Reviewing Research Evidence and the Case of Participation in Sport and Physical Recreation by Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

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Abstract

The paper addresses the implications of using the process of systematic review in the many areas of leisure where there is a dearth of material that would be admitted into conventional Cochrane Reviews. This raises important questions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge, questions that are of critical import not just to leisure scholars, but to the formulation of policy. The search for certainty in an area that lacks conceptual consensus results in an epistemological imperialism that takes a geocentric form. While clearly there is a need for good research design whatever the style of research, we contend that the wholesale rejection of insightful research is profligate and foolhardy. A mechanism has to be found to capitalise on good quality research of whatever form. In that search we draw upon our experience of conducting a review of the material available on participation in sport and physical recreation by people from Black and minority ethnic groups. The paper concludes with a proposal for a more productive review process that makes better use of the full panoply of good quality research available.

Keywords: systematic review, ethnicity, participation, legitimate knowledge

Introduction

Most people reading this will at some stage have read outputs from a research project and thought, "Didn't we know that already?" Once a field of study has accumulated a critical mass of research outputs it becomes sensible to take stock and consider whether the answers to our questions can be derived from existing research, perhaps not from an individual study but from the aggregate of various studies. This is particularly so when, although leisure research around ethnicity may have been slower to take-off in the UK than in the US, more recently the weight of evidence has grown considerably as issues of 'race' and ethnicity have assumed a higher political profile, even if that is partly attributable to them being presented as 'a problem'. In addition to the more conventional literature review an overview might take the form of meta analysis, meta review or systematic review. Such approaches are now commonplace in scientific fields, where the standard has been set by the Systematic Reviews of the Cochrane Collaboration (http://www2.cochrane.org/reviews/). However, this paper is fundamentally about how research evidence can be reviewed in a systematic manner without rejecting good quality, insightful material that falls short when tested against generic entry criteria typically used in Cochrane Reviews[2].

All approaches to research carry implications for the nature of knowledge generated. We recognise that an emphasis on participation in sport, as in leisure more generally, invites a preoccupation with lifestyle through the lens of individualisation and personal choice rather than addressing underlying structural issues. Equally the attractiveness of review procedures may encourage researchers to overlook the way in which methods shape findings. Good reviews obviously encourage a focus on the methods adopted by individual projects, but usually without considering the method of the review itself. The way in which these tensions play out is crucial for the formulation of policy.

The mantra of 'sport for all' invites consideration of who is and is not participating. For at least thirty years those responsible for sports policies in the UK have registered an awareness that people from some ethnic groups might be under-represented among participants (see, for example, Sports Council, 1982, though in that publication the reference was somewhat coyly to 'those newly moved to an area, especially from overseas' (p29)). The associated logic is one that has persisted in sports policy, founded on the basis that 'sport is good for you'. In that case, given that some do not take part, they should be encouraged or at least allowed to do so. And because non-participants are not evenly distributed through the population under-represented groups should receive special attention. This invites the question, "So what lies behind those lower levels of participation and what redress is needed?"

Set in the context of renewed interest in methodology among leisure scholars (e.g. the special issue of Leisure Studies (29/4) on methods) this paper considers the very nature of systematic review in the interface between social science and policy. It invites questions not just of how we know, but of what is considered legitimate knowledge. As well as drawing on the work of others we reflect here on the review of research on participation in sport and physical recreation by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities (Long et al., 2009[3]; Bi, 2011) that was commissioned by Sporting Equals on behalf of UK Sport and the four home nation sports councils, representatives of which constituted the advisory group. Since then, as part of this methodological debate, we have also conducted interviews with people with recognised expertise in the field: Ray Pawson of Leeds University; Sean Carroll, now of Hull University; Fred Coalter, formerly of Stirling University; and Nick Rowe of Sport England.

The Nature of Systematic Reviews

Systematic review is part of a family of approaches that also includes meta analysis, meta review and meta evaluation. Broadly speaking a systematic review involves collating all the evidence within agreed boundaries and then imposing a research design hierarchy to make judgements about quality that will determine whether a study is admitted into the analysis. The scope for a meta review as a review of the

reviews might be limited in leisure studies because of the few attempts at systematic review, though some have been attempted by sports scientists working in related areas (e.g. Biddle et al., 2011). As a technique that is used to determine a dose-response a meta analysis is clearly more likely to be found in sport science than in areas of social policy though might be considered in a challenge to determine something like 'what amount of sport intervention delivers what amount of crime reduction (and for which people in what circumstances)'. Meta evaluations occur when an attempt is used to try to evaluate a range of different initiatives using the same framework and output measures.

Systematic reviews are typically conducted in areas where there is a substantive body of work, but, if in the social sciences we follow the procedures established in the originating medical sciences, the strictures placed upon the admission of studies into the analysis phase results in most being excluded. For example, in doing work on a related project we encountered this account from Perkins et al. (2010: 103):

> The searches located 1,058 references, 895 of which were excluded at the title and abstract stage; a further 132 were excluded after reading the articles in full as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Thirty-one references were therefore data extracted, quality appraised and included in the review.

