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Sport-for-development: Inclusive, reflexive, and meaningful research in low- and middle-income settings

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ABSTRACT

Research in and around sport-for-development (SFD) has increased steadily since the first scholarly work in the field was conducted in the 1990s. As SFD has grown into an established and respected area of study, it has also diversified in its research approaches and methodologies. In this article, we reflect on our experiences as researchers in low- and middle-income countries and specifically discuss the combination of traditional research methods and innovative approaches to qualitative inquiry within two distinct projects that were funded under a single SFD program. We highlight the efficacy of a flexible, innovative, and locally-relevant research design, and advocate for inclusive, reflexive, and participatory research approaches during the monitoring and evaluation processes. Finally, we identify likely success factors and challenges for current SFD research, and offer recommendations for future qualitative inquiries in and around sport-based development programs.

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1. Introduction

The field of sport-for-development (SFD) has undergone significant growth and diversification over the past 15 years. All over the world, sport-based development programs aim to contribute to positive social, cultural, educational, psychological, physical, and economic change for disadvantaged communities and their individual members (Levermore & Beacom, 2009; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014). In their recent review of SFD literature, Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe (2016) identified that research within the SFD domain has predominantly been undertaken with a qualitative research lens but data collection in the SFD field has been largely confined to traditional qualitative methods, such as interviews, observation, and document analysis. This finding provides evidence for recent calls that have been made to encourage more innovative, culturally appropriate, and technologically advanced research methods as well as locally relevant presentations of findings in different SFD settings (Carroll, Dew, & Howden-Chapman, 2011; Garbutt, 2009; Siefken, Schofield, & Schulenkorf, 2014, 2015).

In this article, we report on the specific research approaches, methodologies, and methods employed during investigatory SFD research across two research projects in the Pacific islands region. While both projects were funded under the same

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Australian government SFD international aid program, they had separate and specific development foci; hence, they required tailored approaches to research engagement and delivery. In presenting our practical research engagement in more detail, we provide a critical and applied discussion of qualitative research methods and approaches used in SFD. In doing so, we have a desire to inform the development of culturally sensitive approaches in SFD, and to further current debates by outlining the innovative, qualitative methods we employed to achieve this. In particular, we utilized reflective surveys, stories of change, and photovoice/videography, which have received limited focus in SFD research to date.

2. Literature review

To explore the deeper meaning of a certain phenomenon, it is essential to follow a qualitative mode of inquiry (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2010; Young & Atkinson, 2012). For example, Eisner (1985) argued that "truth" can only be achieved through flexibility, prioritizing the subjective over the objective, intuition over the rational, interpretation over measurement, and surprise over the predictable. In this context, the qualitative researcher is very much like an artist at various stages in the research process, who—in line with Weber's concept of *Verstehen*—tries to establish an empathetic understanding[1] to explore different realities and multiple truths. In the context of SFD, numerous studies have applied a variety of qualitative research techniques to investigate, monitor, or evaluate different sport-based development programs. These approaches have largely drawn on "traditional" qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observation, focus groups, document analysis, and, in some cases, a blend of these tools. In contrast, quantitative research designs (e.g., Armour, Sandford, & Duncombe, 2013; Bloodworth, McNamee, & Bailey, 2012; Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007) and mixed method approaches (e.g., Mammen & Faulkner, 2013; O'Brien & Ponting, 2013; Okada & Young, 2012) are less prominent in the current body of work. For the purpose of this article—which provides a reflection on our experiences in qualitative research in the Pacific islands region—we focus our review on previous qualitative research that has been conducted in the field. Here, we broadly distinguish between traditional approaches and participatory research, and focus on reflexivity as a foundation for conducting meaningful and locally relevant research, particularly in low- and middle-income (LMIC) settings.

