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## On the International Review for the Sociology of Sport, the field of play, and six years of more “more than less”

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# On the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, the field of play, and six years of more “more than less”



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## Abstract

In this editorial essay, Editor-in-Chief Lawrence Wenner reflects on his six-year tenure editing the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* and the sociology of sport as a scholarly field of play. Thanks are given to the many in the sociology of sport community who have supported the *IRSS* and contributed to its success. Consideration then turns to the imprimatur of the *IRSS* and a series of identity struggles evident in the scholarly community. Using the “framing of the naming” of the *IRSS*, the essay poses that the *IRSS* is “more than” each of the constituent parts making up the journal’s title. In considering how the *IRSS* is “more than international,” arguments are advanced that most socio-cultural studies of sport tend to focus on local, regional, and national sporting experiences and that the *IRSS* might be better characterized as “multinational” or “multi-vocal” in its orientation. In considering how the *IRSS* is “more than a review,” arguments are advanced that the *IRSS* has always gone beyond featuring critical articles, a chief technical characteristic marking publications as reviews. In considering how the *IRSS* is “more than sociology,” arguments are advanced that the socio-cultural study of sport has always necessarily reached beyond sociology in engaging a host of disciplines. Related consideration is given to the current status of socio-cultural inquiry about sport, sociology, the sport sciences, and management. In considering how the *IRSS* is “more than sport,” arguments are advanced about the how the socio-cultural study of sport has always had boundaries that blur with the study of physical activity that engages fitness, health, and recreation. Finally, the essay closes with consideration of physical cultural studies and poses that it is deficient as an alternative characterization of the scholarly community.

## Keywords

disciplinary identities, inclusivity, interdisciplinarity, physical cultural studies, sociology of sport

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This is the close of my sixth year as Editor-in-Chief of the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. As my tenure as Editor ends with this issue, I want to take a moment to thank the many who have supported me in this role and to reflect a bit on the state of both the journal and field. Foremost, it has been a privilege and an honor to serve as Editor-in-Chief. During my term, it has been a pleasure working with three Presidents of the International Sociology of Sport Association—Steve Jackson, Elizabeth Pike, and Christine Dallaire—and a diverse group of scholars who have graciously served on the organization's Executive Board over the years. They have been unfailingly supportive of my efforts to make the *IRSS* an increasingly strong showcase for the best work from around the globe in its disciplinary space—a space that, to my mind, has become necessarily interdisciplinary with perpetually blurry and shifting boundaries.

As Editor, I have tried my best *not* to use my editorship as a bully pulpit to decide what is worthy or not of being published. Rather, I've tried to honor the diversity of topical concerns, theoretical lenses, and methodological strategies seen across our field of play. In mirroring the field's ever-changing terrain and tactics, we've strived to diversify and continually freshen the composition of our team of Corresponding Editors and Editorial Board to keep the *IRSS* fluid and nimble in responding to the waxing and waning of research priorities. In recognition of the fact that any Editorial Board, no matter how large and knowledgeable, is necessarily limited in specialist expertise, we have relied over the last six years, perhaps more than most journals, on a remarkable group of some 3000 reviewers who have been carefully cultivated, topic-by-topic, for their expertise. To those who have graciously served as Corresponding Editors, Editorial Board members, and reviewers, I offer my sincere thanks for all you have done in supporting the *IRSS*. My thanks also go to our publishing editor Caroline Moors, who coordinates an extensive support team at the SAGE journals office in London, and Nabajyoti Singh and his fine production team in New Delhi. Their collective efforts have made the *IRSS* better and my job easier. Yet, I offer my greatest, and heartfelt, thanks to Susan Rice. In her role as Editorial Operations Manager, Susan has masterfully provided operational support to the day-to-day functioning of our editorial office and her detailed editorial oversight of manuscripts in production has consistently contributed to improving the quality of the finished product that results from our community of scholars.

One reason that it has been a pleasure serving as Editor-in-Chief of the *IRSS* stems from the clear evidence that the journal has continued to make consistent strides on quality, responsiveness, and inclusiveness over these past few years. While the *IRSS* has had the good fortune to see its highest impact factors and peer journal rankings in recent times, one cannot accurately predict the relationship between any one decision to publish a manuscript and its eventual reception in the scholarly community. Thus, we have chosen instead to focus on making the editorial office and manuscript reviewing process efficient, responsive, and selective. Regardless of whether the outcome for a submitted manuscript was as desired, we've aimed to be hospitable and constructive, and to be a place where authors can get straight, prompt answers about the reception of their work by their scholarly peers.

