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Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On the Trajectory, Challenges, and Future of the Field

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Keywords:	sociology, sport, International Sociology of Sport Association, International Review for the Sociology of Sport, interdisciplinarity
Abstract:	<p>On the 50th anniversary of the International Sociology of Sport Association and the International Review for the Sociology of Sport, the three guest editors for this special 50th anniversary issue of the IRSS, current ISSA President Elizabeth Pike, the immediate past President Steven Jackson, and current IRSS Editor Lawrence Wenner introduce the issue's genesis and theme "50@50: Assessing the Trajectory and Challenges of the Sociology of Sport." In considering the trajectory of the sociology of sport, ISSA and the IRSS, they reflect on the early development of the field and the founding of an international association and journal aimed at understanding sport in the social and cultural dynamic; they note early and ongoing challenges concerning the academic seating of the field, its legitimacy and impact, and its engagement with the public sphere and the "sociological imagination." Speaking to the challenges of fashioning a special issue to represent the breadth of 50 years of the sociology of sport, the editors outline how a "50@50" strategy was implemented to bring perspectives from 50 notable scholars and to insure that a diversity of voices was heard, not only on a range of themes, theories, and methods, but from diverse identities and locales. Addressing two overarching challenges--the global dominance of English as the lingua franca of scholarly discourse and the need to advance interdisciplinarity and engagement with scholars beyond the sociology of sport--will be key to broadening dialogue to help ensure the future sustainability and progress of the sociology of sport.</p>

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Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On the Trajectory, Challenges, and Future of the Field

In 1964, a meeting of eight sociologists of sport in Geneva, Switzerland, led to the formation of the International Committee for the Sociology of Sport (ICSS) in 1965, and the publication of a journal, the *International Review of Sport Sociology* from 1966. In 1993, the names of the association and journal were changed to the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA) and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport (IRSS)*. In 2015, the ISSA celebrates 50 years of operation, and the *IRSS* publishes its 50th volume of issues. In order to mark this occasion, the Boards of ISSA and *IRSS* decided to produce a special anniversary issue reflecting on the trajectory, challenges, and likely future directions of the sociology of sport.

The trajectory of the sociology of sport, ISSA and the *IRSS*

The sociology of sport as an academic sub-discipline has traditionally struggled for acceptance as a legitimate field of enquiry, facing a dual challenge from those within the 'parent' disciplines of sociology and sport science/kinesiology. Mainstream sociologists have often questioned the merit of 'sport' as worthy of study, while some academics within sport science/kinesiology saw little value in social scientific and cultural enquiry (most recently see Atkinson, 2011; Carrington, 2013; Dart, 2014; Silk et al., 2010). In the early stages of the development of the subject area, there was a tendency to refer to the field as 'sport sociology' reflecting the focus on sport, until we witnessed a gradual move to change the name to the 'sociology of sport' from the late 1970s onward, in order to stress that sport, and its scholars, are worthy of serious sociological recognition. However, it remains the case that most sociologists of sport work, and publish, in departments and journals dedicated to sport, rather than mainstream sociology areas, which may serve to limit their engagement with, and influence on, the wider community within and outside academia. Furthermore, many scholars of the sociology of sport are increasingly restricted in their critical analysis and innovation by research audit cultures requiring data-based research and demonstrable 'impact', combined with increasingly restrictive ethical review processes (Bairner, 2009).

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3 Given these trends, it would be easy to be discouraged about the progress that has been
4 made over the past 50 years. In particular, many subjects within the humanities are being
5 threatened by neo-liberal agendas influenced by cost-efficiencies and utilitarian learning,
6 which means that subjects such as sociology and sport may be viewed as less germane,
7 inappropriate, and/or undeserving of scholarly scrutiny. However, as a cultural institution
8 and practice, 'sport' has never been more popular among the general public, nation-states
9 and scholars. And, with respect to the sociology of sport, the subject does appear to be
10 thriving in some institutions and countries, offering a legitimate research and career
11 pathway, and attracting the critical scholarly gaze of academics from a wide range of
12 disciplinary fields including anthropology, communication, economics, gender, international
13 relations and politics and even mainstream sociology. In fact, one can make a case that
14 today the "sociology of sport" is more than sociology in the necessary embrace of a broad
15 array of social and cultural concerns that entail sport. Beyond ISSA, there are national and
16 regional sociology of sport organisations holding regular conferences in Latin America,
17 North America, Europe, China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, among others. ISSA itself operates
18 as Research Committee 27 within the International Sociology Association (ISA). There are
19 also several journals dedicated to the sociology of sport. The *IRSS* was the first journal to
20 focus on the sociology of sport. It has always had its publishing base in Europe, originally in
21 Poland, moving to Germany in 1983, and then to its current publisher of SAGE in the UK in
22 1997. The development of the field is reflected in the increased volume of publications of
23 the *IRSS*, which started as an annual publication, increasing to quarterly in 1973, bi-monthly
24 in 2012, and then to eight issues per year in 2015. The journal has made important strides
25 in its impact and offers articles Online First in response to the open access agenda.