The nature of the research base in leisure and sport does not make fertile ground for *Cochrane Reviews*. For example, when Priest *et al.* (2008) conducted their *Cochrane Review* of international material published in English about interventions that sporting organisations had implemented to promote healthy behaviour they met a brick wall. They were concerned with any policy intervention implemented through sporting organisations with the intention of instigating/sustaining healthy behaviour change or changes in attitudes, knowledge or awareness of healthy behaviour in all ages. Even though they extended the criteria beyond randomised controlled trials to include controlled trials more generally, and even though they covered all groups in the population rather than restricting the exercise to BME communities, they still managed to find 'no rigorous studies' [emphasis added] evaluating the effects of interventions after reviewing 1591 studies. The authors refer to *Driving Up Participation*, the academic review papers commissioned by Sport England (2004) in noting an abundance of qualitative information on barriers to participation, and exhort organisations to review this to design interventions that might promote participation by being better connected with people's motivations, lifestyle preferences and the realities of daily life. Research around participation and ethnicity may not be in quite such abundance, but what riches there are certainly tend to be qualitative studies, supplemented by quantitative surveys, rather than controlled trials which are scarce in an environment where people can rarely be allocated to randomised groups and there are no controlled environments.

Our reading of the literature suggests that the challenge to Systematic Reviews and that style of research appears to be primarily on the following grounds:
- an unnecessarily prescriptive / restrictive definition of what constitutes knowledge (an emphasis on controlled trials and a consequent rejection of alternatives like surveys and qualitative research)

- a reliance on a research and publication culture that is far more likely to report successful/positive outcomes than those that show no or negative relationships
- dominance by the research approved by the major funders (seen to be of particular concern when they have commercial interests), representing the power of the commissioner
- the focus on outcomes overlooks the importance for policy of process (matters of how).
- a relegation of small scale theoretically informed studies

Potentially the most significant contribution of systematic review to cultural policy recently has been the Culture And Sport Evidence (CASE) programme conducted for the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)[4]. The CASE work offers significant new resources for government, practitioners and academics, which can assist with decision-making, management and administration, but perhaps more importantly should be taken as the basis for critical reflection. Recognising the resource it represents and some of the problematic issues involved, at the time of writing this article *Cultural Trends* issued a call for papers looking beyond the CASE programme.

In their technical report on the factors that predict and drive demand for culture and sport Matrix explain a two stage process:

> First, more of the same – the application of more sophisticated statistical techniques to more comprehensive data. Second, moving beyond the regression-based approach that has predominated in the literature – acknowledging that, regardless how large the dataset, such approaches might not be able to accurately model the decision to engage in culture and sport in a manner that informs policy.
> (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2010: 7)

That second stage took the form of a 'system dynamics model' that was an attempt to develop a causal logic behind people's involvement in sport that was essentially based on a simplified version of the stages of change from the transtheoretical model (see, for example, Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983). This produced what was essentially a large flow diagram as the logic model that was then calibrated on the basis of evidence from previous studies and informed assumptions in order to try to establish where best to intervene in order to have maximum effect on people's engagement.

There are a large number of projects being funded in association with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and the government is keen to assess the impact they have. The Grant Thornton review team (Grant Thornton et al. 2011a)

felt obliged to demonstrate that their approach was 'Green Book compliant' to meet Treasury expectations. This is made possible in part by the evaluation framework set up by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the DCMS with a view to standardising evaluations of the impact of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. This was felt necessary because not only has there been a wide variety of approaches to evaluating such events, but one consequence of that is that 'there appears to be no common understanding of meta-evaluation practice and that, as a consequence, meta-evaluations vary widely in their methods employed' (Grant Thornton et al. 2011b: 4).

More generally, Pawson (2006, 72) warns that meta-analysis 'eliminates most of the evidence that is capable of telling us how interventions work and how we might account for their differential effectiveness'. He argued instead for a new approach 'in which theory building takes pride of place' (Pawson 2006, 73).

Conducting the Review of Participation by Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

In conducting our review for Sporting Equals[5] we were not concerned just with establishing what the patterns of participation were, but also with how opportunities might be extended and improved for Black and minority ethnic communities. Pawson (2006) suggests that the question 'does it work?' is unanswerable and instead identifies the challenge as being to establish what works for whom in what circumstances, and also how programmes work. This implies a critical, disaggregated approach that emphasises the processes involved: to that end Pawson deploys the triad of context / mechanism / outcome (CMO). The brief for the review prepared by Sporting Equals (the organisation established to promote race equality in sport) required us to draw together existing data, policy statements and research literature to compile an annotated bibliography and resolve an array of policy questions. Unlike the CASE exercise above, the outputs reviewed were to be, if not restricted to, largely drawn from the UK, and were also to cover the ten year period immediately preceding our study (1998-2008) set by the sponsoring agencies. This was very definitely not to be just about evaluations of interventions (the equivalent of drug trials), but was to embrace all the research in the field within those parameters, and incorporating 'grey literature' that included policy documents, as well as research.

From the outset it was clear that because of the nature of leisure and sport research in the social sciences in the UK the net would have to be thrown wider than randomised control trials or even studies with comparator groups. The challenge was to set the qualifying standards at an appropriate level: too lax and policy may be made on the basis of unreliable evidence; too restrictive and some insightful research could be ruled out. We also needed to select those studies that met the needs of policymakers and practitioners. Thus, in addition to major public data sources (e.g. population statistics, attitude surveys and participation surveys), included in the associated bibliographic database was (primarily) UK research from the previous ten years that passed the quality threshold. This was judged on the basis of:

- including empirical data or parallel theory that relates to BME groups and sport, physical activity or active recreation – hence articles representing only the author's opinion were excluded;
- providing sufficient information to withstand methodological scrutiny; and
- having drawn conclusions justified on the basis of the evidence presented.

