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Making sense of the lack of evidence discourse, power and knowledge in the field of sport for development.

Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores and analyses the power dynamics and vested interest groups that shape the lack of evidence discourse, which is critical of the way evidence is produced within and for the Sport for Development SFD field. This examination recognises that an understanding of the dominant neoliberal context within which SFD is located is critical.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a Foucauldian conceptual framework, power, knowledge and discourse relating to political actors in SFD - funders, policy makers, academics and sport development practitioners (SDP's) - are assessed. . This paper addresses two key questions: How is the lack of evidence discourse constructed, and what is its impact? And whose interests are served in the interpretation, generation and reporting of evidence

Findings – This paper concludes that although in a Foucauldian sense power surrounding evidence is everywhere, the neo liberal context, which situates SFD, favours the privileging of evidence discourses associated with and derived from funding organisations, political and academic interest groups to the detriment of evidence discourses associated with SDP's. Clearly then there is a major tension concerning knowledge transfer, power and process, and the way that evidence can be used to inform practice.

Originality/value – Attempts to highlight the power dynamics influencing the way evidence is produced within SFD and that much is needed to move the field forward in a more united approach for what counts as evidence for all political actors.

Keywords – Power, Discourse, Evidence, Sport for Development

Introduction

The increasing international focus on sport, sport development and sport for development (SFD) (see Houlihan and White, 2002 Grix and Phillpots, 2010, Coalter, 2007, 2010, 2012) has hastened demands and requirements to provide appropriate evidence for governments, funders, donors and accountable organisations (Taylor, 2009) to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of programmes being delivered in return for the investment made. On a global stage neoliberalism, as an ideology; New Public Management (NPM) as a mode of governance; and modernisation as a policy package, provide the architecture that enables and controls the contexts and frameworks within which SFD operates (Hood, 1995, Christensen and Laegried, 2001, Finlayson, 2003, Steger and Roy, 2010). These intertwined elements have ensured that committing to professional management, involving; auditing and performance management and embracing contractualisation, in relation to how organisations work together, has become the standard bearer of neoliberal inspired public management (McLaughlin et al, 2002, Skalen, 2004, Budd, 2007).

In the UK, the New Labour administration (1997-2010) [1] incorporated modernisation as a central motif for its political and social project (Finlayson, 2003); a motif that also acted to problematise legitimate aspects of public service provision. For this administration, modernisation provided both a structural framework for the development of policy and a discursive tool that facilitated a world view that was pragmatic, positive and forward looking (Lister, 2000). The publication of *Game Plan* in 2002, for example, was symptomatic of the power of modernisation processes to shape and delineate decision-making processes, set agendas and shape preferences (Hay, 2002). Moreover *Game Plan,* in setting out the issues in a development framework, is itself a document that aims to translate modernisation to those organisations and individuals who 'willingly comply' (Lukes, 2005) with its central modernising mandate. The consequence of these processes has been that to modernise is to accept that public institutions and public services *must* change in accordance with the rational and scientific processes of managerialism, evidence-based policy, measurement, audit and technologies of accountability (Newman, 2001, original emphasis).

It is within this broad context of neoliberal derived modernisation, with the emphasis on evidence as the golden goose of validity, that the field of SFD has been roundly criticised. In part this criticism concerns the imposition of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which have, in a modernised sport system, depowered delivery agents (SDPs) by reaffirming the dominance of external stakeholders (Taylor, 2009). A second aspect of the criticism meted out to SFD is directly

related to how sport has been, and continues to be, conceived of as a panacea that can be used to address more or less any 'social bad', 'wicked issue' or 'social ill' in the name of development (Sam, 2009, Collins, 2010, Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011, Coakley, 2011). Much of this scepticism and critique has centred upon significant issues and shortcomings of certain approaches to monitoring and evaluation which reinforce the evangelical claims made by many SFD programmes (Coalter, 2007, 2010, Smith and Leach 2010). This has amplified and exacerbated what Nicholls et al (2010) call a lack of evidence discourse, which has antecedents in the how and why programmes work; the who has the resources to define what evidence is and, the how it should be collected. This article addresses two questions: first, how is the lack of evidence discourse constructed, and what is its impact? Second, in light of the first question, whose interests are served in the interpretation, generation and reporting of evidence? To answer these two questions the paper harnesses a Foucauldian understanding of power, knowledge and discourse to interrogate the key power dynamics shaping the attitudes and approaches to evidence of different actors. The paper finally offers some implications and inferences for public sector management and researchers investigating discourse alignments in the field of monitoring and evaluation.