Keeping the trains running on time is no small task. While I have been blessed by a culture of cooperation from scholars in the sociology of sport community, it will be, after six years, a pleasure to hand over the reins to Dominic Malcolm and I am confident that

he is a fine choice to serve as the new Editor-in-Chief for the next four years. Six years is a long time to serve in this capacity, perhaps too long, and I will look forward to the constancy of the role's demands being absent atop my to-do list. While the role eludes being 24/7, it is a 365-day constantly running tap that demands attention. Serving as Editor is less a sprint than it is a marathon and one needs to pace oneself. And just as my originally planned-for four-year term was about to end with a final kick, the course distance was extended for another two years by the ISSA Executive Board. This was done to facilitate a calendaring process that would allow each new Executive Board to exercise due diligence in picking a new Editor-in-Chief to advance ongoing improvements in quality and recognition. These are good developments for the *IRSS* and the ISSA. As the editorial transition comes with the journal at perhaps its most stable and influential moment, our community should be optimistic about the future of the *IRSS*.

As many of you may know, the sociology of sport is not my first field. My graduate education was neither in sociology or in sport studies (or in its various articulations in sport science, kinesiology, exercise science, or even sport management), but rather communication and media studies. Still, the welcome I received from the sociology of sport community for my early forays into the workings of media and sport was warm, supportive, and much appreciated. Over the years, I've attempted to legitimize myself by teaching sociology of sport courses and gaining related experience in overseeing what became the largest graduate sport management program in the US. Early in the game, I was even given the opportunity to edit and breathe new life into the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*. So, sport's been good to me. Even though I've likely been adequately credentialed as this point, and my media and sport research area has become more central within the sociology of sport, I still see myself as an outsider in thinking about the field and its place on the scholarly landscape. Thus, from both "outsider" perch and the "insider" one that has come with editing the *IRSS*, I offer some informal observations about the field of play. Let me start with some musings about how the "framing of the naming" and the recent imprimatur of the *IRSS* relate to some current identity struggles in the scholarly community.

## More than international

The importance of international aspirations for the sociology of sport should not be underestimated. Foremost in the launching of the *IRSS* (originally titled the *International Review of Sport Sociology* rather than "for the Sociology of Sport") and the ISSA was that the socio-cultural study of sport needed to be an international one. On one hand, this was obvious as sport was played around the globe. Yet, on the other, it was just as clear that the articulation of sport across the globe was quite varied. Fueled by distinct regional and national sensibilities, differential political and economic resources, and set amidst social and cultural norms, sport has always been as much local, regional, and most particularly, national as it has been global.

Yet, for a journal such as the *IRSS* and the nascent field that was forming around an articulation as the "sociology" of sport, the "international" banner was in some ways more essential to establishing its disciplinary viability and, eventually, credibility. As is the case with the successful start-up of any scholarly area, there needed to be critical mass, a "there, there," to form a legitimate area of academic inquiry.

Indeed, it may be argued that the “internationalness” of the sociology of sport was more founded in its needs to look globally for a critical mass of scholars to help undergird its legitimacy than it had to do with studying international or global sport. Indeed, if we were to be honest, few sports are embraced in a way that could be seen as truly international or global, despite the well-bankrolled marketing efforts of sport organizations looking to grow their global reach through events such as the various World Cups and Olympic Games.

Thus, the notion of “international” for a sport or for a journal remains largely aspirational. For the *IRSS* and the *ISSA*, the “international” banner most importantly signals a disposition toward inclusiveness, to grow the community of scholars and work proactively to be a site where the voices of scholars from underrepresented quarters may be heard.

Again, if one were to be honest, the *IRSS*, while it has featured research on the most “global” or “international” articulations of sport as seen through its mega-events, has always featured more studies interested in understanding localized sporting experience from around the globe than global or international sport per se. In this sense, much of the research that is featured in the *IRSS*, and the stories that come with that research are less “international” than they are “multinational,” or more appropriately (to get out of a received view of scholars as necessarily entangled with the boundaries of political states) “multi-vocal.”

