



Participatory research in sport-for-development: Complexities, experiences and (missed) opportunities



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors examine how participatory research can be conceptualized and fostered in sport-for-development (SfD). The authors offer a conceptualization of participatory research that centers on the interplay between three dimensions: participation, power, and reflexivity. Drawing on variegated experiences with SfD research across different geographical locations, the authors scrutinize the conceptual and empirical linkages between these dimensions, and how these linkages are influenced by structures of authority. Findings suggest that most SfD research falls short with regard to the critical challenge of embracing and delivering high degrees of participation, power shifting, and reflexivity. More specifically, SfD researchers typically fail to relinquish power and control over the research process. The SfD research community would likely benefit from greater inclusivity and collaboration when designing creative ways to improve this state of affairs. The authors conclude by reflecting on the implications and by suggesting ways to promote participatory and activist research in SfD contexts.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the sport-for-development (SfD) sector has been one of the fastest growing aspects of the globalization of sport (Giulianotti, 2016) and a major driver of the belief that sport has the potential to contribute to community development and positive social change (Kidd, 2008; Levermore, 2008; Schulenkorf, 2012). In short, SfD represents the intentional “use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution” (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). This definition highlights that, from a SfD perspective, sport is a conduit to achieving wider development outcomes for marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged communities and their individual members, rather than an end in itself. As such, SfD has at its center an ambition to alter existing systems and structures of inequity.

Around the world, belief in the potentially beneficial outcomes resulting from SfD has led to the creation of hundreds of development initiatives supported and/or implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government

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departments, sport associations, aid agencies, and corporate actors.¹ The promises, achievements, and pitfalls of the SfD sector have been subject to vigorous academic debate (e.g., in books including: [Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014](#); [Young & Okada, 2014](#)). On the one hand, scholars and evaluators alike seek to theorize, identify, test, and measure the impacts and outcomes of SfD initiatives, as well as the conditions and mechanisms that facilitate or produce development across a wide range of geographical and program contexts ([Coalter, 2013](#); [Coalter & Taylor, 2010](#); [Cronin, 2011](#); [Van Eekeren, ter Horst, Fictorie, 2013](#)). On the other hand, critical research problematizes commonly-held assumptions, discourses, and practices in SfD ([Darnell, 2012](#); [Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011](#); [Donnelly, Atkinson, Boyle, & Szto, 2011](#); [Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013](#)).

Much of this debate has centered on the design and delivery of SfD programs and the wider political, social, cultural, and economic contexts within which they operate. Far less attention has been paid to the critical role of research and evaluation in these processes, despite the fact that, as [Kay \(2009, 2012\)](#) notes, research and evaluation are centrally implicated in the power/knowledge nexus in SfD. Specifically, [Kay \(2009\)](#) calls for “reflexive forms of research [that] provide a mechanism for the expression of local understandings and knowledge that are crucial to the assessment of the ‘social impact’ of sport in development contexts” (p. 1190). While some of these issues have long been considered in other areas of development and health research (e.g., [Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995](#)), to date they do not fully inform research and evaluation in the field of SfD. For example, a recent review of SfD literature shows that although the majority of SfD programs are carried out in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 90 percent of SfD authors are based in North America, Europe, and Australia ([Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016](#)). Only eight percent of SfD studies have contributors from the countries in which the programs are delivered ([Schulenkorf et al., 2016](#)). It appears that SfD research has thus far failed to fully engage with the wealth and diversity of local knowledge, experience, and expertise. The SfD research community, we argue, needs to be more inclusive and collaborative in designing creative ways to improve this state of affairs.

In this paper, we articulate conceptual and methodological foundations for altering this status quo. In particular, we recognize that SfD initiatives are often underpinned by social justice objectives and may seek to alter dominant power relations. Challenging these power inequities has not necessarily been a central focus within SfD research, and importantly, research approaches have often done little to transform existing power relations. This paper addresses the following question: how can participatory research in SfD be conceptualized and fostered? Through both conceptual and empirical analysis of this question, we seek to contribute to the promotion of high-quality reflexive research on SfD.

Our analysis unfolds as follows. In the next section, we develop a novel conceptualization of participatory SfD research centered on the interplay between three key dimensions: participation, power, and reflexivity. We scrutinize these dimensions by drawing on our own variegated experiences with SfD research across different geographical locations and by relating these experiences to current debates in the SfD literature. While existing scholarship in SfD and community sport contexts has addressed the notions of participation, power, and reflexivity individually, we make a conceptual contribution to this field of research by linking the three concepts, by exploring how they are influenced by structures and relationships of authority, and by actualizing their linkages through a critical analysis of research conducted by the authors in five SfD projects. Finally, we draw together our main findings and reflect on implications for future research, policy, and practice in the SfD sector.

2. Conceptualizing participatory research in SfD

Recent reviews of SfD research foreground issues of problem definition, knowledge generation, and knowledge use within broader discussions on how to improve research quality and impact ([Cronin, 2011](#); [Darnell, Chawansky et al., 2016](#); [Darnell, Whitley et al., 2016](#)). These issues are at the core of participatory research approaches. Participatory research is differentiated from conventional research methodologies “not in methods but in the attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted” ([Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995](#)). Participatory research is not a unified approach, and much research that claims to be participatory falls short in practice. Moreover, conventional research itself involves varying degrees of participation, such as gaining access to the field. In this context, [Collison, Giulianotti, Howe and Darnell, \(2016\)](#) stress “the importance of building strong relationships with skilled, experienced and informed locals in order to collect accurate and valuable data in unfamiliar locations” (p. 422). Yet, as shown in the following space, this kind of research approach does not necessarily qualify as participatory because it tends to privilege the interests of researchers and maintain their primary control over problem identification, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

What, then, makes research participatory? The alignment of power and control within the research process is critical in this regard. Participatory research focuses attention on the key issues of power and control, and thus involves more than simply taking part. As [Cornwall and Jewkes \(1995\)](#) note, the most striking difference between participatory and conventional methodologies lies in “who defines research problems and who generates, analyzes, represents, owns and acts on the information which is sought” (p. 1668). These issues affect all phases of the research process: from the development of research questions through to the communication of the results for action ([Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005](#)). Participatory research thus positions local people, who may be recipients or stakeholders of SfD projects, as knowledgeable actors. In the

¹ See the Sport and Development platform (<http://www.sportanddev.org>) of the Swiss Academy for Development for a detailed overview of SfD initiatives from around the world.

words of [Darnell, Whitley, and Massey \(2016\)](#), the participants and presumed beneficiaries of SfD initiatives “are not subjects to be tested with a focus on collecting predetermined outcomes or outputs. Rather, they are potential agents in the research process who possess skills, knowledge, and experiences to offer insights” into SfD and its effects (p. 572).