2.1. Traditional approaches in SFD research

The majority of studies investigating SFD employ multiple methods; typically a combination of interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and document analysis. For example, Okada and Young (2012) utilized open-ended interviews and participant observation to analyze the Siem Reap Hotel Football League in Cambodia. Similarly, Schulenkorf, Sugden, and Burdsey (2014) used interviewing techniques and focus group discussions to understand participant experiences of the Football for Peace program in Israel. Further applications of these traditional method combinations include interviews and focus groups (e.g., Gavin, McBrearty, & Harvey, 2013; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2013; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013), interviews and participant observation (e.g., Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Hill & Green, 2008; Intrator & Siegel, 2008; Ley & Rato Barrio, 2013; Light, 2010), and interviews and document analysis (e.g., Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007; Ekholm, 2013; MacIntosh & Spence, 2012). Larger research projects, including Masters and PhD theses, have typically utilised interviews, focus groups, participant observation and document analysis in a single study (see, for example, Cohen, 2013; Oliver, 2014; Schulenkorf, 2009).

While this brief overview provides only a snapshot of the most common research methods in qualitative SFD work, it assists in highlighting a reliance on traditional methods and, arguably, a lack of methodological innovation in the field. This observation is supported by highly charged methodological debates within the SFD literature regarding the legitimacy and efficacy of research methodology; for example, Hayhurst (2015) contended that there is a history of inequality and colonialism imbued in SFD, which extends to the research context. She argued that there is a need to disrupt "conventional" research processes in this space to account for the complex social relations and nuanced sociocultural contexts in which SFD programmes are situated.

Against this background—and considering the valuable contribution made by traditional methodologies in the initial exploration of SFD programming and associated processes—we are proposing a more participatory, reflective, and collaborative approach that extends existing data collection and research engagement tools. "Being collaborative" goes beyond "speaking to" individuals who are directly involved with SFD programming; in fact, it aims to create research spaces where power differences between research partners are less pronounced, critical reflection is encouraged, and research tools are jointly chosen and therefore most appropriate for the context (see Kay, 2012). In short, the collaborative process is underpinned by a quest for multiple knowledges that are embedded in local cultures and the understanding that local voices can and should be included to offer more value to in-country SFD programs (see also Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). This can generate insights for a variety of potential audiences, including those researchers actively engaged with the program, local sport and community organisations, as well as SFD scholars and practitioners more widely.

Our work builds on previous research by utilizing a cooperative and participatory approach, which fostered the production of a tailored research design that is empathetic to unique Pacific nation contexts. Furthermore, we have

[1] The German term Verstehen is best understood as an enhanced and deep understanding.

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developed new qualitative research tools that have not been widely used in the SFD space. By outlining the iterative nature of our applied research process and the development of specific research tools, we are aiming to be both transparent about our own experiences and provide practical guidelines and resources for others. Before we go into detail about the empirical reflections of our work, we will now provide a more detailed overview of participatory research and the underlying tenets that make this approach pertinent to work in SFD.

2.2. Participatory research

When undertaking research around SFD projects, the views, attitudes, and opinions toward development are often divergent, conflicting, contested, and controversial. Therefore, it is important for researchers to speak to as many relevant groups and stakeholders as possible. Even more important, perhaps, is the depth of engagement during these face-to-face encounters. Janesick (2001) emphasized that trustful relations, engagement, and rapport are key aspects of a successful qualitative investigation. In order to create these conditions, qualitative researchers are required to take an explicitly open-ended stance and—as we argue in this article—actively participate in the research. In other words, they are "active learners" in unknown territory who seek to engage and see things from other people's perspectives.

Participatory research involves planning and conducting the research process in partnership with the individuals whose lives, world, and experiences are being explored (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Participatory research has been conducted in a diverse range of contexts and disciplines, including agriculture (Kerr & Chirwa, 2004), health (Mc Menamin, Tierney, & Mac Farlane, 2015; Vaughan, 2013), youth violence (Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009; Hausman et al., 2013; Stoudt, 2007), and disability studies (Morgan, Moni, & Cuskelly, 2015; Whitzman, James, & Poweseu, 2013). In short, the focus of contemporary participatory research is on acquiring knowledge for action, facilitated by the analysis and reflection of people in local contexts; research methods underpinned by participatory "sensibilities" focus on researching *with*, rather than *on* people, which elicits opportunities for participants to have an influence over research processes and outcomes (Dawson, 2010).