Amara et al. (2005) recognise the need for flexibility in diverting from the strictures of Cochrane Reviews, but the kind of transparency they seek is difficult to establish in what are necessarily subjective judgements in the absence of a clear in/out rule of the kind 'RCT yes/no'. So cases in any doubt were discussed collectively by the research team.

Three main forms of existing data sets were of particular interest to us: demographic data, large scale participation surveys and attitude surveys that periodically investigate attitudes to other ethnic groups. The findings of these surveys are not easy to interpret because without some comparator measure it is not possible to say whether 20% (say) holding a particular attitude is a lot or a little. They are at their most useful when they repeat questions in subsequent years, thereby offering an insight into change over time.

The main sources of demographic data available to us at the time were based on the 2001 Census. Use of Census data and the various derivatives is complicated by slightly different classifications of ethnicity being used in Scotland and Northern Ireland which, as Finney and Simpson (2009) argue, reflects historical and contemporary forces as a compromise seeking to satisfy different interests. We also recognise that there have been questions over the extent to which minority ethnic groups may have gone disproportionately unrecorded by the Census, and even then the outputs were rather dated. We did, however, have access to figures from the UK Statistics Authority that rolled forward the 2001 data to 2005 on the basis of known migration patterns and differential birth/death rates. Other demographers periodically calculate projections of future patterns: we used those from Rees and Parsons (2006).

The variations between the four home countries are even more marked in the availability of large scale surveys that record participation in various sports by different ethnic groups. In the past the best estimates for England, Wales and Scotland were provided by the General Household Survey, which periodically asked questions about participation in sport. As participation in most sports is the preserve of a small minority even a sample of some 20,000 people (20,149 people for 2002/3) was capable of sustaining only limited analysis by different ethnic groups. In Scotland best estimates of participation are based on the boosted sample of the Scottish Omnibus Survey in 2003/4 (**sport**scotland, 2007). In Wales we were unable to get access to the survey of Adult Sports Participation and Club Membership. And in Northern Ireland we were unable to identify an appropriate survey as up to that time ethnicity had not been addressed in the Continuous Household Survey. At the time of our review we had access to the 2005/6 Active People Survey conducted in England with a sample of 363,724; even the reduced sample of each subsequent survey has been approximately 188,000 people. By most survey standards this is an enormous data set, allowing analysis of participation by different minority ethnic groups.

In addition to searching for academic material (see below), a thorough search was conducted of material from the various sports councils. As part of this we searched the strategy and policy documents as well as the past three years of annual reports from the five individual sports councils. We were looking for references to BME groups, religion, equality or equity. We also searched the websites of the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) for the 21 most popular sports in England (as defined by data in Sport England's Active People Survey) to find specific references to BME groups. During this search we also examined the equity strategy of each of those NGBs to find out what specific actions they were planning to undertake to address racial inequality. Having identified the policy material our concern was to analyse the various statements for their content, significance and impact, internally and externally. For example, initiatives such as the Equality Standard have ensured sports organisations are committed to the production of policies and plans, but it is not yet clear that the link between such corporate commitments is reflected in the development of sustained actions and cultural change.

For the review of research literature the following electronic databases were searched for articles published from 1998 up to the start of the review in 2008: *Academic Search Premier* and *Academic Search Complete* (*EBSCO*), *Sport Discus*, *Leisure Tourism Database*, *Sociological Abstracts*, *Physical Education Index*, and *IngentaConnect*. The following key words were agreed with the advisory group (one of whom was an information scientist) for use in the initial searches.

Ethnic		
Race		
Racism		
Asian		
Black		
BME		
BEM		Sport
Refugee		
Asylum		**OR**
Religion		
Religious	**AND**	Leisure
Sectarianism		
Catholic		**OR**
Protestant		
Muslim		Recreation
Sikh		
Buddhist		
Hindu		
Wales		
Ireland		
Scotland		

Zetoc, *Web of Knowledge* and *Social Science Citation Index* proved less useful as they only allowed searches by title. The *Index to Theses* database covering theses

accepted for higher degrees at UK universities was also used. As that database only allows searches of abstracts it was searched using the broad keywords of – sport, leisure, recreation. Each abstract identified was examined for reference to BME groups.

As we wanted to ensure we covered 'grey' or unpublished literature as well we asked prominent academics and researchers with a track record of publishing material in this area to provide any information they held. The University web pages of each author who appeared in the Endnote bibliography (see below) was located to see if they had other publications that had not previously been identified: these may have been conference papers or book sections which had not been picked up in the electronic searches. Contacts at the sports councils, the various local authority associations (Local Government Association, Wales LGA, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Northern Ireland LGA) and the Central Council of Physical Recreation were asked to identify any grey literature that may have escaped the other searches. The Local Government Association (LGA) and DCMS websites were also searched for specific information on BME groups and sport.

We then followed up references to work used in the material our searches had identified: one piece of research started a trail that led to further cases. Despite our best efforts it is quite possible that some material may have been missed. However, we felt confident that the main themes and arguments that we subsequently reported reflected the research conducted in the UK during that period. The material used for the report is research conducted in the UK in the 10 years from 1998 to 2008, though a few pre-1998 studies were included for their status as seminal research, consistently referred to by others.