Some conceptualizations of participatory research extend this focus on power relations to prioritize education and political action in order to change structural inequalities. Participatory research is closely linked with, and an integral part of, activist research, a form of politically and morally engaged inquiry aimed at “challenging inequality by empowering the powerless, exposing the inequities of the status quo, and promoting social changes that equalize the distribution of resources” ([Cancian, 1993](#)). From this perspective, it is “not enough to simply endeavor to *understand* any given reality. There is a need to *transform* it, to *advance the cause of social protest, action, and change*” ([Denzin & Giardina, 2012](#); original emphasis).

This activist stance reveals the philosophical underpinnings of participatory research which, in contrast to the positivist paradigm in SfD research ([Giulianotti, 2011](#)), consider all knowledge as partial, situated, constructed in practice, and tied to power relations. Crucially, activist researchers value the knowledge of those with whom they work, and recognize that people from socially vulnerable backgrounds have the capacity to analyze their social context and to develop opportunities and strategies to challenge and transform their circumstances ([Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013](#)). In order to achieve this goal, researchers must also be prepared to confront their own stereotypes and assumptions about the people with whom they are working. As [Luguetti and Oliver \(2017\)](#) note, “activist research is not only about trying to transform social structures ‘out there’ and ‘the people’, it is about being open to transform ourselves as researchers and our relationships with others” (p. 4). Doing so can help to prevent the common situation in SfD research where researchers receive more from the research process than they provide, even when they use progressive research approaches ([Collison et al., 2016](#)). Participatory research thus offers an alternative paradigm of knowledge production, which challenges us to reconceptualize, and continuously reflect upon, the questions we ask and the methods we use ([Nygreen, 2006](#)). Participatory and activist research in SfD contexts confronts a number of challenges and tensions which, as will be shown below, are an important part of this process.

2.1. A three-dimensional model of participatory research in SfD

In the context of SfD, we propose that participatory research can be conceptualized along three inter-related dimensions: the degree of local participation, the degree of power shifting, and the degree of reflexivity. [Fig. 1](#) visualizes this three-dimensional conceptualization of SfD research. In conjunction, the three dimensions bring to the fore epistemological, methodological, and political issues in SfD research. While we distinguish between these three dimensions for analytical purposes, in this paper, we demonstrate how the three dimensions of participatory research are inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive, and can therefore not be fully grasped in isolation. They also need to be considered in relation to the influence of structures of authority (see [Fig. 1](#)).

The first dimension, the degree of participation, refers to the extent to which research participants are actively involved in all phases of the research process. A key argument underpinning participatory forms of research is that the relevance, trustworthiness, and usefulness of the data are enhanced when research participants are involved in the knowledge production process ([Frisby et al., 2005](#)). There are also ethical reasons for conducting participatory research; for example, to make research more accessible to those who are normally excluded from knowledge production and policy making. [Cronin \(2011\)](#) found that there has been some resistance to SfD research at the grassroots level partly because “research can be seen as esoteric and specialist, and not accessible in terms of participating in, producing or using the research” (p. 13). In a similar vein, while researchers should strive to maintain some distance and detachment in the service of critical analysis ([Elias, 1987](#)), they risk “alienating local actors who feel they have given more than they gained from the research encounter”

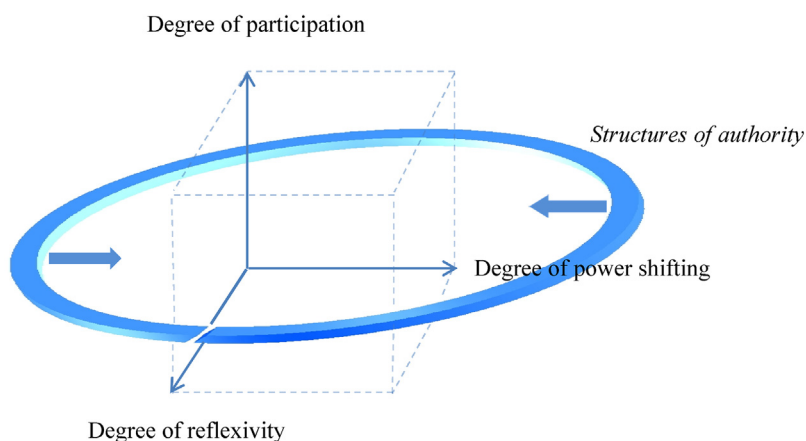


Fig. 1. Three dimensions of participatory research within surrounding structures of authority.

(Collison et al., 2016, p. 419). Such experiences have raised questions about how research may be produced and disseminated in more inclusive and accessible ways (e.g., Darnell, Chawansky, Marchesseault, Holmes, & Hayhurst, 2016; Darnell, Whitley et al., 2016; Schulenkorf et al., 2016).

Participation in research can be assessed in terms of both the level and scale of participation, both of which constitute a series of continua. Research in which local actors, and especially gatekeepers and key informants, are engaged in order to facilitate access to the field typically operates at the level of shallow participation, where researchers control the entire process and local actors' participation is confined to consultation and/or to taking part in the enquiries. With increasingly deep participation, there is a movement towards relinquishing control and devolving ownership of the research process to those whom it concerns (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), such as local stakeholders including the presumed beneficiaries of SfD program, their families and their communities. Scale, as a further axis of participation, refers to the breadth and number of people who are involved in the research process, which can range from narrow to wide participation. The issue of scale is foregrounded in recent research publications that reflect on whose voices are privileged and whose voices are marginalized (Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2011); for example; as a result of the particular levels and kinds of cooperation and access that are afforded by key stakeholders (Collison et al., 2016).

