

UNPACKING THE SPLISS CASE FOR IDENTIFYING THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS IN ELITE SPORTS SYSTEMS: A CRITIQUE

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Synopsis:

A critical review of the SPLISS methodology is undertaken identifying the strengths and shortcomings of the SPLISS approach. Recommendations for the enhancement of the approach adopted are provided, as well as explanation of the limitations of accounts based on the key methodological assumptions evident in the existing SPLISS comparative policy studies..

Abstract:

AIMS

The SPLISS studies of Veerle De Bosscher and her colleagues which proliferated over the early 2000s (De Bosscher et al., 2006, 2008, 2009) exercise a hegemonic effect in relation to the literature seeking to explain the factors leading to international sporting success. Growing out of De Bosscher's PhD studies the application of the approach has been developed to encompass studies of increasing numbers of countries and two international conferences in 2013 and 2015 have been organised exclusively around this project. The enthusiasm with which this approach has been embraced is certainly a reflection of the political salience of the issue, and of the careful and sophisticated construction of the account offered.

However, in the development of SPLISS's leading position, the approach has been accompanied by relatively little external critique. This paper therefore seeks to unpack the SPLISS approach identifying and acknowledging its strengths but also delineating its limitations and the implications of those limitations for the validity of the account which the SPLISS approach can offer.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The method adopted for this critical evaluation of the SPLISS approach seeks to address a range of issues from the 'meta-theoretical' aspects of ontological and epistemological foundations. In particular it employs the critical perspective of Realist Evaluation, to bear upon the principles informing the approach to

analysis invoked in the SPLISS studies.

RESULTS / IMPLICATIONS

The paper will identify five major sets of issues in relation to the SPLISS studies, through which the strengths or limits of the approach can be usefully considered. These are as follows:

- a. **Ontology, Epistemology and the identification of causal variables**
In discussion of ontological and epistemological premises we highlight the aspects of a positivist methodology on which largely implicitly draws such that statistical associations form the basis for accounting for outcomes. This runs counter to the Realist Evaluation approach of Pawson et al (Pawson, 2013) which argues for context-specific explanation of policy outcomes in open social systems. Policy systems are indeed open such that qualitative accounts are needed to tease out causal relationships between intervention variables and outcomes. While the value of such qualitative causal accounts is recognized by De Bosscher and her colleagues (2010), there is an absence of the application of such material in the published studies to date.
- b. **Internal validity**
Internal validity is related to the extent to which an operational measure captures the reality of the concept to be measured. In the case of the SPLISS studies this invariably means that the dependent variable (measured predominantly in terms of numbers of medals won, market share, or some such quantitative measure) is taken as the measure of 'international success in elite sport'. There are two principal issues which we highlight here. The first is that this is very blunt instrument. Valuing medals for all sports as equivalent value may not provide an appropriate measure of national priorities. Secondly given that the majority of nations win a very small number of medals, the use of Olympic medals excludes most nations from the comparison.
- c. **Reliability**
The reliability of measurement is questionable. Comparative studies even of financial data on sport, within relatively similar governmental and economic systems have manifested major problems in terms of compatibility of data and interpretation.
- d. **The Black Box Problem.**
The SPLISS approach employs an input-throughput-output policy model. However the 'throughput' elements (Pillars 2-8) are measured in terms that constitute 'inputs' into the system. The use of quantitative measures means that what is actually done within the policy system remains hidden from view (inside the policy 'black box'). The inputs may be evident but not the throughputs, and causal relationship with outputs can only be guessed at.
- e. **Problems of multivariate statistical techniques.**
Even within the samples of countries adopted for analysis, the numbers involved mean that the application of techniques such as multiple regression to explain variance in output measures (medals) is questionable.

CONCLUSIONS

The appeal of the SPLISS analysis is clearly evident. In its positivist form it identifies varying levels of statistical association between inputs and outputs (even though many of these inputs are misdescribed, in our view, as throughputs). Notwithstanding this it fails to provide good causal explanations of why and how success is attained in different contexts, by different athletes / countries, employing the available inputs in context-specific ways. A realist approach to evaluation, would involve a more complex approach but one which ultimately has the potential to enhance the significant but ultimately limited contribution of the current SPLISS approach.

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