The outcome was an annotated bibliography of 339 items that contained notes on aim, methods used, main findings and an assessment of the contribution the research made. Each item was assigned to one of three categories:
1. studies that met the criteria above (empirical/theoretical, methods, evidenced conclusions);
2. strategy/policy, reports, good practice;
3. other items that might be of interest to policymakers, professionals and researchers working in the field – some of these may have been outside the specified timespan or reporting the same evidence as another item included in (1).

When we embarked on the research our intention was to formulate a proposition, the investigation and refinement of which would provide the basis for analysis, much as Pawson (2006) envisaged. We suggested that proposition might be something as basic as:

> 'People will participate in _____ insofar as it affirms their identity and delivers individual and collective benefit within available resources. Increasing participation then requires: a change in resourcing; adjusting barriers / increasing support; changing the activity.'

As material was admitted to the bibliographic resource we suggested it could be interrogated to allow the proposition to become more refined. In the event the process did not work quite like that, but more of that below

Some Key Findings

As we were not involved in a meta analysis we suggested at the outset that our challenge would not be to provide definitive statistics, but to identify common messages from the various sources at our disposal. We started with a review of the main publicly available databases. That prompted us to highlight some key features that had a bearing on popular (mis)conceptions. First, it is worth reminding ourselves that the 'non-white' population of the UK is still a small minority (92.1% white at the 2001 Census), but the forecasts we had access to showed that the steady increase in Black and minority ethnic groups would be continuing until at least 2020 (Rees and Parsons 2006). There is enormous variation in ethnic make-up across different parts of the UK: Scotland, Wales and particularly Northern Ireland are much 'whiter' than any English region. Estimates for the UK in 2020 suggest 11.4% will be non-white, though still with large regional variation (at one extreme is Outer London at 35.5%). In terms of the non-British population other white groups are significant (including the Irish they amounted to 4.4% of the population in England in 2005, for example) though, apart from in a few cases, given scant regard in the research literature (Jones 2007; ONS 2007).

Second, participation data appeared to confirm the relatively low levels of participation among BME communities. For a range of key performance indicators non-white respondents recorded lower levels of involvement than white. However, there are some important caveats. When ethnic groups were disaggregated the 'mixed' ethnic groups showed consistently higher levels of participation. At the same time the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities showed consistently low levels of participation until individual sports were examined. That revealed relatively high proportions of males playing football (true also for other BME communities and for women as well as men) and cricket, for example. Although leisure researchers intuitively appreciate this diversity, sport is still commonly referred to as though it is some generic function engaged in (or more likely not) by some homogeneous BME community (Rowe and Champion 2000; Sport England 2001, 2005; **sport**scotland 2007).

Since then the Active People Survey has recorded higher levels of participation among non-white groups (see, for example, Sport England 2011). However, these figures are not quite what they seem as where there is higher participation it can in large part be explained by the younger age profile of BME communities (younger people being more likely to participate in sport). Interestingly the Taking Part survey suggests that, at the general level, ethnicity when controlled for age is more

important in determining visits to heritage attractions or museums and engagement in the arts than it is for sport (Matrix 2010).

Significantly, the generally lower levels of involvement by BME communities were not confined to active participation, but could be found in spectating, volunteering and administration as well (particularly among Asian groups). Perhaps surprisingly given the position in high profile professional sport the balance was more even among coaches, but the Asian groups were still under-represented. It came as no surprise that BME communities were under-represented in official positions within sports organisations. That prevailing whiteness of the institution and culture of sport establishes a set of norms that deter participation by the wider community as we have discussed previously (Long and Hylton 2002; King 2004; Hylton et al 2005; Ratna 2008).

Despite legislation, campaigning and education, racism persists. In the British Social Attitudes Survey (2006), 30% of respondents described themselves as very or a little bit prejudiced against people of other 'races' (Cregan and Robinson 2008), and those are the ones with sufficient insight to recognise it. That is not as high as the 39% in 1987, but an increase from the low of 25% in 2001. And in the Citizenship Survey (England and Wales, 2007) 56% reported their perception that racial prejudice had been increasing (Communities and Local Government 2008). Of course sport is not immune from this; studies repeatedly conclude that the experiences of Black and Asian people in sport are mediated by racism. Among the studies in our review 32 identified that racism had a negative impact on involvement and only an older study by McGuire and Collins (1998) suggested racism had no appreciable impact on participation. Their argument was that multicultural and antiracism policies were working well within schools and far more significant was the failure of parents of South Asian origin to recognise the value of sport. More recent research (e.g. Kay 2006) has insisted that Islam need not necessarily be a barrier to participation. Equally, other research has been more likely to align with Scott Porter Research (2001) in insisting that racism is a key deterrent (Back et al 2001; Connolly 2002; Bradbury and Kay 2007; Countryside Access and Activities Network 2008; Spracklen 2008).

There has been a growing realisation that the processes of discrimination under systems of racism are more complex than at first thought. Media representations and racial stereotypes held by people in the sporting world construct a barrier to fulfilling participation by limiting visions of what is possible; stereotypes need not be negative to restrict opportunity. The impact of the media on creating and perpetuating stereotypes and as a vehicle for everyday racism and oppression is well documented across many disciplinary areas. The studies found in this review of literature challenged the notion of 'positive' stereotypes and highlighted the pernicious process of negative racialisation (Johnson 2000; McDonald and Hayes 2003; Rasmussen et al 2005). It is in areas like these that it is clear that scientific comparator studies are

not the only way to knowledge; the use of life histories like those of Ismond (2003) can be revealing in their exposition of experiences, processes and consequences.