These issues concerning access and involvement point to a second dimension of participatory research: the degree of power shifting. As noted earlier, participatory research consists of modes of research which not merely involve a high level and scale of participation but, fundamentally, seek to address issues of power and control over the research process (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). The shift to participatory forms of research requires the reconceptualization of power relations between researcher(s) and research participants (Frisby et al., 2005). Such a reconceptualization would involve (a) affirmation that people's own knowledge is valuable and that they are capable of analyzing their own situations and designing their own solutions (Nicholls et al., 2011); and (b) a repositioning of the role of the researcher from detached director or evaluator to facilitator and collaborator (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Spaaij, Oxford, & Jeanes, 2016). Critical questions to be addressed include: for whom is the research for; whose knowledge is counted; and who has control, leadership, and responsibility during the different stages of the research process? To date, SfD research appears to have largely failed to fully come to terms with these questions, as local actors are still largely contracted into processes residing outside their ultimate control (Nicholls et al., 2011). This issue has been a point of contention in contemporary academic debate on the state of play in SfD research (e.g., Darnell, Chawansky et al., 2016; Darnell, Whitley et al., 2016; Lindsey & Gratton, 2012), and has recently sparked a number of innovative methods to embrace this research orientation including dialogue-based and participatory mapping methodologies (see, for example, the 2016 special issue of *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Vol. 8, No. 5).

The recent debate on issues of power and control in SfD research sensitizes scholars to reflexivity, which constitutes a third dimension of participatory research. The need for reflexivity on the part of researchers is well established in SfD research; yet, a recent critical review indicates that reflexivity is often not practised as consistently and deeply as it should (Darnell, Chawansky et al., 2016; Darnell, Whitley et al., 2016). Reflexivity broadly refers to “an understanding of the knowledge-making enterprise, including a consideration of the subjective, institutional, social, and political processes whereby research is conducted and knowledge is produced” (Alvesson, 2007). There are different varieties of reflexivity which “typically draw attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2010). Reflexive researchers recognize their own biases, beliefs, and assumptions in the act of sense-making, and share these with their audiences. To date, reflexive SfD research has primarily addressed identity-based forms of reflexivity, including how researchers' social positions in the field (e.g., as White, educated, middle-class, and global North identities within a global South context) may have shaped their research relations, data collection, and interpretation (Collison et al., 2016; Forde, 2015). Yet, Darnell, Chawansky et al. (2016) and Darnell, Whitley et al. (2016) advocate for more radically reflexive research that moves beyond identity-based forms of reflexivity to reflect on power and difference and their impact on interpersonal and institutional relationships, including how our practices are interwoven with processes of imperialism and neo-colonialism.

2.2. Structures of authority

As noted earlier, participatory research faces challenges and tensions reflected in SfD contexts. Various power dynamics, institutional processes, logistical and funding issues, and social distinctions influence the ability of researchers to enact the three dimensions of participatory research. In this paper, we refer to these collectively as structures of authority, which affect not only the degree of participation but also the degree of power shifting and reflexivity.

A first broad challenge is that the institutionalized relationship between sport and development has a tendency to reproduce or reinforce power relations in SfD initiatives (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). While the risk of reproducing power relations exists in all research (Nygreen, 2006), it has particular significance in SfD contexts. Recent research shows that the structure and culture of sport create specific tensions and challenges for participatory research (Lugueti & Oliver, 2017). The structural hierarchy in sport situates professional knowledge as superior to participants' knowledge. For example, Lugueti and Oliver (2017) discuss how their activist research in an Association football (from hereon soccer) program in a socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhood in Brazil “had to negotiate an environment of hierarchy that is part of sport culture” (p. 9). There was “a clear hierarchy” (p. 9) present in the program they investigated: the coordinators were the

people in power, followed by coaches, and finally the young people. As a consequence, the coordinators' voices were privileged, followed by coaches' voices; whereas, in a participatory or activist approach, the participants should be at the center. Moreover, sport's emphasis on winning and high performance as core objectives sits uneasily with social justice research due to the latter's focus on wider development outcomes (Lugueti & Oliver, 2017; Spaaij, Farquharson et al., 2014; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2014). These two factors appear to distinguish sport from other areas of participatory and activist research. Researchers need to be prepared to find ways to negotiate the structure and culture of sport if they are to successfully conduct participatory research in SfD contexts.

A second broad challenge concerns the conflicts between participatory research and academic institutions. Participatory research, which is inherently open-ended, messy, and long-term, often lacks the full appreciation and support of academic institutions (Cancian, 1993) that are characterized by a "culture of speed" (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Participatory researchers typically struggle to hold their work accountable to both activist and academic standards. For example, their commitment to forging strong ties and sharing power with community members can make it difficult to maintain adequate ties to academia, meet academic and managerialist targets (i.e., publications in "top-tier" journals, external research income), and have a successful academic career (Cancian, 1993). Building social action into participatory research projects further complicates the research and may antagonize academic administrators and human research ethics committees. These systemic issues and pressures within higher education systems are known to similarly affect (participatory) research in the SfD field (Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015). Participatory researchers must be prepared to develop strategies to negotiate these challenges; building on the findings presented in the following sections, in the remainder of this paper, we will offer some specific suggestions in this regard.

In what follows, we analyze the three dimensions of participatory research and the way they are influenced by structures of authority in relation to our own experiences in conducting SfD research. We aim to make a conceptual contribution to the field of SfD research by linking the three dimensions and subsequently actualizing them with a critical analysis of five specific SfD projects. The next section discusses the methods used to elicit novel insights into this issue.