Within the family of participatory research there are several manifestations, including participatory action research (PAR) and community-based PAR. These approaches have similar methodological philosophies, but differ according to the subject under study, the wider sociocultural context, and the overarching needs of the research (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). In this article, PAR is understood and applied as a particular orientation to inquiry that encapsulates principles of ethical representation, partnership, transparency, and ownership, in order to extend the rights and hear the voices of those involved. In other words, we concur with Whitley and Johnson (2015), who recommended engagement in collaborative work that aims to situate the less powerful at the center of knowledge generation processes and create research spaces that facilitate trusting, comfortable, and balanced interactions that are also potentially empowering (see also Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Hayhurst, 2015).

2.3. Participatory research in SFD

In the context of SFD research, questions have been raised over the (re)presentation of knowledge and what can be considered "evidence" in the SFD movement (e.g., Chawansky, 2015; Darnell, 2010; Hayhurst, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2010). These questions are posed in explicit reference to numerous "tick-the-box" evaluation exercises, which utilize simplistic quantitative measures in an attempt to provide evidence for the alleged 'success' of SFD programs. In response, researchers have argued that in order to ameliorate the effects of these simplistic and at times cynical research methods, it is critical to engage in professional scholarly activity that provides academic rigor and more meaningful methodological approaches (Kay, Mansfield, & Jeanes, 2016). In other words, new approaches should challenge traditional top-down power structures, in which researchers, sport programmers, and aid or development organizations dominate the design, research, and evaluation of development programs, rather than those community members whom the programs aim to benefit (Crivello et al., 2009; Hayhurst, 2009; Schinke, McGannon, Watson, & Busanich, 2013).

Accounting for these critiques and calls to action, participatory approaches in the field of SFD offer an opportunity to address local priorities and perspectives in nuanced environments. In this article, we have engaged with these principals to outline how they can be applied in a Pacific island context and to present the specific qualitative tools we developed to respond to emerging issues. This seems particularly important given that practical dimensions of research are somewhat underrepresented amongst the theoretical discussions of PAR. Moreover, consideration of local perspectives is paramount for researchers from high-income settings who are working in LMICs to engage with locally accepted, relevant, and meaningful approaches (Lawson, 2005; Schinke et al., 2013). In short, we argue that a coupling of theoretical discussions of inclusion with tangible, on the ground experiences concerning the evolution of locally relevant program and research processes can progress important conversations in the SFD space and assist with the development of more engaging and meaningful practices.

As part of the suggested conversations around inclusive PAR, it is important to consider some of the wider constraints attached to this type of research design. Some of these constraints are internal to academic circles and relate to ongoing struggles in academic and program stakeholder contexts concerning what is considered 'quality' research. For example, in a recent review of qualitative research in the field of sport management, Shaw and Hoeber (2016) emphasised the high value placed on quantitative research by university institutions and program partners. The authors went on to suggest that in some

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higher education environments, there is a subsequent lack of training provided to doctoral students and emerging researchers about the value of PAR approaches and hence limited possibility for conducting research with a qualitative or more 'artistic' focus.

Furthermore, PAR research is often time-consuming because of the level of local community engagement required and the need to continually reflect and act upon ongoing processes. Consequently, scholars might be discouraged from undertaking this type of work because of competing time demands; in fact, the University system often shows limited flexibility and support and instead applies rigid performance and time structures that arguably reduce researchers' willingness and ability to engage. Therefore, it is important to continue generating dialog about the value of PAR and its significant contribution to creating significant internal and external knowledge.