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28 While it may be argued that research within the sociology of sport has not always had the
29 highest profile or been very visible, it has had considerable social influence, playing diverse
30 roles in policy development, and it is due to the work of sociology of sport scholars that
31 public and media attention have been directed to a myriad of pressing issues facing sport in
32 society today. For example, there is now growing public awareness of, among other
33 concerns: corruption in the organisation of major events and institutions and inappropriate
34 expenditure of public funds; exorbitant profits and skyrocketing salaries and ticket prices in
35 professional sports; the treatment of athletes on the grounds of gender, sexuality, ethnicity,
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3 disability and other identity issues; compromises to the well-being of athletes and others
4 working in the sport industry in order to ensure athletic achievement and performance; and
5 the potential that sport has to challenge and protest against 'serious' social inequalities.
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10 In the 50th year of the ISSA and *IRSS*, as we reflect on the field as a whole, our point here is
11 that the sociology of sport is simultaneously under threat while also possibly making a
12 greater contribution to public discourse than ever before. In key ways, sociologists of sport
13 have already addressed the call from the former President of the International Sociological
14 Association for a "public sociology" (Burawoy, 2004). It is worthy of note that the fiftieth
15 anniversary of the ISSA and *IRSS* falls just six years after the 50th anniversary of the
16 publication of C. Wright Mills classic book *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills' (1959), of
17 course, argued that we need to connect private experience with wider social structures,
18 personal problems with public, and scientific analysis with political awareness. In this spirit,
19 the articles in this issue present research and perspectives that are both global and local,
20 both macro and micro, both qualitative and quantitative, and, perhaps most significantly,
21 both contextually relevant and publicly accessible. We hope that the framing of the topics
22 and themes in this collection of papers will serve as a foundation for further advancing
23 understanding of the work of sociologists of sport and contributing to debates outside
24 academia.
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38 **The challenges of a special issue representing 50 years of the sociology of sport**