3. Methods

The empirical analysis that follows draws on illustrative examples from five separate studies conducted by the authors on three continents between 2008 and 2015. All research discussed in this article is primarily qualitative, which reflects the majority of SfD published research (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). The case studies analyzed were conducted with five SfD programs: VIDA in Colombia, HIV/AIDS education in Zambia, Vencer in Brazil, Football for Peace (F4P) in Israel, and Asian-German Sport Exchange Program (AGSEP) in Sri Lanka. These cases were selected purposively on the basis of two criteria: first, the authors' extensive research experience with the programs, in order to preserve a robust understanding of the study context; and, second, to develop a geographically and culturally diverse sample upon which to draw in the present analysis.

Consistent with previous research, case study designs were implemented because we were seeking rich understandings of the nature and effects of the SfD programs within particular contexts. This design allows for an exploration of views, experiences and behaviors as they unfold in practice, which, for the researcher, provides context and meaning to the study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009). More specifically, case studies enable researchers to pay detailed attention to local understandings and knowledge, and to the voices, experiences and meaning-giving processes of the people being studied. Due to space limitations, the specific research methods used in the five studies are merely summarized in Table 1. Comprehensive details of the research methodologies can be found in the listed references. In order to protect the identity of the organization and interlocutors in Colombia and Zambia, we use pseudonyms and withhold identifying information.

We assess the five case studies within a single analysis in order to address this paper's guiding question: how can participatory research in SfD be conceptualized and fostered? While methods have been developed to enable such an overarching analysis that brings together findings from different qualitative studies (e.g., Noblit & Hare, 1988; Thomas & Harden, 2008), a vital concern is that re-analysis may detach findings from their original context and that themes or concepts identified in one setting are not applicable to others (Kay & Spaaij, 2012). We used two strategies to overcome this challenge. First, we only selected studies with which we were intimately familiar (that is, studies we had conducted), with the aim of preserving a robust understanding of context. We discussed and reflected on the contextuality of the studies and their

Table 1
Five studies of SfD programs.

Program	Location	Methods	Reference
VIDA	Colombia	Participant interviews (n=60) and participant observation	Oxford and Spaaij (2017)
HIV/AIDS Education	Zambia	Participant interviews and focus groups (n=82), stakeholder interviews (n=22) and participant observation	Jeanes (2013)
Vencer	Brazil	Participant and stakeholder interviews (n=89) and survey (n=157), participant observation	Spaaij (2011, 2012)
Football 4 Peace	Israel	Stakeholder interviews (n=30), 8 focus groups	Schulenkorf and Sugden (2011) and Schulenkorf et al. (2014)
AGSEP	Sri Lanka	Stakeholder interviews (n=35), 2 focus groups, program observation	Schulenkorf (2010)

findings on several occasions during the analysis process to ensure that the findings remained sensitive to the context in which they were produced. This included discussion of, for example, the conditions under which the study was conducted, data were collected and analyzed, and products were written. Second, we used [Thomas and Harden's \(2008\)](#) thematic synthesis technique of generating analytical themes. Initially, this process involved a comparative analysis of the original findings of the studies. We then used the specific review question to interrogate the descriptive syntheses of these findings by placing them within an external conceptual framework of participatory research. This framework focused on the analytical triad of participation, power, and reflexivity, as well as the influence of structures of authority.

4. Findings and discussion

Building on the three-dimensional model of participatory research that provides us with a conceptual foundation for an applied analysis, we reflect on and discuss our experiences and findings from five SfD research projects. We do so with the aim of critically investigating the status quo of participatory research on SfD, and providing recommendations for fostering engagement to promote culturally appropriate, high-quality, and high-impact research.

4.1. Participation

A critical dimension of participatory research is the degree and nature of community participation in the research process. In situations where there is a high degree of participation, the researcher and local participants would be committed to the process of mutual learning and collaboratively reaching a specific goal, which may involve linguistic considerations and crossing cultural boundaries ([Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016](#)). Creating a space for mutual learning demands that researchers bring forward a level of sensitivity, vulnerability, and integrity to engage meaningfully and respectfully with community groups and individuals as they negotiate roles, knowledge, and ultimately seek solutions ([Frisby et al., 2005](#)).

Our research highlights the critical need for researchers and community groups to build mutually beneficial and respectful relationships. An important element in this process is time, which specifically relates to the level of participation. Experiencing local contexts over a prolonged period of time, and taking local knowledge and perspectives seriously, proves a level of commitment from the researcher to the community, but also permits the researcher to experience the setting when the novelty of being a new outsider wears off. It is then that the mundane routine reveals new information concerning social processes, and informal means of positive communication can be fostered. However, time can also be a shallow quantifier, as relationships do not always depend on two groups of people being in the same time and space. For example, in our studies in Colombia, Brazil and Zambia, relationships were strengthened through text messaging and online conversations in social media platforms, such as Facebook, where the participants made regular informal contact, discussed triumphs, and shared stories about serious issues without the pressure of face-to-face interaction.

Our research provides concrete examples of authentic community participation. In one project in Zambia, for example, the research team worked with peer leaders who were responsible for delivering HIV/AIDS programs in their local communities and assisted them with developing research skills to collect data from participants. The research team co-designed interview schedules and questionnaires with young people to incorporate knowledge that they considered to be important for understanding the impact of projects and its role in young participant's everyday lives. This process was considered mutually beneficial by both the research team and peer leaders. The latter gained valuable skills that enabled them to continue to collect information about their projects that they could use to leverage further funding, as well as providing important insights into their delivery approaches and how they might better provide and support young community members. For the research team, the approach reduced some of the North/South tensions inherent in the research process. Moreover, peer leaders usually had a strong and trusting rapport with participants and were also able to undertake interviews in local language, if necessary, leading to a rich array of information emerging from this data collection approach. Similar examples can be drawn from AGSEP, VIDA, and Vencer, where staff members discussed, added, deleted, and/or edited interview questions before the interview process began. We also engaged in member checking, sharing drafts of reports and papers with community members and incorporating their feedback into publications. In addition, in the Vencer study, a local youth leader was trained as a (formally employed) researcher by the lead researcher, and the local NGO and subsequently contributed to the design, implementation, and analysis of the survey and interviews.

