

# Elite Sport and Sport for All: An Epistemological Paradox

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## Aim

Sport policy discourses of advanced capitalist nation states have predominantly taken shape around self-evident positive presumptions of elite sport. Successful elite sport would ‘trickle-down’ to community levels through role model athletes, events and athletic successes, expecting to generate numerous public benefits, amongst others increased sport participation (De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, & van Bottenburg, 2013). Current studies remain unable to provide indisputable empirical evidence neither for the existence nor the absence of trickle-down effects on mass sport participation. These ambivalent empirical relationships do not necessarily imply that trickle-down effects regarding mass participation do not empirically exist. They rather suggest that the hypothesized effect is subject to causal complexity. Therefore, the aim of this study is to critically synthesize how the current evidence base has been constructed and to identify why current research discourse has been unable to capture causal complexity.

## Theoretical Background

The hypothesized trickle-down effect of elite sports on mass sport can be considered a deductive assumption. A closed linguistic and empirical system. Elite sports would inspire the public, an inspired public takes up sport: elite sports lead to mass sport (De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, & van Bottenburg, 2013). This causality perspective is often used by governmental institutions to justify elite sport investments. It, however, assumes a causal and linear understanding of the social world, which almost never persists in policies and praxis (Stone, 2002). Research traditions that intend to understand the social world in terms of linear relationships are therefore considered unable to take the equifinality and asymmetry of the phenomena under study into account (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010), making the pursuit of an explanatory theory and invariable knowledge nearly impossible (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

## Research Design and Methodology

A systematic literature search was carried out in databases SPORTDiscuss, Web of Knowledge, PubMed, Scopus by hand search techniques. A crucial selection criterion for including articles was that studies research the effectual relationship between elite sport and sport participation. Figurational studies about leveraging strategies, managerial perceptions or stakeholder interviews were for that purpose excluded. Although the number of included studies might be subject to change, a total of 40 English written journal articles have been selected for a subsequent mapping review. Mapping studies do not primarily discuss findings of included articles, but identify characteristics and linkages about the activities that generated those findings (Cooper, 2016). This approach allowed for a systematic comparison of the included studies in the pursuit of identifying why current research discourse about spill-over effects of elite sport remains unable to identify those.

## Initial Findings and Discussion

Initial findings are consistent and show saturation, making it convincing that initial findings will not be subject to major revisions. Included studies are characterized by ambiguous overlapping operationalisations of predictors, mediators and outcome variables. As a consequence, this constitutes two research deficits. First, different sociological phenomena

can be identified to be subject of study, more specifically effects of 1) intentional behavioural change and 2) observable behavioural change to do sports or physical activity. An epistemological paradox takes shape here. Both discourses attempt to study the extent elite sports leads to mass sport, but these research traditions produce fundamentally different types of knowledge. This is not necessarily problematic, but becomes problematic because these research traditions cannot be considered mutually exclusive in case of spill-over effects of elite sport. Second, in the pursuit of observable behavioural change, intentional behavioural change is a necessary condition, but the latter does not automatically mean that increased sport participation has been established. In combination with ambiguous operationalisations of predicting variables (e.g., elite sporting success index, medal wins, qualification for World Cups), lacking comparative studies that take into account the complex contexts the cases of study are active in (e.g., population change, membership definitions, relative success) and arbitrary definitions of the effects under study (e.g., played football once a year, has the intention to be more active, is inspired to take up new sports), it is not unsurprising that the evidence base remains fragmented and equivocal.

### **Conclusion**

It is argued in this study to break away from current vicious research circle and that a reflexive turn is desirable. Although the evidence base provides valuable insights regarding processes that might enable mass sport through elite sport, if, how and when elite sports inspires the mass public to participate themselves seems to depend on the plural conditions of the social world. In this contribution we conclude that only a few studies move beyond current discourse in an attempt to capture causal complexity, but that comparative (case-control) research designs are desirable to identify those conditions under which elite sport might – or might not – enable mass sport. If these cases are combined and compared, necessary conditions for increased sport participation can most likely be identified.

### **References**

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