The (lack of) evidence discourse

The neoliberal derived emphasis on NPM [2] places performance management and accountability to the fore, and given that each of these aspects of public management are located within centralised technological and political frameworks (Dieffenbach, 2009) it follows that power has become centralised in the governance of sport (certainly in the UK, see Grix and Phillpots, 2010). Certainly the importance of considering the nature of evidence in the context of SFD is that institutional landscapes featuring public policy actors have become increasingly blurred and fragmented across the many organisations represented by stakeholders (Stoker, 2000). What is clear, however, is the applicability to SFD of the broader recognition of the complexity and fragmentation that exists across different areas of public policy (Skelcher, 2000). Indeed while complexity, as an essential feature of NPM, has arguably led to the shift from government to new modes of governance (Pierre and Stoker, 2000), some have also argued that the paradoxical centralising of power gives rise to asymmetries of power in the march towards decentralisation (Grix and Phillpots, 2010, Dieffenbach, 2009, Courpasson, 2000). In short the SFD field has come under enormous institutional pressure to expand its activities to include a range of partners in a number of loose arrangements that cross institutional boundaries and yet is under enormous central pressure to provide evidence for programme development as much as programme outcome. Consequently a lack of evidence discourse has emerged around SFD; where sport programmes are

often justified post hoc in the name of social change and then criticised for apparent failure. In this section we examine two broad themes underpinning the notion of the lack of evidence discourse.

Benefits, outcomes and approaches

When it comes to SFD there are many who harbour over-ambitious aspirations and lack the theoretical and practical acumen of understanding how change is realised, a consequence of which is that KPIs are often badly designed, lack the necessary validity and reliability (Taylor, 2009) consequently ensuring that programme implementers are faced with demonstrating successful programme outcomes on the basis of slim evidence. Kay is unequivocal on this matter, arguing that 'the claimed benefits attributed to sport overreach the research base as the evidence of sports social impacts is unsatisfactory' (2009, p.1178). Others (e.g. Levermore, 2011, Coalter, 2007, Coakley, 2011) have argued that such unrealistic outcomes are founded in the dominance of SFD by sport evangelists who approach evaluation with 'the conviction that sport for development inevitably leads to positive outcomes' (Levermore, 2011, pg 341). SFD in this respect is in a C*atch 22* situation. Neoliberal governance arrangements are such that the importance and value of sport is necessarily 'sold' but, in doing this, and based on the notion that sport is self-evidently a good thing (Rowe, 2005).

It is this context of implementation of SFD programmes that much of the evidence produced by practitioners is met with scepticism, suspicion and disbelief over its reliability and validity – often because this evidence is framed as the 'the power of sport' (e.g. Coalter, 2007, 2010, Sugden, 2010, Levermore, 2011). The consensus is more that sport may have the capacity to elicit change, but that evidence at the moment is inconclusive at best (Coalter, 2010). Thus in the SFD field we can say that the lack of empirical data does not necessarily disprove the potential value of sport, (Kay, 2009). Clearly SFD programmes take place and are situated within a complexity of social processes and interactions and that institutional complexity is an added factor that contributes to confusion and misunderstanding in finding evidence. The struggle to evidence and explain the realisation of certain outcomes often concerns the lack of attention afforded to processes underpinning SFD programmes, from the outset of programme development through to monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Certainly the literature is clear in arguing for greater attention to be paid to the construction of underpinning programme theory (Chen, 1990, Pawson and Tilley, 1997, Weiss, 1997), calling for programmes to develop 'plausible and sensible models of how programmes are supposed to work' (Bickman, 1987 cited in Green and Macallister, 2002, p. 217). Given this position, programme development, as well as evaluation, is crucial because it is through a well