The scale of participation was a key consideration in each of the five studies. Throughout our research, we sought to engage in the research process a wide range of people who were involved in or impacted by the SfD programs. A first step in this process was typically a community mapping exercise to identify and map all relevant stakeholders. This was followed by consultations and conversations with a myriad of stakeholders, including participants and their families, local residents, SfD organizations, donors, community leaders representing different segments of the communities in which the programs operated (taking in to consideration axes of difference such as gender, class, age/generation, religion and race/ethnicity), local NGOs, schools, local government officials, local political leaders, and so forth. This consultation process was dynamic and flexible. For example, in Zambia, changes were made after reflection and discussion with SfD participants. In a project focusing on experiences of participation in soccer, girls and young women highlighted that to gain a full understanding of their involvement in the game, it was necessary to speak to their family members, particularly their mothers, grandmothers, and older siblings. While the researcher had intended to interview organizational stakeholders that policymakers and SfD practitioners considered being responsible for developing the female game, the participants stressed the hidden work many

of their family members had undertaken in establishing competitive female football opportunities. Working with the researcher, they co-constructed an interview schedule and then conducted interviews with their families to elicit this knowledge.

This example indicates that the different dimensions of participatory research, and particularly participation and power shifting, are inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive. It is to the degree of power shifting that we now turn.

4.2. Power shifting

The second dimension of participatory research relates to the degree of power shifting and associated aspects of control between researchers and research participants. Without a proactive commitment to a participatory research approach that allows for the researcher to be flexible in all stages of research, researchers' ability to relinquish their inherent power is limited (Frisby et al., 2005). At one end of the spectrum, where power remains exclusively in the hands of the researcher, local participants are merely seen as subjects who are used to gain information. Here, the power difference between researchers and participants remains significant, as can be seen in so-called fly-in-fly-out or helicopter approaches to research and evaluation (Giulianotti, Hognestad, & Spaaij, 2016; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014). A number of research projects conducted around the Football for Peace (F4P) program in Israel provide examples of initiatives in which more focus could have been placed on sharing or shifting power. For instance, different empirical studies conducted in the Northern Galilee region in 2009 yielded important insights into the very topic of community engagement and empowerment; however, little consideration was given to locals in sharing power in the research process, let alone to them co-designing or leading research and evaluation (Hippold, 2009; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2011). Instead, international researchers designed, conducted, and analyzed their research projects almost independently. Upon reflection, it seems that important opportunities were lost: first, local (research and cultural) knowledge was ignored, and second, the local community never experienced ownership of F4P's research elements, which resulted in a lack of sustainable research practices on a wider scale (see also Wallis & Lambert, 2014 for further detail). Interestingly, a very contrasting picture unfolded in the planning, management, and implementation of the F4P program on the ground. Here, the engagement between international and local administrators and coaches had grown steadily for more than 15 years, with control and responsibilities gradually being transferred to local communities and supporting authorities (Schulenkorf, Sugden, & Burdsey, 2014).

At the other end of the spectrum, where power shifting in research occurs in a dedicated and cognizant way, external investigators understand that people's local knowledge is not only valuable but indeed critical for achieving a truly informed understanding of SfD in context. Hence, participants are empowered to analyze their own situations and to design their own solutions (Kay, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2011). For example, empirical fieldwork for different SfD research projects in rural Sri Lanka was structured in a way that facilitated empowerment and independent decision-making by the local community (Schulenkorf, 2010). Importantly, the inclusion of local people and the subsequent shift of power did not happen automatically; rather, it was a dedicated co-constructed process that required the external researcher to relinquish control over time, changing her or his role from evaluator to facilitator and eventually observer (see also Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Spaaij et al., 2016). Here, the opportunity of the researcher to spend several months with the local community ahead of the official fieldwork supported the process of identifying, engaging with, and empowering specific community representatives for research purposes. As a consequence, local members of the community were able to co-own the unfolding research: they were in charge of co-identifying suitable participants; determining relevant research approaches and questions; and establishing meaningful research contexts (both physical and social).

In a different example, it was the engaging discussions around the most suitable research methods that sparked a subsequent shift of power during the research process. In the Vencer study in Brazil (Spaaij, 2011, 2012, 2013), young research participants suggested that instead of relying exclusively on face-to-face data collection, more use should be made of social media as a data collection method in which they could exercise greater control over the research process. The young people helped to add an online research component designed around Orkut (Facebook) and MSN, both of which were popular among the local youth participating in Vencer. Although most of the young people did not own a personal computer or laptop, they had at least irregular access to the Internet in cybercafés or in computer rooms at local NGOs. A considerable advantage of this method was that it was less constrained by time and travel on the part of both the researcher and research participants. Moreover, it allowed participants to craft their solicited and unsolicited communications with the researcher in ways that they deemed appropriate, at a pace that suited them, and using a social media platform that was embedded in their daily lives.

As these particular examples indicate, changes towards co-construction and co-design of research projects can greatly benefit the integrity, quality, and appropriateness of the research and potentially contribute to a shift in power where local participants can come to co-own the research. Co-ownership as a desired state is important here, as a complete shift of power and an entire withdrawal of the external researcher often seems improbable and unrealistic in the short term, especially when considering the specific expectations of Global North funding bodies and associated research institutions.