Finally, there seems to be a lack of transparent method(s) papers that are published in sport-related academic journals; in fact, 'standard papers' rarely provide the opportunity for a detailed discussion of data collection processes including the inherent 'messiness' of executing research studies on the ground-something that would be particularly important for research conducted in resource-poor and complex sociocultural environments.

One way to address such constraints, and to encourage a stronger practice-theory link, is to place more focus on the transparency of the research design by outlining the choice of methods and tools used to support the analysis process. Hence in this, we not only advocate the use of PAR, but we also provide a clear insight into the processes and innovative methods we employed, which were borne from an iterative research process. In particular, for our empirical work in the Pacific islands region, we undertook participatory action research in addition to adopting a reflexive mindset, in an attempt to produce authentic, ethically responsible, and culturally appropriate SFD scholarship. This was particularly important given that our research was conducted as part of a wider monitoring and evaluation process, with industry partners both in-country and in Australia, to assess the impacts, outcomes, and progress of two SFD projects. Hence, we were constantly required to reflect on our own position in the field and social identities overall; an important aspect of qualitative research that will now be addressed in more detail.

2.4. Reflexivity

As open and engaged learners, researchers should take a reflective stance during all stages of the research. According to Willig (2013), "personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research" (p. 10). Reflexivity is an important part of the research process, across a diverse range of sociocultural settings. In the context of SFD, where local knowledge and contextual experiences are considered essential ingredients for successful research, scholars are therefore required to get to know the "unknown" of particular social setting. One of the best ways to do this is through immersion in a new environment; however, "as [a] full immersion can be rather intense, the researcher is recommended to go in and out of the field at regular intervals in order to take a step back and reflect efficiently on the situation under study" (Bray, 2008, p. 304).

In this context, reflection is a crucial element throughout the different stages of empirical SFD research, including the initial design phase of a project. Once the program is implemented, it is also important to acknowledge that reflection extends beyond immediate SFD participants and interviewees to wider program stakeholders. For example, reflections can contribute to the clarification and regular adjustments of stakeholder and organizer expectations, structures, and processes. Finally, if international funders are supporting local communities in their SFD efforts, the structure, processes, and power relations of such an engagement may also deserve some critical discussion and reflection (Darnell, 2010; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). In sum, we argue that together with regular in-country community visits over the entire duration of a project, the process of reflection is likely to lead to the identification of the most relevant, practical, and effective approaches to research and the creation of reciprocal engagement, rapport, and trust with communities and interviewees. We have endeavored to follow these guiding principles throughout our research work in the Pacific islands region.

3. Social context

3.1. SFD program context

It is important to situate any research approach within the context, setting, and culture of the participants. In our case, this research was based on two SFD projects that were designed, implemented, and funded as part of the *Pacific Sports Partnerships* program, an Australian government initiative funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The program facilitates cooperation between Australian national sporting organizations (NSOs) with their Pacific counterparts, in order to deliver SFD programs with a specific focus on social development aims. The National Rugby League (NRL) and Netball Australia (NA) are the two sporting organizations that deliver the programs on which our research was based; each had a number of overarching aims that were relatively flexible and open to development and adaptation.

A participatory research approach was applied across several research sites, each with distinct sociocultural differences and divergent program foci. The primary aims of the NA programs in Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and the Cook Islands were (a) to reduce the impact of noncommunicable diseases and (b) to develop female leadership capacity. The NRL's program focused on Papua New Guinea specifically, where projects were originally designed around two key aims: (a) to contribute to students' educational engagement; and (b) to communicate positive social messages, with a particular

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emphasis on gender equity and respect. Both SFD programs included an extensive and detailed program design phase engaging the Australian NSO, Australian Aid, the in-country NSO, and key community stakeholders in each nation. In particular, the NA pre-program design phase involved the engagement of the research team with local communities and stakeholders to better understand their needs and current capacity, and allow this knowledge to drive the direction of both the research design and the implementation of the programming. Incorporating this phase was imperative to address the diverse ethnic, geographical, and sociocultural influences within each nation and region, as well as to identify the most relevant project outcomes for participating communities. Through the engagement of the research team in the design phase of each project, a clearly defined and culturally appropriate research and evaluation approach was able to be developed.