developed theory of change or programme theory (Vogel, 2011) that processes and activities will be described and lead to certain outcomes. However, outcomes are often envisaged or idealistically drawn up without considering the processes, mechanisms or underlying theory that may lead to their realisation. Clearly, design or theoretical fallibilities may ensure that 'ill-defined outcomes' elicit evangelical performance indicators which, based on the presumed intrinsic values of sport, become the indicator or mechanism of change. The consequence of which, is to identify evaluation questions that are limited in both scope and value, giving rise to questions such as 'did the sport intervention have an impact?' rather than asking 'why and how did sport have an impact'? Without doubt the complexity of the social and cultural conditions under which sport operates (Coalter 2007, 2010) ensures that a blanket approach to evaluation is neither nuanced enough nor flexible enough to go beyond many of the artificial and 'narrowly designed concepts of measurement and accountability' (Diefenbach, 2009:895).

What has emerged, in theory and practice, is a range of approaches to M&E that are now being implemented within the field of SFD. These vary from impact and outcome evaluations, often evident within industry driven evaluations (e.g. Sport England), to theory driven approaches that may offer more insights on how and why impacts occur (Weiss, 1997). For example, theory based evaluation (Bell, 2010), theory of change (Vogel, 2012; Coalter, 2012), and realistic approaches (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Nichols, 2007) have been implemented and advocated for their strength in outlining and clarifying how and why programmes should work to achieve specific outcomes. As a result, there has been an increase in evaluation practice (Vogel, 2012) within SFD programmes. Logic models that attempt to specify inputs, outputs and outcomes (Coalter, 2007, 2009 Levermore, 2011) have been widely implemented in the global south, where donors in particular, are keen to map out in a linear fashion what a programme is and will do, and how investments link to results. However, there is some concern (e.g. Nicholls, 2010; Kay, 2009, Piggin et al 2009 and Levermore 2011) that these approaches are overly positivistic, and in emphasising linearity and causality of programme inputs, outputs and outcomes may be quite narrow and restrictive in terms of which aspects of a programme can be evaluated (Lindsey and Gratton, 2012). Some (e.g. Levermore 2011) have sought to include participatory approaches within theory driven approaches and have begun to advocate interviews, focus groups and informal discussions as useful tools to M&E.

Whilst a plurality of approaches may represent creativity, diversity and choice in M&E practice it may also confuse, compete, crowd out and even mislead what is an emergent and growing field.

Additionally, despite an increase in evaluation practice, many evaluations are commissioned by funders for external interest groups to bid for (Levermore 2011, Taylor, 2009). In most cases this commissioning of M&E practice requires academic expertise and may sideline the knowledge, reliability, community ownership and inclusion of practitioners on the ground (Fetterman, 2005). Arguably this is because funding organisations rely more on the support of external stakeholders than their actual performance for their legitimacy (Scott, 1987 – cited in Taylor, 2009:854). It is not surprising therefore that many research agendas are set in academic institutions (Nichols et al, 2010), as academic knowledge continues to be privileged, but also ignored (Houlihan, 2012). This rather fragmented, and fragmenting structure, suggests that consistency and consensus in using and deciding on M&E approaches are not maintained and embraced by all stakeholders involved, but is rather an exercise in power and control. Arguably evidence based practice should empower practitioners and according to Goldacre should be a process whereby 'A coherent set of systems for evidence based practice listens to people on the front line…' (Goldacre, 2013:8)