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42 What we have tried to do in this special issue of *IRSS* is provide an intellectual marker of
43 where we have come from, where we are at and where we need to go. We can attest that
44 this was a challenging project not the least of which was deciding on some terms of
45 reference: what was to be the scope of this special issue; what topics should be
46 included/excluded, which authors should be invited and based on what criteria? Ultimately,
47 we reached agreement on a unique format: a "50@50" strategy in which we sought
48 perspectives from 50 notable scholars who could offer papers that speak to key themes that
49 have developed over the past 50 years in the field, association and journal. We sought
50 voices and contributions that would not only represent the past, present and future of *IRSS*
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3 but also represent the diversity of the ISSA with respect to geographic location and
4 language, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity.
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8 Guided by such concerns, we looked to include key scholars with demonstrable
9 commitment to the organisation and/or journal through service of a minimum of one full
10 term on at least one of the boards of the association (the Executive, Extended, or *IRSS*
11 Editorial Boards). This provided us with a long-list of 80 possible contributors for our target
12 of 50 papers. In some cases invited authors were not able to contribute due to conflicting
13 schedules, retirement, health or personal issues. Throughout the process we carefully
14 monitored our list of contributors to ensure we remained as true as possible to our criteria,
15 always mindful that we needed to strike a balance between representing the field's past
16 (with all its biases, including the dominance of the English language and males) as well as its
17 present and to some degree what we think the field should aspire to in the future. The final
18 issue includes contributions from 50 scholars: 29 male and 21 female, representing 24
19 different countries and all continents. It is interesting to note that the first issue of the *IRSS*
20 in 1966 included authors from 13 countries representing 3 continents and only one female
21 contributor (Donnelly, 2005). Ultimately, we are well aware of the limitations of our
22 approach and accept that our list of selected contributors and themes is likely to stimulate
23 considerable discussion and debate. At this stage, we would like to apologise to those
24 scholars, past and present, who we have not been able to include in this special issue.
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40 We invited each author to contribute a short (2000 word) essay with a common basic title
41 "Assessing the Sociology of Sport." In each article, we asked authors to comment on (1) the
42 trajectory of the sociology of sport as a field of inquiry, (2) the challenges ahead for the
43 sociology of sport, and (3) future directions for the sociology of sport, with special reference
44 to intersectional concerns (theoretical, topical and/or regional/national issues) that have
45 driven and focused the author's personal scholarly agenda. We have adopted this
46 framework for this introductory editorial paper as well. The key themes that have emerged
47 from this issue primarily relate to: identity politics; deviancy; capitalism and the
48 commodification of sport; politics, power and control; national identity and globalisation.
49 The papers draw on a range of theoretical frameworks and flag methodological issues for
50 consideration. The authors highlight many matters that need to be considered in shaping
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3 the development of future scholarly agendas, and we hope this collection will stimulate
4 debate and further academic enquiry.
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8 **Future directions for the sociology of sport, ISSA, and the *IRSS*** 9

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11 The process of editing this special issue raised for us some key issues for future
12 consideration. We would like to speak to two overarching issues here—language and
13 interdisciplinarity—that have particular resonance for both the current state of affairs and
14 the future of the field.
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19 As an international association and journal, we remain challenged by and still have
20 considerable work to do in overcoming the limitations presented by the global dominance
21 of English as the *lingua franca* of scholarly discourse (whether spoken at conferences,
22 transmitted via social media and other communications, or published in our journal). This
23 linguistic imperialism is exacerbated by the “thesaurusization” of so much scholarship: the
24 unnecessary use of complex words and jargon to either demonstrate our mastery of
25 language, to mask the inadequacies of our research and/or to attempt to legitimate our
26 research to colleagues both within, and often more importantly, outside the field.
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29 According to a 2010 UNESCO report, 80% of academic journals in the social sciences are
30 published in English, and two-thirds of the most influential publications in sociology are
31 written by authors in only four countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, the
32 Netherlands and Germany. By way of contrast, Oceania, Latin America and Africa are each
33 responsible for fewer than 5% of the global production of articles (Martin, 2012). ISSA has
34 made considerable efforts to encourage the participation of non-native English speakers on
35 its boards (the Executive and Extended Boards have 18 members, usually from 18 different
36 countries), at its conferences (held annually in different regions of the world and often
37 offering parallel sessions in the native language of the host country), and in the journal.
38 However, further recognition is needed that there are not only language barriers but also
39 cultural differences in the style of composing an academic paper, which continue to
40 undermine the contribution of non-English speaking scholars to the global sociological
41 understanding of sport.
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3 On the second issue, of engagement with scholars from disciplines other than the sociology
4 of sport, pressures to score highly in audit cultures, meet the criteria of employment
5 committees, and secure external funding, has led to what may be described as an
6 “intellectual arms race”. Some, overeager to apply the newest sociological/cultural studies
7 theory or method to sport, colonise a new cultural/regional context, or apply for new
8 sources of funding (regardless of their source or politics), may be unwittingly exacerbating
9 the field’s marginalisation and putting its future at risk. In the early years of the
10 development of the sociology of sport, scholars engaged with the field came from a wide
11 range of disciplinary backgrounds, including physical educators, social psychologists,
12 historians and philosophers. In order to effectively challenge the marginalisation of the field
13 and to transact more integrally with the worlds of sport and sociology, sociologists of sport
14 will need to facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaborations with scholars working in other
15 social sciences, sport sciences, and mainstream sociology. We hope that this collection of
16 papers, reviewing the past, present, and considering the more immediate future of the field,
17 might advance that dialogue and help ensure the future sustainability and progress of the
18 sociology of sport.
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