Thus, during my term as Editor of the *IRSS*, I have done my best to make sure that the research we publish is “multi-vocal,” that we reach to include scholarship from diverse quarters of the community and those too little heard from. That said, structural barriers, such as those of writing in English when it is not your first language and the nascent development and legitimacy of the sociology of sport in certain quarters of the world, remain. At the end of six years as Editor, a frank assessment would note that our achievements of inclusiveness still lag behind our goals. Indeed, we are “international,” or more appropriately “multinational” or “multi-vocal,” but not enough and I look forward to the new editorial team’s advancing the progress we have made.

## More than a review

In a technical sense, the *IRSS* is less a “review” than it is a journal that attempts to publish the best research articles in its scholarly space. Indeed, we do publish book and media reviews, and will continue to do so. But apart from that, our research articles are infrequently focused on reviewing a given area within the socio-cultural study of sport.

Nonetheless, the *IRSS* shares the word “review” in its title with many other research journals and thoughtful general circulation periodicals. Still, if typical dictionary definitions of a periodical that calls itself a “review” are scrutinized, it is clear that the *IRSS* is more than a review. Reviews generally connote periodic publications with critical articles on current events, the arts, or other domains of culture, such as sport. And certainly, the *IRSS*—most particularly in recent times, with the rise of critical-cultural studies and the shift in sociology away from empirically oriented social science to more humanistic and qualitative inquiry—has participated in this “critical turn.”

Still, following my earlier “inclusivity” arguments, it is my view that the *IRSS*, and the socio-cultural study of sport more generally, is both stronger and more vibrant by

being an open and welcoming place for diverse theoretical orientations and methodological approaches. Indeed, if my tenure as Editor has seen too much of one thing, it has been critically oriented limited sample studies reliant on qualitative interviews, which if again one were to be honest, are more grounded in what can be called the “ethnographic impulse” than the more formal tenets of ethnography as a social science enterprise. I ask that you don’t get me wrong on this observation. Indeed, much of this research, in pursuit of grounded theory, employs decidedly select qualitative interviews and, with the look and feel of ethnography, features rich texture and reveals savvy understandings. These latter benefits are shared and seen vividly in the artifactual insights that come with the rise of well-done autoethnography in sport studies and other areas of inquiry, but what is also shared is the structural liability of limited generalizability.

As a result, the sociology of sport needs the methods and approaches of empirically oriented social science now more than ever. In recent times, the *IRSS*, and competitor journals in the sociology of sport space, have published a plethora of qualitative studies featuring rich interview data and offering intriguing findings. Yet, because of their case study nature and limited samples, the resultant findings about the sensibilities and dynamics at play call out to be tested for generalizability. In this way, good empirically oriented social science research can be the best friend, rather than something oppositional, to critically oriented qualitative research. Thus, if our area of inquiry needs a bit more of one thing, it would be generalizability, and that comes from broader testing, comparative research, and an understanding that empirical methods and a critical disposition can be good bedfellows. And, on a technical point, this requires the *IRSS* to be more than a review.

## More than sociology

Part of my joy in editing the *IRSS* comes from its inclusivity, much of which comes with the necessity of the socio-cultural study of sport to be interdisciplinary. Indeed, the *IRSS* aims and scope statement makes clear its welcoming of interdisciplinary research. Beyond that, by naming contributions from adjacent disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, geography, gender studies, media studies, history, political economy, and semiotics as being sought after, the *IRSS* aims and goals statement makes it clear that the “sociology” of sport—or more appropriately the “socio-cultural” study of sport—necessarily engages a host of disciplines and is thereby a multidisciplinary affair that is “more than sociology.”

Of course, most in the sociology of sport community recognize this. We also recognize that most sociology of sport, at least in certain quarters of the world, is often done by scholars who are not centrally trained in or seated in academic departments of sociology. Ironically, a remarkable paucity of sport sociologists may be found in departments of sociology. Rather, many, if not most, sport sociologists are both trained and foundationally aligned with departments that grow from physical education and the sport sciences. Here too—as is the case in the seating of the sociology of sport in many a department of sociology—those scholars focused on the socio-cultural study of sport, especially those with a critical disposition, may find themselves in a precarious situation, on the periphery of their core academic unit and sometimes in conflict with its priorities.