Significant though it has been, it is clearly important to advance beyond the view that eradicating racism simply means dealing with a minority of violent and abusive fans. Just as it would be inappropriate to resort to blaming a small number of hooligan fans it would be wrong to attempt to explain the reported significance of racism as the result of unrealistic expectations on the part of minority ethnic groups. The evidence affirms that being a member of a BME community is associated with higher incidences of disadvantage stemming from long-term unemployment, low income, poor living conditions and poor health, which act as material constraints on participation. Alongside that, research has highlighted shortfalls in sporting capital (e.g. in the form of knowledge and contacts) that may frustrate involvement. Without having a full appreciation of what a sport can offer excitement is unlikely to be aroused and interest is more likely to be turned into participation if others in the network already participate. The research also demonstrates the importance of building capacity so that those from BME communities are better able to contribute to provision (Cardiff Council 2007; Hylton 2008; Walseth 2008). However, important though it is, ethnicity is patently not the sole defining criterion of sporting inclusion. It is the way ethnicity intersects with gender, class, income, disability, age, religion and other factors that shapes sporting opportunities (Ratna 2008; Carrington 2008; Flintoff et al 2008). As argued elsewhere, people working in sports organisations need to have a more sophisticated understanding of racisms in order to promote racial equality (Back et al 2001; Hylton 2010).

Beyond the practice of racism, research has drawn attention to how denial of its existence contributes to racism's perpetuation. We noted that anti-racism is still an arena of variable practice and levels of commitment within sport, but in light of some of the methodological difficulties referred to elsewhere in this paper it is perhaps not surprising that there is currently a lack of evidence around what works best in challenging racism. Assessing the construction of the institution of sport, some researchers argue that it might be more profitable to address the everyday whiteness of sporting cultures and organisations (Burdsey 2004; King 2004; Watson and Scraton 2001).

In contrast to the whiteness of many organisations in sport, clubs dominated by people from BME communities are often seen as being separate, or segregated, even when they embrace a range of ethnicities. Though opportunities for women-only participation are identified as desirable there is a more ambivalent assessment of separate leagues for ethnic groups because they may frustrate the development of talent and progression. Nonetheless, the research evidence calls for targeted provision that is sensitive to the needs of BME communities, not just to secure increased participation in sport but also to promote community development. Most of the studies addressing the issue stressed the importance of sport development

projects working with BME communities using workers from the same community, although Crabbe's (2005) work for Positive Futures qualified this.

>…in the context of the multicultural make up of the project staff other black members of staff have identified on the basis of a common racial background and engaged in conversation centred on issues of racism and prejudices on the basis of a perception of common experience. Yet in other delivery contexts, where there is some history of black on black tension between those of West African and Caribbean heritage, a degree of animosity has been displayed which has necessitated a more cautious approach to the building of relationships. (p25)

>…in one of the case study locations where the work has proven to be by far the most challenging, locality, social class identifications and outlook have come to the fore, enabling gender and racial distinctions to be suspended. (p91)

Time and again the point was made that the short-term nature of many projects represents a challenge to developing sustained participation never mind wider sporting and social impacts. Conducting the review persuaded us that clear examples are now available to demonstrate good practice in consulting with BME communities to ensure appropriate facilities and services (Scott Porter Research 2001; Sport England 2002; Bains 2005; Barlow et al 2007). More generally though, some examples of good practice may be overlooked because they lack rigorous empirical evidence to substantiate their work. However, if carefully assessed they could provide knowledge to pass on to others as long as there is some flexibility in how criteria for inclusion are formed and interpreted. Poor dissemination of these ideas requires the continual reinvention of wheels; better dissemination of such knowledge would make it easier to develop expertise among practitioners.

The Politics and Practice of Doing Research for Policymakers

The enthusiasm for systematic reviews is part of a search for certainty amidst a lack of conceptual consensus associated with contestations over what constitutes legitimate knowledge, one outcome of which might be interpreted as epistemological imperialism. As Sean Carroll observed, "What becomes accepted as appropriate for one area of investigation may become inappropriate for another".

The exercise we conducted was not a 'Systematic Review' as recognised in the literature, offering instead more of a critical narrative and synthesis based on a process of systematically reviewing the available evidence. Even if it had been possible we are not persuaded that pursuing the Cochrane project would have been appropriate. On the basis of our own experience we can now reflect on the limitations identified earlier in this paper and we shall then conclude by offering a proposition for a preferred approach.

In systematic reviews the rules of inclusion are crucial. The approach used by the EPPI Centre (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre) for the CASE reviews, for example, in appearing to opt for a more rigorous approach has rejected a large body of research. We argue that the price of this might be to sacrifice a more nuanced understanding of available knowledge. Our concern is that with initiatives like CASE, data become confused with knowledge. This is not just a concern for an epistemological debate in academic circles over what constitutes legitimate knowledge; its resolution determines the evidence base for policy.