4.3. Reflexivity

Power shifting and reflexivity are inextricably intertwined. As Darnell, Chawansky et al. (2016) and Darnell, Whitley et al. (2016) note, foregrounding a "reflexive sense of humility" (p. 12) encourages researchers to probe more deeply into their

objectives in SfD research and the methodological and theoretical approaches they take. It is only through such a process that difficult questions are being raised and reflected upon, such as why we are undertaking the research and to whose benefit and purpose. Whilst there has been some consideration of how researcher identity influences the research process, few researchers (e.g., [Chawansky, 2015](#); [Forde, 2015](#); [Hayhurst, 2015](#)) explicitly discuss reflexive insights that critically consider broader socio-political influences and how these impact on the ways in which SfD research is undertaken and knowledge produced. For example, in a critique of her own efforts to implement a postcolonial feminist ethnographic study, [Hayhurst \(2015\)](#) begins by challenging the concept of ethnography, encouraging researchers to recognize its colonial origins and the invasion of space it requires as researchers become embedded and established in the “customs, cultures and habits of another human group” (p. 427). In a critical SfD discourse where short-term, fly-in-fly-out research is considered to reinforce colonial relations, ethnographic research is often advocated ([Kay, 2012](#)). Therefore, [Hayhurst’s \(2015\)](#) reflexive account provides a valuable reminder of the importance of researchers continually considering the influences and values woven within their work even when striving to use seemingly good-practice approaches.

Within all of our research, we have continually grappled with the often discussed issue of being White, middle class, Global North researchers working in marginalized and at times highly impoverished areas. We have experienced the challenges this brings in understanding cultural, social, and political realities of the individuals involved in the research and the types of knowledge we can expect to illicit from participants. There are, however, additional layers of complexity regarding reflexivity in SfD research. In Zambia, Global North/South dynamics have been continually present in SfD research but, in addition, much of our research has involved working with young people adding further considerations as we attempted to minimize adult/child power dynamics within a cultural context where young people have limited status and authority ([Jeanes & Kay, 2013](#)). Another level of complexity in our Zambian research was that it involved undertaking externally funded evaluations. Young people understandably struggle to differentiate between sharing their views that will influence the continuation of a program, and discussing or analyzing their everyday lived realities. In other words, as would be expected in exploring young people’s experiences of SfD projects involving HIV/AIDS education, we recognize that we are often presented with a version of what the young person believes we need to hear and what they consider will mostly likely influence program continuation.

A large proportion of SfD research is undertaken in partnership with NGOs that have a direct interest in the research. Their staff members often act as gatekeepers to whose voice is heard within the research. Their facilitation of the research process, in terms of guiding researchers to particular communities, establishing contacts and setting up focus groups and interviews has been an essential part of the logistics of much of the research that we have carried out in SfD contexts. As illustrated earlier, this inevitably shapes with whom we have the opportunity to speak and what they are likely or willing to say ([Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014](#)). In the specific case of sport-for-reconciliation projects in Sri Lanka and Israel, the delicate socio-political context required the researchers to consider – and constantly reflect on – the ethnic background and political affiliation of the interviewees, and to ensure a balanced representation of people from largely opposing political parties. This also meant the purposeful inclusion of community members who were not part of the SfD program— either by choice or due to lack of vacancy. Gaining access to non-participants can be difficult; however, their voices are immensely important if arguments are to be made regarding community buy-in, wider community impacts, and the potential of maximizing program benefits beyond the sporting ground ([Schulenkorf, 2012](#); [Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014](#)).

To date, few researchers have considered the full spectrum of influences that affect the production of knowledge within SfD contexts; yet, even this cursory overview provides insight into the nuances of whose voices are privileged and what version of knowledge is produced and communicated within SfD research. For example, Colombia continues to be shaped by colonialism, the Catholic Church, and the legacies of internal armed conflict. Moreover, the government-enforced class system impacts on where Colombians live, work, and with whom and where they socialize. To understand lived experience and everyday social pressures, voices were sought from residents (especially women) with lower socio-economic backgrounds. And, to better understand the macro-social relations, interviews were also sought with people occupying diverse positions of power inside and outside of the VIDA community. The diversity of interlocutors and their stories teased out how intersectional institutional elements coupled with personal characteristics (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) shapes agency. The researcher, who existed outside of Colombia’s class system (but was socially elevated because of Whiteness and education, among other factors), was largely unaffected by social stigma and thus able to travel between neighborhoods and groups of people in a relatively uninhibited manner. Local leaders assisted the researcher in understanding local social dynamics. This process encouraged leaders, who had been interviewed previously, to reflect on their responses and re-engage with the research, but the process required creativity, flexibility, and patience from both parties. By incorporating reflexive practices with local leaders and seeking voices from marginalized interlocutors, a platform was created whereby rarely-heard perspectives were not only voiced, but situated within the broader socio-cultural context ([Oxford & Spaaij, 2017](#)).

Overall, we propose that the connections between the degree of participation, power sharing and reflexivity are important for realizing culturally appropriate, high quality and high impact SfD research. In several of the evaluation projects in Zambia, the researchers worked closely with NGO staff, peer leaders and young participants to design the research approach, methods, and contexts, and to support NGO staff, in particular, to control the research process and collect information that was most relevant and valuable to them. Socio-political dynamics nonetheless remain heavily embedded within the research process. In Zambia, where research was conducted over several years, a relatively trusting relationship was developed between researchers and local participants. However, some young people remained concerned about sharing

knowledge with the researchers because they felt their input might influence ongoing donor funding arrangements. As researchers we became a source of guidance for local staff and participants with regard to what donor agencies within the Global North wanted or expected in relation to research knowledge. Our attempts at being participatory, therefore, did not necessarily lead to the production of knowledge that was any less influenced by North/South power dynamics. Such a critical interrogation further highlights the complexities of what participation and collaboration actually mean and, importantly, what local knowledge (including subjugated knowledge) actually is and how it can be accessed. [Darnell, Chawansky et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Darnell, Whitley et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasis on the need for SfD researchers to reflexively consider institutional relationships and their influence on the research process is particularly pertinent in this context. We explore this issue further below in relation to structures of authority.

4.4. Structures of authority as moderating influences

As discussed earlier, participatory research in SfD contexts is rife with tensions and complications that emanate from institutional structures and relationships. Our data indicate that the degree of participation, power shifting, and reflexivity are all affected by these moderating influences which provide insight into the socio-political dynamics that govern the research process in SfD contexts.