Ironically, a most common life preserver thrown to those in the sociology of sport community comes from the rapidly growing areas of sport management and marketing. While cooptation may not necessarily come to those sociologists of sport who find themselves commingling with those looking to advance sport markets, the risks are considerable, and they are exacerbated by the undeniable pressure to do fundable research that is structurally biased toward finding pragmatic answers to questions driven by government policy or effective business practice. Situated thusly, those engaged in the socio-cultural study of sport may, on one hand, find that it is “more than sociology,” but on the other—in being bedfellows with those advancing the pragmatics of sport—find that their academic fates hinge on it being “less than sociology.”

### **More than sport**

Just as the sociology of sport is necessarily “more than sociology,” its recent practice makes clear that it is also about “more than sport.” Part of this state of affairs may have come from the relative fruitlessness of the early and long debates about what formally constitutes sport and thereby falls within a domain that is “proper” for the study of the sociology of sport. Usually, considerations in those debates center on constituent elements of a sporting endeavor being both “physical” and “competitive.” Here, physical activity that was aimed at just staying fit or something like chess (or other games) that was competitive but had limited physicality (such as moving game pieces on a board or video gaming) fell outside the scope of sport. Yet, it was generally recognized that there was more lost than gained in being sidetracked by some artificial allegiance to what formally constituted sport.

Most particularly, sport, and its most notable “relative,” physical activity that “merely” engaged in fitness, health, and recreation (and did not mandate formal competition per se), came into the sociology of sport fold. To my mind, this broadening of scope for the sociology of sport has been without question a healthy one. In many ways, this set the stage for resolving the increasingly obvious twin conundrums: (a) that sociology of sport was not only “more than sociology” and (b) that it was also “more than sport.”

One answer to these conundrums has been the positing of physical cultural studies as a broadening of, and, most particularly, a viable replacement for the too delimited “sociology of sport” banner. Although I find physical cultural studies an unsatisfactory replacement for what is clearly a flawed and inaccurate articulation as the sociology of sport, it does provide an alternative, albeit a limited one and one that, in its connotation, may be unnecessarily unwelcoming by seemingly “excluding” rather than proactively “including” many who presently see themselves as part of the sociology of sport community. Still, for some with the desire to escape what has become a necessarily large tent and to reside in a more comforting echo chamber, physical cultural studies offers a more delimited but decidedly critically and politically engaged option to the equally inaccurate and delimited sociology of sport banner.

There may be no easy answer for the future of the sociology of sport. It is clear that it is both “more than sociology” and “more than sport.” As one who has engaged critical-cultural studies after taking a critical turn away from the blinders that too often remain in place in the doing of empirical social science research, and most particularly its

administrative research variant, seating myself in physical cultural studies would be a comfortable place. On a personal basis, my politics and disposition align with many of those who have advocated for physical cultural studies. But, in a sense, it would be too comfortable, a silo of sorts and I distrust silos as a place for academic inquiry.

For me, the notion of physical cultural studies doesn't solve the puzzle about the sociology of sport being an inadequate banner. On one hand, our study of the "physical" seems to me to be a delimited one, albeit one that extends beyond sport. Rather, it strikes me that we are talking about the physical in particular companion with sport, fitness, health, and recreation. Physical work, as in manual labor—while logically falling into the basket of what a physical cultural studies implies—presently falls outside what I understand as our field. Of equal concern on a different front is that physical modifies "cultural studies" and thereby carries particularized connotations to a theoretical and political disposition and forms only one part of the many theoretical and methodological proclivities that are seen under the sociology of sport banner. It is that exclusivity that worries me most about the physical cultural studies option.

In recent times, in the rise of the "alt-right" (or shall I say "alt-wrong"), we have seen the dangers that can come (for both those on the left as well as the right) with cloistering ourselves in silos through social media that feed us a world view with which we already agree, and thus I can't see that as a pathway to disciplinary health. Our community has strongly benefited from its diversity, being inclusive, and respecting those working from paradigms that are different than our own. While the "sociology of sport" may not be, at this stage of development, an entirely accurate banner, we need to think long and hard about alternatives to "frame our game" not only more accurately, but in a more egalitarian way.

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