When interviewed about the policy potential, Nick Rowe sought not to gainsay the contribution of qualitative research, but was concerned lest some of the arguments in favour of less scientific approaches were taken as an excuse for bad research design. We have seen enough bad research to share that concern, but questions of research design should not be conflated with questions of research techniques. If we take the case of testimonies in research, for example, Coalter points out that in work done for Comic Relief on the use of sport for development:

> With so many individuals increasing perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem, it is easy to obtain the individual testimonies and 'case studies' which are often presented as evidence in sport-for-development. All programmes of any type will produce such successes – such programmes do contribute to the personal development of some young people. However, the data in this report indicate that there are few statistically significant changes and that such individual testimonies tell us nothing about more general programme impacts. (Coalter with Taylor 2010: 92)

The research identified in our review had few statistical studies never mind statistically significant findings, but the use of our quality threshold was to try to ensure that anecdote should not be mistaken for research. Simply extracting good news stories from successes is the style of research that might be used by unquestioning apologists for sport, and we agree that unquestioning apologists for sport make poor researchers. Clearly the research design has to permit alternatives by allowing the possibility of counter narratives. Methods of critical social inquiry are potentially fruitful in research into racism in sport. Arguing for an alternative to a standardised questionnaire in search of a closer exploration of sensitive experiences of racism, Long (2008: 244) observed:

> Some people think that African Caribbean and Asian players are too ready to blame racism for all their problems. Far from it in our research; it was only because we were talking with them for some time that they became sufficiently confident to discuss such experiences. To my mind this vindicated the decision to use this way of gathering data because we found out things we would not otherwise have done.

Conducting research in this mould is not done with a view to making judgements about the success of one programme over another, but to inform our theories of racism and hence contribute to specifying and examining the models presumed to underlie practice.

There are also geo-centric consequences of the rules of inclusion that, Fred Coalter argued, privilege American social science over work from the UK because of the different research cultures in the two communities; the point made in relation to the CASE initiative above applies more generally. Different methodologies and epistemologies, accepted as the product of different historical, cultural and philosophical development, have historically enriched the quality of research in leisure and sport sociology. Now, due to a paradigmatic prevalence internationally, systematic reviews lend themselves to research in sport emerging from the US with its leaning towards a more positivist approach, its statistical description and modelling symptomatic of mainstream science and deductive studies (just as in the CASE study of engagement in culture and sport). On the basis of his work producing the Value of Sport Monitor for Sport England, Coalter observed that "If you set a set of criteria up as you do with systematic reviews the American work will always pass it and the British work won't… American work tends to be more empirical… the differences tend to be quite stark".

For us there was a more pressing geographic dimension that aroused political sensitivities. While this review drew on research from throughout the UK, clearly not all parts would have the same volume of available material: for example, Connolly's (2002) review found 'a dearth' of research on race and ethnicity in Northern Ireland, and despite increasing interest in this topic there had still been few studies specifically in sport and recreation (see www.research.ofmdfmni.gov.uk). Although this was tantamount to a truism because of the variation in population size and budgets, and although we concluded our report with 24 recommendations it was this observation and the associated recommendation that policymakers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should therefore evaluate carefully how useful findings derived from research conducted in England might be for their purposes that caused greatest consternation among the funding agencies. Intended as a caution not to apply 'English' research unthinkingly in different cultural circumstances (cf. the CASE programme), it was taken instead as a slight on the respective agencies. The consequence was a scramble to identify further 'grey literature' that might be included. Of itself this was welcome, but much of what was unearthed at this stage failed to meet our quality criteria which were not so easy to enforce in a debate that had become partisan.

In our discussion with Fred Coalter he suggested that social research is typified by a "lack of conceptual consensus", symptomatic of researchers seeking clarity in domains replete with conceptual confusion due to the construction of social problems. As a result, social research in sport is likely to be excluded from systematic reviews and meta-reviews because it falls outside established, 'validated' forms of knowledge. Coalter stated in our interview that,

> "In some epistemological domains there is consensus on … valid knowledge and presentation…but my problem would be when you come down to the other end such as crime and social cohesion there isn't that consensus about presentation, no consensus about methodology…I wouldn't have any idea what a systematic review would look like! So even if you could set up your criteria...there's nothing to go on… no [history]. Nothing to trawl."

In cases like these, Systematic Reviews become paradoxical as on one hand they are believed to promote the development and awareness of 'high quality', criterion-defined research, yet at the same time they deny access to new ways of knowing. This might be interpreted as epistemological exclusion, symptomatic of the myopic approaches to research criticized by Lather (2006) and Hylton (2005). In the context of what has just been said, the bulk of research on 'race' and sport is problematic in Systematic Reviews. Methodological dependence on qualitative inquiries with small sample sizes, leading to work that is often non-replicable or generalizable, makes them unattractive to Cochrane-type studies. In turn, Silk et al. (2010: 116) criticise the preferred style of research for Cochrane reviews for appearing to be 'ill-suited to dialogues with others, critique, and an emancipatory agenda'. The 'actual' experiences of marginalised voices that offer up a story from more gritty existence become decontextualised and reduced to measures that mask these particular 'truths'. Consequently a liberatory 'race' conscious agenda remains marginal. Fred Coalter explained further that:

> "A Systematic Review suggests that there is a lot of research. My position would be that systematic reviews only apply to particular types of knowledge. If it's not uniform I don't know how you do it."