Foucault's power and the manufacturing of (the 'lack of evidence') discourse

A Foucauldian lens

We use some of the ideas of Foucault (1980) as thinking tools to interrogate how certain forms of knowledge, in the process of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), and hence discourse construction and formation are privileged and considered legitimate, when others are not (Nicholls et al, 2010). Foucault, a key post-structuralist took the position that power was universal and consequently could not be possessed by actors, but rather was something that one engaged with, as an action. Power, according to Foucault, is therefore something that can be exercised, and when this happens, typically, its impact will provoke a resistance (Foucault, 1973, 1982, Ransom, 1997, Barth, 1998). Nicholls et al (2010) highlight the devaluing of voices and the production of resistance, arguing that 'central to Foucauldian theory is an examination of the influence of power on knowledge production and the ways in which relations of power shape the production, marginalisation or valorisation of different forms of knowledge' (2010, pg 4). Accordingly, discourses, such as those of managerialism and business and lack of evidence, legitimise certain regimes of truth, meaning and knowledge. For Foucault discourse referred to a consistent set of ideas that people use 'to navigate social life and make sense of their experiences…[involving]…unwritten rules that guide social practices, produce and regulate the production of statements and shape what can be perceived and understood'(Dennison and Scott-Thomas 2011: 29). Clearly, acceptable forms of evidence, and approaches to generating that evidence, are underpinned by the power of significant interest groups to shape discursive formations that regulate acceptable evaluation practice.

However, given that, in the Foucauldian sense, power is something that can be deployed by particular people in specific situations, its exercising will produce other reactions and resistances that are not tied to specific groups or identities (Ransom, 1997, Danaher et al; 2000). Thus in a Foucauldian sense, power is everywhere, and is derived from people's empowerment or disempowerment by the groups to which they belong. It follows therefore that the lack of evidence discourse comprises a series of discourses that reflect and embody the varying interest groups and power dynamics involved in M&E. To be sure, discourses do not act in isolation, but interact and intersect with each other creating further constructions that enable power to be used in different ways (Mwaanga, 2011).

Dominant discourse in practice

Vested interest groups have a significant role in shaping the discursive formations of evidence and consist of public accountability organisations, agencies, and are represented by funding organisations, government departments, academics, and practitioners. Hierarchies of power are evident with governments (national, regional and local) and likely to have ideological, conceptual and/or structural parameters within which they will seek to exert power and hence frame what they might consider suitable and appropriate approaches to evidence. Similarly, funding agencies like national and international sport organisations, charities and NGBs are likely to interpret what might be considered evidence on the basis of who it is for, its purpose and how that evidence can be known. Those within academia are also privileged, first via their ability to wield power in defining, articulating and controlling discourse elements via academic output; second, in commissioning reviews and evaluations as a result of their perceived expertise. However, it should be borne in mind that whilst it may appear that a hierarchy of power exists this may not necessarily be the case, for as Foucault (1972) argues it is difficult to identify who might be responsible for promoting or controlling particular discourses because they work anonymously through various human interactions.

Sport development practitioners have arguably to date, had a limited voice in the discursive formation of evidence and have been unable to challenge dominant approaches to evidence (Nicholls et al 2010). In part this is because the voices of those who deliver programmes at the operational level are neither fully understood nor explored. Through a Foucauldian lens, it is possible to observe that SFD practitioners lack or do not have the means to access and use power as largely they are excluded from shaping and valorising knowledge. Reflexively this inability to impart influence confirms their position as marginal power brokers in the field of SFD. Many of

the approaches to evaluation, coming from the managerial and business discourse (Kirkpatrick et al, 2005), privilege funders, policy makers and the scientification of what can (and should be) considered evidence (Nichols et al, 2010). However, observed through a Foucauldian lens this does not mean that power or alternative evidence discourses are not accessible to SFD practitioners.

Situating and creating alternative discourses

Discourses are critical in the sense that they frame what can be perceived of, by an actor, as truth with the consequent action of influencing individuals' social practices and shaping what can be perceived and understood (Denison and Scott-Thomas, 2011). It may be the case that what can be known as evidence, influenced by evidence discourses and discursive formations of evidence that use and promote a common language, will be accepted as truth and as the correct way to do things. However, this does not necessarily mean that SDPs should, can or will adopt them. For Foucault discourses are never real, they are socially constructed ways within which we can know about ourselves, our bodies and practices where truth is open to interpretation and any discourse can be contested (Denison and Scott-Thomas, 2011 p29). Perhaps, the narrow, constraining and scientific approaches to evaluation in SFD, which tend to be accepted as truth, can be resisted. In this regard it is possible to ask whether sport development practitioners have the capacity to generate their own discourses of evidence or indeed whether these discourses of evidence may already exist.