As the likely project initiator and the primary disseminator of knowledge, the researcher is often supported by and bound to her or his academic institution and thus the processes and pressures of the academic system. These institutions and processes influence research funding, the researcher's resources, and the amount of time allotted to the project – factors that may impact on the researcher's willingness and ability to seek local participation and incorporate local knowledge and, in turn, research participants' access to the research process ([Frisby et al., 2005](#)). Rudimentary project logistics, such as pre-organized timelines and budgeted funds, further impact all stages of research, and tend to be heavily influenced by Western, linear methods of collecting and producing knowledge. Conducting participatory research in SfD communities, however, requires time to build relationships and a strong commitment to learning local processes and valuing local knowledge. For this reason, even though the majority of SfD research to date has been qualitative by design, it has been restricted in both level and scale of participation and power shifting ([Schulenkorf et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, as in our own research, it has failed to fully engage with activist research and its inclusion of political action ([Cancian, 1993](#)).

A related challenge that originated from our positions within and relationships to higher education systems concerned how research success was defined. This challenge relates specifically to the issue of reflexivity. The goals of the five studies were variegated, but invariably included using our research to make (modest) contributions to program improvements and development in order to help advance social development outcomes. This goal, underpinned by social justice, was partly at odds with the university's performance-driven goal of publishing in top-tier journals and books ([Cancian, 1993](#); [Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2015](#)). Throughout our studies, we sought to balance these two goals: to publish our work in prestigious outlets while also working with SfD organizations and stakeholders to translate our research into policy and practice. As discussed in the previous section, this raises important questions that require reflexivity on the part of both researchers and the institutions where they work, especially with regard to which forms of knowledge production and dissemination are valued and pursued. For example, we have long been concerned that by publishing primarily in English-language, subscription-based journals, we are excluding many of the communities that have been involved in, or might benefit from, our work from having access to it. In order to counteract this barrier, we have sought to make our research available to a wider audience in a variety of ways including: using open-access journals and repositories; sharing author copies with participants and organizations, and publishing them on our private and institutional websites; and disseminating the findings and recommendations in alternative formats (e.g., local languages, plain-language summaries, reports, and infographics).

Researchers' ability to foster community participation and transform power relations is additionally influenced by local authorities and gatekeepers. All five research projects discussed in this paper worked with marginalized or disadvantaged populations, but as [Frisby et al. \(2005\)](#) discuss, factors such as the research participants not considering themselves marginalized and the gatekeeper restricting access, may impact the degree of participant involvement. Moreover, the interlocutor's limited availability, coupled with the researcher's lack of access to local participants, may hinder local participation and thus local investment in the project. For example, the VIDA and Vencer studies revealed high levels of public violence in the neighborhoods where the SfD initiatives operate ([Oxford & Spaaij, 2017](#); [Spaaij, 2011](#)). Public violence combined with tight controls maintained by local gangs and paramilitary groups restricted the researchers' access to public and private spaces where local young people and their families could be engaged. In VIDA, this issue similarly limited the researcher's ability to interact with specific groups on a regular basis. For example, in one location, it was difficult to interview young women with children not participating in the SfD program because they frequently remained in their homes due to cultural norms and security; in addition, middle-aged employed men whose children were in the program worked outside the neighborhood during the hours the researcher could conduct interviews. In both Vencer and VIDA, local authority and protocols constrained local voices from being easily heard and required the researchers to be more creative and less strict with the notion of local participation. For example, to reach young mothers with no association to VIDA, the researcher participated in a young mother's group organized by a local social worker. Although interviews with this specific demographic were difficult to arrange, spending time in a setting where story telling was common provided the researcher with insight into their lives. However, the researcher

excluded the voice of middle-aged men employed outside the neighborhood as security constraints totally prohibited interaction.

Further examples displaying how authority (both institutional and local) impacted on our ability to conduct participatory research can be drawn from VIDA. Conscious of the researcher's security within the research context, the researcher's university and the director of the organization created strict security protocols and guidelines, such as the researcher not residing in the research neighborhood, specific access days and hours, and constant accompaniment by a local guide. These restrictions limited with whom the researcher spoke and what was observed; it also created a distance between the researcher and participants. In fact, a few field office employees and many interlocutors voiced that these constraints were superfluous and reflective of the commonplace stigmatization placed upon people living in the community by those in power.

Numerous field note entries from case locations in Colombia and Brazil revealed interlocutors asking the researcher, "Where do you live?" and "Why don't you live here?" These questions were not merely out of curiosity; they exposed the researcher's social positioning within the countries' class and racial systems. This is not to argue that the interlocutors felt their lives were not encumbered by local authorities themselves or that they felt the researcher's security was not a concern; rather, it is to note that they recognized the researcher was not experiencing the everyday stressors that are linked to their insecurity and social class. Even the SfD employees who did not reside in the neighborhood – yet shared a common goal with local participants and actively employed a horizontal power structure in the office – were considered outsiders by many participants. This example reveals that in both VIDA and Vencer, the local participants' identity and sense of belonging within the social hierarchy was a sensitive issue, and normative academic protocols may have affected the researcher-participant relationship and consequently may have impacted the degree of local participation in the research process.

Overall, the ability of researchers to design and conduct participatory research is influenced by the aforementioned structures of authority, as well as by the trust and relationships between both parties that allow for collaboration and knowledge co-creation in all stages of the research. Logistically and institutionally this is a challenging endeavour and thus far few studies in SfD contexts have fully embraced this challenge (Luguetti & Oliver, 2017).

5. Conclusion and implications

Research is centrally implicated in the dynamics of knowledge production in SfD. In this paper, we argue that participatory and activist research approaches facilitate reflexive, inclusive, and transformative investigations into SfD processes and outcomes. The conceptual contribution of this paper is to frame participatory research at the intersections of the three dimensions of participation, power shifting, and reflexivity, and to identify how structures of authority influence all three dimensions. In order to address each dimension, researchers need to ask fundamental questions regarding who holds power within particular SfD contexts, what power relations participatory research is seeking to address, and how SfD participants are to be engaged. Understanding the various layers of participation and power will hopefully encourage researchers to be critically aware of how they are facilitating involvement and to what degree participants are genuinely co-constructors of the process. A further issue that requires consideration by researchers is how the knowledge produced will be related back to SfD stakeholders and participants. Doing so in a form that is accessible, meaningful, and valuable is critical and should be discussed at the outset of the research process and constantly reflected upon throughout the research.