Coalter also noted that in the pragmatic world of policy makers while research clearly has to be credible in order to provide insight it is not necessary for it to comply with the requirements of Systematic Review:

> "Policy makers are looking to researchers to give them evidence-based assessments of risk, reward and value and they are not well served by potentially misleading and inevitably frustrating searches for the holy grail of certainty."

Commenting on the search for certainty Nick Rowe observed, "In our world evidence doesn't lead to one outcome, it leads to choices", and in the absence of certainty those choices have to be based on a balance of probabilities. However, the politician and policymakers being serviced by people in such positions may not see research in the same light. The fears of Silk et al. (2010) in the sociology of sport echo those of Lather (2006) in educational research. Funders in the public sector being the primary arbiters of 'valid' educational research in the US have their parallels in the UK public sector, as national agendas of 'return on investment' and 'value for money', encourage those in search of research funds to use the same

language to win support. Morse (2006) argues that where disciplines 'centre' social relations, dynamics and contexts they are more likely to be relegated from positive categories of 'high quality' research by funding agents and influential others.

So research may or may not be judged to make a useful contribution to a Systematic Review, but what is its impact in shifting practice? Our contention is that the critical research rejected by Cochrane reviews has the capacity to make a substantive contribution to our understanding of society through its adherence to critiques of domination and its emancipatory emphasis. Critical social research such as studies exploring racialised problematics in sport are relatively new, offering intellectual insight and challenges, suggesting an agenda that facilitates clearer connections with, and conclusions about, oppressive structural relations.   Unfortunately policymakers in sport have less leverage at this level than they have with day-to-day practice.

Instead, the proliferation of evidence-based research in public policy domains has come to permeate academia to the point that many feel the need to criticize those who privilege epistemologies and methodologies that conveniently fit these strategic constraints. For example, Silk et al. (2010) lament this hierarchy of epistemologies and methodologies in research and are critical of those who prefer randomized control trials and systematized reviews over other types of knowledge generation techniques.   Their description of aggressive evidence-based studies as 'methodological fundamentalism' is provocative and forces an engagement with what could be described as a scientific imperialism that might threaten the diversity of social research methods, and academic integrity.

The fondness of ministers for figures to quote is accentuated by the Treasury's preoccupation with quantitative measures. Particularly in the current climate there is an economic imperative that arguably makes the Treasury the key ministry in shaping policy directions because of its control of the purse strings. It is therefore not just methodological considerations, but political muscle that diminishes small scale, critical social research. Silk et al. (2010) contend that it has become increasingly difficult to structure competitive methodologies that fall outside conventional models; the less conventional the social inquiry the less competitive a model becomes.

Underpinning claims for the validity of evidence based exercises, and in particular Cochrane studies, are the ideals of objectivity and neutrality courted by natural scientists but viewed more critically by social scientists. The desire for comparative measures is significant for systematic reviews to maintain perceived rigour and efficacy, yet the suggestion from this remains that those studies excluded from such studies are of lower value and lower quality. Defending the hierarchy of knowledge associated with different research methods Nick Rowe insisted this was not through some naïve search for value free research, but a belief that the higher levels of this

putative hierarchy promote research that is "systematic, transparent, clear and consistent". However, he acknowledged that given the messy nature of the world of sport it would commonly be necessary to 'go down the hierarchy' to find 'more realistic and appropriate' research, but was not prepared to concede that as a reason for poor research design.

We are acutely aware of the risks of generalising from ethnographic and other qualitative forms of research, and policymakers seek general solutions. However, particularly in sensitive areas like 'race' they need an insight into process in order to understand sporting cultures. It is unusual for challenges to dominant ideals and philosophies to emerge from the research most likely to be included in Systematic Reviews. But not to allow such possibilities risks reinforcing racism through hegemonic practices, through dogma and lack of reflexivity. The process of research itself might then lead to further inequities in sport and academe, themselves racial formations (Omi and Winant 2002; Bulmer and Solomos 2004; Hylton 2009). Morse (2006) sounds a warning about the prospect of disciplinary atrophy in relation to academic and policy domains beyond the sport sciences that rely heavily on qualitative inquiry.

Our optimism about being able to interrogate the research evidence as part of a theory-based approach to our systematic review à la Pawson or Weiss (1995) foundered on the demands of our six commissioning agencies. Quite apart from the injunction to provide an overview of demographics and policies we were asked to address some 18 policy questions, with further sub-questions (plus some that were not the proper subject of a systematic review of the research literature), never mind the associated questions that we might identify as researchers – and all that within the different contexts of each of the four home nations. When interviewed Pawson observed:

> "You were hamstrung by the diversity of issues they wanted you to address. That meant you lost any chance of a programme theory. There was little chance of a realist synthesis. The big secret is to have a narrow band of programme theory."

Of course we had an appreciation of that at the outset and raised the prospect of a more limited question set at the first meeting of the advisory group; we had a far more acute understanding at the culmination of the project. However, the nature of much contract research and the associated bidding process make it difficult to restrict the focus. We were able to offer a concluding table (Long et al, 2009: 59) that summarised the contribution from available literature to some of the questions posed, but were not able to offer a theory-based assessment in the manner its advocates envisage. It is important to insist that this does not mean that the review was a-theoretical. It was partly our desire to embrace some of the more interesting contributions to theory that had lain behind our insistence on moving beyond the scientism of the original Cochrane methodology.