Taking Foucault's position that 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1978, p. 93), allows an acceptance of power as a resource, as something available to individuals in everyday life that is not the preserve of particular privileged groups or individuals. Clearly then counter discourses can emerge but are fundamentally contextually contingent. In New Zealand for example, research with senior policy makers has indicated that whilst people are constrained by discourses they are also active in crafting different ways of knowing via their harnessing of knowledge (Piggin et al, 2009). Research in the global south is supportive of this view, with many practitioners expressing their own views about what constitutes the right and proper evidence base for evaluating their programmes (Nichols et al 2010) (despite them being constrained and subjugated). Although we have already highlighted academia as having a privileged voice in the formation of evidence, it is clear that academia may also represent a less dominant alternative discourse as well. For example, large amounts of empirical evidence are often ignored, particularly when dominated by qualitative data, by policy-makers governments and other public sport organisations (Houlihan 2012). Certainly then, discourses may

be dominant, emergent, resistant and even transgressive. Indeed, if as Foucault advocates that power is everywhere then discourse formation is possible in virtually any setting and it is the relative power that a discourse is able to acquire and sustain that then becomes the key factor. The production of new forms of evidence may not only further empower SDPs but may act as a counter discourse that may allow these particular SDPs to influence other local and national funding organisations and agencies. Consequently it is important that policy-makers should acknowledge discourses of perceived truth at the practitioner level as by doing so legitimates further experiential evidence, and may help to break down power inequalities in the M&E discourse landscape.

The sport development practitioner and irony of evidence based policy

It is clear that the Sport Development Practitioner (SDP) is a crucial actor in M&E as he/she is the one experiencing the day to day practices involved in running SFD programmes. It is still unclear however, why it is that practitioner knowledge is underprivileged, compared to academic knowledge, and also whether sport development practitioners can embrace and deliver some of the varying approaches to M&E. Certainly structural problems abound including confusion of what is best practice in M&E, lack of time, limited staff resourcing and the short life-cycle of programmes (Levermore, 2011). Consequently many SDPs are inadequately trained to conduct sufficient or appropriate M&E (Hylton and Hartley, 2011) notwithstanding their ability to establish and promote alternate discourses surrounding M&E. There are however structural dispositions to balances of power and knowledge empowerment that for many stakeholders predetermine the necessity to outsource M&E practice to external consultancies and academic institutions. The structure of M&E in SFD programmes indicates that terrains and spaces of M&E knowledge has become sequestered and embedded within academic circles and practice, in conferences and publications, and guarded by language, and knowledge of that language, which acts as a gate-keeping device for particular professional and knowledge communities (Hylton and Hartley, 2011) [3]. The continual commissioning of external evaluators to carry out M&E over SDPs also creates tensions that manifest in the distancing of SDPs from that work. The result is that an evaluation report may either be ignored or insufficiently acknowledged by practitioners, which once more reinforces and contributes to the knowledge transfer gap.

The final element to the lack of evidence discourse concerns the role of policy makers and funders in their influence on SFD and the approaches to M&E they expect. Coalter (2010) refers to funders or donor's insisting on addressing goals that may not fit the context or local issues and needs, as