Our findings suggest that most SfD research – including our own – falls short when it comes to the critical challenge of embracing and delivering high degrees of participation, power shifting and reflexivity. While existing SfD research incorporates elements of participatory research, it has yet to engage fully with the complexities and possibilities of participatory research across all three dimensions. Moreover, there is a dearth of activist research in this context, which reflects scarcity of activist research in sport more broadly (Luguetti & Oliver, 2017). Terms like participation and reflexivity are spoken of frequently as things SfD researchers should do, but the complexities and requirements of participatory research have rarely been consciously and explicitly discussed. Nevertheless, the need to foster local participation and input in research and evaluation is increasingly recognized in the SfD sector. Practical strategies include the development of relationships and rapport with local stakeholders, and active involvement of community members in recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

The findings suggest that such practical research strategies alone do not constitute participatory research in the true meaning of the term because they typically fail to relinquish power and control over the research process. To a large extent, control over the research process – from the formulation of the research problem and purpose through to the dissemination of research results – remains firmly in the hands of researchers. These researchers are typically based outside the countries where the SfD programs are delivered, and overall, little cooperation exists between researchers from the Global North and South. As we have shown, this issue is complex and requires ongoing reflexivity regarding the micro-dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion, such as whose voices are being heard and what (critical) perspectives are being subjugated because of the particular relationships and forms of access negotiated in the research. These considerations echo the broader critique that alternative, subaltern ways of thinking and knowing are marginalized in the social sciences at large (Connell, 2007), and in sport contexts in particular (Spaaij, 2011; Spaaij, Farquharson et al., 2014; Spaaij, Magee et al., 2014). It is imperative that SfD researchers develop a heightened awareness of what types of knowledge are dominating in SfD and what types of perspectives and understandings are being privileged, as well as better understand their limitations, biases, and partialities.

Put differently, it is necessary to conduct SfD research “with eyes philosophically wide open” (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). This involves critical exploration of research methodologies and their underlying philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge production, and about the purpose of research. Recognizing that all SfD knowledge has a distinct position, and that it can be mobilized for social justice purposes, can open up space for alternative and critical perspectives and experiences.

5.1. Limitations and future research

While aspects of our own research and that of other scholars can be located within a participatory research framework, we recognize that our research does not yet fully embody the participatory principles we are advocating. We have been necessarily selective in the accounts we have provided from our studies to ensure they provide specific examples of each element of our framework. However, we acknowledge that no one project provides an exemplar approach that reflects all dimensions of our framework. We have engaged with the three dimensions to different degrees in each country context. Within each of the projects we have been limited as to how fully we have been able to embrace participatory research. Our research in Zambia, for example, sat within the context of internationally funded evaluation work that placed constraints on how participatory the researchers were able to be. Similarly, in Colombia, restrictions placed on the researcher by her university and ethics committee limited some elements of the participatory approach. Our experiences thus highlight the need to address institutional relationships in order to realize the potential that participatory and activist research holds for SfD. We hope the framework and empirical evidence presented in this paper will encourage researchers to develop greater awareness of what a participatory research process would require of the researcher, as well as strategies to navigate institutional relationships.

In this paper, we have identified examples of good practice in current SfD research, including instances where researchers have embraced forms of local knowledge and relinquished at least some of the ownership over the research process to participants. Several implications for future research in the field of SfD can thus be formulated. We note, however, that participatory research is not an on-the-shelf solution to transforming inequities and power dynamics in SfD. As the illustrative examples in this paper highlight, there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for what participatory research unfolds to be, and tensions will inevitably remain present. The way participatory research is developed and carried out is highly contextual, and researchers (and the institutions they represent) must be flexible in all stages of the research process.

Further research is required to enhance the understanding of ways to promote participatory and activist research and, in particular, of how to transform power inequities within both the research process and institutional relationships. Greater dialogue and collaboration among SfD researchers, and between researchers and SfD organizations, can assist in demystifying some of the challenges associated with participatory and activist research and contribute to making its use more commonplace and more effective in SfD research. Transforming power relations in the research process demands a mutual willingness to experiment, for instance with new methodologies (see Darnell, Chawansky et al., 2016; Darnell, Whitley et al., 2016). Moreover, it challenges traditional standards and conventions set by academic institutions insofar as they often constrain the possibilities for participation, power shifting and flexibility. We concur with Frisby et al. (2005) that taking on this challenge may not be feasible for young and emerging scholars who conduct PhD research projects that are guided by rigid institutional frameworks and protocols. Instead, we argue that senior scholars with more established projects and secure funding are in a better position to change the status quo, as well as to train, mentor, and support junior scholars who wish to conduct participatory or activist research (see also Luguetti & Oliver, 2017). Collectively, they are also in a better position to navigate dual accountability to activist community organizations and academic institutions (Cancian, 1993).

Our findings also have implications for SfD policy and practice. In addition to the identified need for critical awareness on the part of SfD policymakers and practitioners concerning the dynamics of knowledge production, the quality and impact of participatory research in the field of SfD would be aided by funding bodies (donors) and SfD organizations that actively support local actors. This explicitly includes street-level practitioners and participants, who would then be able to input more fully into, and help shape, the research process. Moreover, funding bodies are encouraged to support participatory research throughout SfD programs, instead of the typical post-hoc assessment that merely aims to determine program impacts retrospectively. Here, again, the connections between participation, power sharing, and reflexivity become visible through the unequal power relations that have been at play between donors, SfD organizations, researchers, and local participants. Participatory and activist research invites all SfD actors to help reconfigure how, by, and for whom SfD research is conceptualized and conducted, with the shared goal of challenging inequality and promoting social change. The SfD field – and the research community especially – will need to value and embrace the complexities of participation, power and reflexivity if this goal is to be achieved.

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