In the terminology made famous by Donald Rumsfeld (see Pawson et al 2011 for an exposition in the current context) our review may not have moved many 'known unknowns' into the 'known knowns' category. However it did serve a useful purpose in communicating 'known knowns' to policymakers and challenge or clarify some other presumed 'known knowns'. It also shifted some 'unknown unknowns' into the 'known unknowns' category for policymakers so that they can at least be subject to political decision-making.

Conclusion

We are not prepared to accept that because there is no material matching a previously determined standard there is nothing to be learnt from a review of a substantive body of research. The question then relates to whether that can still be addressed in a systematic manner. And having set out our concern with the accepted model of systematic review we feel it incumbent upon us to suggest a way forward. In doing so we acknowledge that having previously invoked Pawson's approach to garnering evidence and failed to deliver the proposed outcome (interrogating the research evidence to refine a proposition about participation) it may seem foolhardy to return, but believe that there is more on offer. Just as Nick Rowe had no desire to gainsay the potential contribution of qualitative research we have no intention of denying the value of well-designed quantitative research. Policymakers and researchers alike need procedures that utilise a variety of research to best effect. We take some heart from Wong et al (2010, 8) who concluded their realist review of internet based medical education with a plea to editors and authors to include qualitative *as well as* quantitative material 'since the future of realist and other theory driven reviews to extend the knowledge base further will depend on the quality and completeness of the qualitative data gathered'.

Of course this approach may have some elements and pathways in common with the approaches adopted by exercises like the system dynamics model in CASE or the somewhat peculiarly titled 'consensus' produced for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on the contribution of physical activity and sport to the health and fitness of young people (Mountjoy et al 2011). Mechanically they are similar, conceptually they differ.

1. The exercise requires at least a stipulative definition of key concepts; not least 'sport' where the well-worn Council of Europe (2001) definition should be questioned. This would not preclude (indeed, should encourage) later stages of the exercise examining different forms of racism, for example.

2. Then establish the instrumental goals those responsible for policy are concerned to address – e.g. increase participation by Black and minority ethnic communities, challenge racism in and through sport.

3. Devise a conceptual model of the social processes involved that establishes associated programme theories and sub-theories (the how and why) on the basis of what is known from the literature (Wong et al. (2010) refer to these as candidate theories).

4. Having specified the theories return to the research studies that match the inclusion criteria to search for evidence that will test out those theories. If the theories are robust they should allow evidence to be drawn in from other fields of study (e.g. on attitude change).

5. Formulate recommendations for policy.

Both the CASE review (Matrix 2010) and the IOC consensus statement (Mountjoy et al 2011) used experts within their review models and they could play a part here too, whether to identify suitable studies, in helping to formulate the programme theories or to check the credibility of conclusions.

The key, of course, is what constitutes 'testing' at stage 4 and whether that can only be done using quantitative data from randomised control trials. When interviewed Ray Pawson noted that "realist reviews aren't about verdicts on how effective programmes are because we know that sometimes they work and sometimes they don't". Moreover, as he and his colleagues have observed, 'evidence does not come in finite chunks offering certainty and security to policy decisions' (Pawson et al 2011: 543). They present the challenge as being to convert 'unknowns' to 'knowns'. The point then is to assess whether the programme theories explain what is happening because to the extent that they do they can be used to recommend actions having established the conditions under which the programme is most likely to succeed.

In examining the kind of proposition we began to formulate at the outset, this might allow alternative theories to be explored and refined. For example, the implicit programme theory of policymakers may relate to different elements of behaviour change and the likely effectiveness of this can be assessed by an examination of research into presumed good practice. On the other hand we might argue that critical race theory and associated concepts like normalised whiteness is capable of offering the insights necessary to improve practice and increase engagement. Either route could open up the possibility of making use of studies in areas beyond sport that address the effectiveness of marketing in behaviour change or the cultural norms that inhibit interaction between ethnic groups for example. In either case it seems clear to us that both quantitative and qualitative research could be used to examine the underpinning programme theory.

We acknowledged earlier that an emphasis on a particular approach to research invites a preoccupation with addressing particular kinds of issue and may cause

researchers to overlook the way in which methods shape findings. We remind the reader that the form of methodological parochialism practised by 'Systematic Review' when applied to the research on 'race' and ethnicity is likely to marginalise key underlying processes without disrupting or transforming them. As Lorde (1979) so eloquently argues, *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* Our concern is that the power relationships represented here can reinforce research processes that in themselves can perpetuate 'colour blindness' by ignoring the effect of social factors on broader issues of participation. In protesting 'race' neutrality it overlooks who does research and the ontologies they bring to it just as it promulgates apolitical epistemologies that disengage from social justice and social transformation and also tends to impose a process that is ahistorical as the effects of past inequalities and constraints become detached from current problematics. This is especially the case if funders, clients and academics dogmatically privilege particular methods at the expense of others that may be equally valuable.

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[2] Sometimes we use capital letters for Systematic Review specifically to denote this narrow definition of systematic reviewing.

[3] The full report of the project is available free on a number of the sponsors' web sites, e.g.:
http://www.sportingequals.org.uk/resources.php?resources_ID=1#anchor where it is listed under 'Other

Resources' along with a summary report and the accompanying bibliographic database of research outputs. The latter has been transformed from an Endnote bibliography to Excel format for more general use.

[4] http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/research_and_statistics/7275.aspx

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