
A SPORTING PARTICIPATION LEGACY FROM LONDON 2012: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCES IN BIRMINGHAM

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

Aims and research question: Legacy has become increasingly important for the IOC since the 1980s and it is now a requirement for legacy to be discussed in host city bid documents submitted to the IOC (Leopkey and Parent, 2011). As the London 2012 bid committee, LOCOG and the DCMS promised a legacy across Britain it is important to examine the experiences of those involved in grassroots sport away from the host city; we therefore examine the perceptions and experiences of people involved in delivering sport in Birmingham as this is a highly populated city and was not a host city for any Olympic events. The research question is therefore: what are the experiences of those working in Birmingham in sport with regard to planning for and trying to deliver a grassroots participation legacy from London 2012?

Literature review: London 2012 provides us with an interesting case study as, for Leopkey and Parent (2011, p.937), the 'change from thinking about legacy post-Games and post-bids to planning for it pre-Games is one of the most significant evolutionary adaptations in the governance of legacy'. Bloyce and Smith (2010) have discussed the policy process and unintended consequences that are common at the implementation stage in relation to sport policy more generally. Specifically in relation to mega-events, Weed et al. (2009) highlighted that there is no automatic or inherent link between watching elite sport and changes in community participation. However, the notion of inherent inspiration remained a key aspect of Olympic discourse throughout national legacy documents (Bloyce & Lovett, 2012).

Methodology, research design and data analysis: Using a case-study design, 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with a range of people involved in delivering sport in Birmingham in 2012 before the Games.

The same participants, with the exception of four, participated in interviews one year later, after the Games. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to access participants from the following organisations: Sport England, West Midlands for 2012, the City Council, County Sports Partnership (CSP), National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and clubs of Olympic and non-Olympic sports. Participants were selected in order to gain an insight into the work of the people and organisations considered key to the delivery of sports participation and the implementation and management of national policies and strategies at the local level. Interviews included sections where participants were asked about their work and the impact of London 2012 on their work, as well as being asked about their perceptions of legacy in Birmingham. The theoretical perspective of figurational sociology is used to analyse the relationships and partnerships involved in planning for and managing a grassroots legacy. Figurational sociology is derived from the work of Norbert Elias, with a focus on understanding interdependence.

Results, discussion and conclusions: Based on our analysis of the interview data, the sheer complexity of the networks involved came to the fore and differing perceptions of legacy were examined. There were so many people involved in sport in Birmingham who wanted to link to legacy that it was near impossible for any one person or organisation to have a clear idea about everything that was being planned and implemented. The constant interweaving of individual actions gives rise to something that has not been planned by any one individual or group (Elias, 1991); in this case, that is a state of confusion surrounding legacy related programmes and initiatives. Participants' perceptions varied with regard to any impact of London 2012 on participation; they also provided different perspectives on the success of pre-Olympic training camps for the American and Jamaican track and field teams in engaging members of the public. The different perspectives offered regarding Olympic related impacts was arguably influenced by the position held by participants, their relative level of involvement, and whether they were constrained to demonstrate the development of a legacy. Further to this, there were several projects labelled as legacy projects that were originally being planned for, or implemented, regardless of the Olympics in London. It is clear from this that the idea of legacy is made even more nebulous when people at the local level are retrospectively labelling projects as legacy. Elias (1991) argued that such collective fantasies serve to protect people from a full awareness of situations that they are powerless to control. The implications of this study include the importance of recognising that analysing any impact of London 2012 on sports participation is constrained by the complex ways in which those involved interact and portray the notion of 'legacy' in their work.

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