well as noting that organisations such as charities, and public sector organisations can, and often do, make inflated promises to obtain funding. In England the major national sport organisation, Sport England [4], has, since 2008, become the prime funding agency for many national governing bodies of sport (NGBs). Certainly the impact of centralised funding has been to clintelise (Houlihan,) sport agencies and ensure that contractualisation and accountability have resulted in the use of evidence to meet targets, tick boxes, and jump through hoops in order to meet government objectives irrespective of impact on practitioners and/or the quality of that provision (Smith and Leech, 2010). Clearly governments and arm's length bodies who impose unrealistic policy derived targets and goals on organisations and practitioners should be held to account. There should be no surprise that many find it extremely hard to provide the necessary evidence to meet targets when the relevant preconditions for achieving those targets such as contexts and resources are not properly assessed (Collins, 2010). In practice the broader neoliberal consensus and more particularly the practice of NPM has ensured that what is measured or evaluated is that that can be measured, quantified and consumerised to enable those demanding evaluation to be satisfied. As Wilenski (1988) argues the narrowness of parameters can lead to further negative effects, particularly for those aspects that are not quantifiable. It is worth remembering at this juncture that PIs are largely unable to capture quality (Taylor, 2009), so it is questionable whether KPIs set by accountability organisations help at all in M&E practice. Certainly the irony, in this respect, concerns the many intangible assets and traditional values of SFD that are ignored to the extent that 'They are devalued and discredited, portrayed as being unimportant, only of instrumental use, ignored, or treated as constraints and obstacles that organizations have to overcome' (Diefenbach, 2009: 900). Practitioners are thus thrust into the paradoxical situation of knowing that government, funders and national sport organisations are keen to cite evidence as the basis for policy formation, but finding themselves being set unrealistic, over ambitious and unachievable policy goals (Collins, 2010) that subsequently struggle to be evidenced.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed and interrogated the area of M&E within the field of SFD. It has addressed the key questions of whose interests are served in the generation of evidence, and what the lack of evidence discourse is. In locating the argument within a Foucauldian framework it is essential to recognise that any analysis of evidence within the contemporary climate is affected by the neo-liberal context. The march to modernisation has ensured that neo-liberal disciplines dominate the contexts and frameworks that SFD operates within.

The paper has highlighted how approaches to M&E are dominated by funding organisations and other privileged groups such as academics (Nicholls et al, 2010, Kay, 2009) who tend to alienate and subjugate, often unwittingly the SDP. However, the dominance of these vested interest groups does not represent a structural and hierarchal manifestation of power. Rather the employment of Foucault's post-structural framework enables a consideration of power as omni-present and shaped by discourses of truth. Counter discourses may manifest themselves in how SDP's view social change, sports' role in its development and establishing alternative approaches to evidence that some may adopt for particular SFD programmes. It is clear therefore that counter-discourses can emerge, however it is the relative power that a counter-discourse can acquire which becomes the key factor.

Finally the state of play outlined by this paper paints a problematic picture concerning the way that evidence is generated and reported within SFD. This is largely because there is limited synthesis, cross fertilisation or continuation of knowledge that enables those vested interest groups in the field to progress it. Whether the field can move forward depends upon establishing an empowered context and bridges that adopt approaches to M&E, and sharing of knowledge that meet the needs of *all* vested interest groups. A good starting point would be to engage more deeply with SDPs concerning their attitudes and perceptions to evidence. It may be that standard forms of empirical research can develop insight and perspective on this matter, however in order to gain a greater understanding of what approaches to M&E are most suitable for SDPs it may be that participatory evaluation research, where SDPs are included within the research process, is needed to empower and involve practitioners to the extent that their voices could be heard alongside those of funding organisations, policy makers and academics.

Notes.

1. The outcome of the 2010 general election was a coalition government between the Conservative party led by Prime-Minister David Cameron and the Liberal Democrats led by Deputy Prime-Minister Nick Clegg who between them had almost 60% of the vote.

2. NPM, introduced to public sector organisations in the late 1970s, breaks with traditional public management, which has been viewed by advocates of NPM as old-fashioned and having limited practical applicability. In this regard NPM represents, what Newman (2001) has argued, is a field of tensions which concerns the attempt by (those employing) NPM to modernise government and the study of government from a particularistic view of the individual from an individualised and economic stance (Massey and Pyper, 2005). Defining NPM is itself problematic see for example Hood (2005) for a more detailed discussion.

3. This is an irony indeed, given that in order to tackle the conceptual and contextual issues surrounding M&E this paper uses jargon and technical language and maybe places itself in the category of academic

gatekeeping. However as this paper is written for a largely academic audience, it is important to get inside the gate in order to have the potential to free those inside.

4. Sport England is a government agency which is primarily responsible for increasing participation within community level sport using funding from the government and the national lottery.

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