-income countries, and as such, is incomplete and missing key voices that can

help to build more robust, contextualized theory and praxis. We challenge sport management scholars to actively seek concrete avenues to partner with and empower indigenous and marginalized voices in our field.

It is our hope that this special issue will be a stepping stone for scholars committed to working toward bridging the theory–practice divide in sport for social change and in the sport management field more broadly. Collectively, the articles in this issue challenge us to approach and advance the dynamic interplay between theory development, knowledge translation, and praxis in innovative and inclusive ways. We encourage scholars to take up the calls and future directions presented in this special issue and to engage creatively and sensitively in the art of building stronger and more durable bridges between theory and practice.

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