

Unpacking comparative sport policy: exploring the challenges of applying comparative models to examine Paralympic sport

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Background

The cross-comparative sport policy debate has emerged, in part, due to the increasing complexity, uncertainty and competitive nature of high performance sport environments (De Bosscher et al. 2006). Similar trends are also evident in Paralympic sport with the International Paralympic Committee increasingly promoting global/national models of elite sport (Legg, Dowling, & Brown, 2015). There have been a number of attempts to compare able-bodied high performance sport systems in order to understand the factors that lead to international success (e.g., Digel, 2002; De Bosscher et al., 2008, 2015; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Truyens et al., 2013). These studies have collectively furthered our understanding of and ability to manage high performance sport systems. However, there is still a paucity of cross-comparative sport policy research that focuses on elite disability/para sport. Furthermore, and in building upon Henry and Ko's (2015) remarks, there still remains a general lack of explicit critique of cross-comparative elite sport policy approaches. Such critique, we argue, is brought into sharp focus when approaching a cross comparative analysis of Paralympic sport systems.

Objectives

This review paper seeks to explore the challenges of applying cross-comparative sport policy models (or modified versions of them) to better understand the Paralympic sport domain. In doing so, our discussion highlights a number of issues in applying what have historically been able-bodied centric comparative models to examine Paralympic sport. Furthermore, and in building on the above, we use the discussion of the application of cross-comparative models to the Paralympic context as a research context (or platform) in which to highlight and discuss some of the more fundamental limitations and challenges of cross-comparative policy research.

Theoretical background/ method

The paper draws upon two bodies of literature to support its discussion. The first body of work stems from the general (non-sporting) cross-comparative literature, Øyen (1990), Baistow (2000), Schuster (2007) and Jowell (1998) in particular, which provides a useful insight into the inherent difficulties and challenges of conducting cross-comparative research – much of which, we would suggest, is evident within, and has implications for, the current direction of elite cross-comparative sport policy research. The second body of literature relates directly to the examination of the viability of applying able-bodied cross-comparative research to examine the Paralympic domain (Dowling, Legg, & Brown, forthcoming; Legg & Darcy, 2015;

Legg, De Bosscher, Shibli, & van Bottenburg, 2015; Pankowiak, 2015). In particular, Pankowiak (2015) is currently developing a theoretical framework in which to compare national elite-para sport policies through the adaptation of the SPLISS framework. Similarly, Legg and colleagues have recently submitted reports to Sport Canada (Legg, 2015) and the International Paralympic Committee Sport Science Committee (Legg, Dowling, & Brown, 2015), both of which explored the possibility of using cross-comparative research to examine Paralympic sport.

Results/implications

The review draws three broad conclusions. First, the necessity to reflect upon the overall intended purpose of conducting cross-comparative research as this guides the overall direction and scope of the investigation, in particular consideration should be given to which organisation is driving the research agenda/project and the epistemological foundations of the research endeavour which fundamentally underpins the research project. Second, it is evident that both methodological and practical implications and problems emerge when engaging in cross comparative research. These problems are of particular relevance to the Paralympic context given its heterogeneous context. Specifically conceptual issues related to equivalence arise both through linguistic and definitional complexity, and the organisation and structure of asymmetrical national Paralympic systems and agencies. Third, there is a balance to be struck between approaches to cross comparative Paralympic sport that takes account of both broad macro themes emerging across nations and the micro contextual factors from which they arise. There is a need to move beyond description, beyond identifying key success factors, and towards an understanding to why it works. Broad models that decontextualize good practice from its historical, political, cultural and economic origins limit insights to the Paralympic movement and its international and national committees and agencies weakening the case for engaging with comparative research.

Conclusion

Ultimately the review seeks to enhance the potential insights of the cross-comparative sport policy research by laying the foundations for further application for comparative research that examines the disability/Paralympic context. It is evident that the adoption of cross-comparative sport policy approaches has the potential to further develop our understanding of disability/Paralympic sport, furthering the development of the Paralympic movement, yet there is clear recognition that any attempts to adopt and apply cross-comparative sport policy approaches should only be done so cautiously and reflexively.

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