3.2. Cultural context

While all SFD programs funded by the Australian Government in the Pacific region are linked together under the Pacific Sports Partnerships umbrella, significant cultural differences exist between the participating Pacific nations; for example, Tonga, Samoa, and the Cook Islands are Polynesian countries, while Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are Melanesian. Regrettably, it is often prohibitive, given the scope and length of academic articles, to describe all the distinct features of the countries and people that take part in cross-country research studies. However, to do justice to our research, and in a genuine attempt to avoid accusations of hypercriticism regarding the decolonization approach taken, it is necessary to provide at least a brief overview of the diversity present in and between participating nations. Together with the unique program contexts alluded to earlier, this also provides further justification for the intentionally nuanced and reflexive research approach employed in our work.

First, there are complex social stratification and governance structures present across all of the countries. For example, in Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, chief-based hierarchical systems operate alongside Western-styled political and legislative systems. In local communities, social ranking hierarchies dictate power and authority; leadership largely correlates with age, gender, and ability (see e.g., Heard et al., in press; Khoo, Schulenkorf, & Adair, 2014). This also means that conservative gender roles are prominent and women are expected to perform primarily domestic tasks in these localities (Siefken et al., 2014, 2015). Second, there are linguistic and cultural differences between the distinct ethnic groups. The strongest example of this heterogeneity is in Papua New Guinea, where over 800 separate languages and dialects exist in a country of four million people (Whitford & Dunn, 2014). Divided by languages, customs, and traditions, intercommunity conflicts and tribal warfare present ongoing issues, particularly in the highland provinces and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Third, many of the Pacific Island nations consist of dozens of separate islands; for example, Vanuatu has 83 and the Cook Islands has 15. Finally, the socioeconomic standard and living conditions vary considerably across program locations. While in some countries the sporting infrastructure is more developed (e.g., Cook Islands), there are other examples where community sport is severely underfunded. Furthermore, transport options are limited and communication infrastructure remains problematic. This is particularly relevant in the mountainous terrain of Papua New Guinea's highlands, where local conditions create severe restrictions for SFD program implementation and all activities require expensive, comprehensive, and often reactive logistical planning.

In addition to the geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural disparities between the participating nations, there are also distinct differences in their history, with each experiencing its own unique relationship with different colonial powers. The only nation in the Pacific never to give up its sovereignty is the Kingdom of Tonga; in 1900, the country formed an official Friendship Treaty with Great Britain and achieved full independence in 1970 (The Commonwealth, 2016). Samoa, in comparison, was colonized by Germany in 1900 and remained under German rule until 1914. Administration of the country was then handed to New Zealand at the start of World War I; Samoa eventually gained independence in 1962 (The Commonwealth, 2016). Vanuatu is unique in that the region was historically part of the Tongan Empire, but from 1906, it was ruled concurrently by both the British and French until the end of World War II. Official independence was finally granted after an extended period of internal turmoil in 1980 (The Commonwealth, 2016). Meanwhile, the Cook Islands became a British protectorate in 1888 and was later included within the boundaries of the Colony of New Zealand from 1901 until 1965. Today, the Cook Islands is a self-governing country in free association with New Zealand (The Commonwealth, 2016). Finally, Papua New Guinea has a complex colonial history, with first European contact being in the 16th century via Portuguese and Spanish navigators. In the late 19th Century, both Germany and Britain colonized Papua New Guinea; Germany took possession of the northeast quarter of the island until 1914, when Australia seized the German colony. In 1902, the British territory of Papua New Guinea was placed under the authority of the Commonwealth of Australia with Australian administration lasting from 1905 until independence in 1975. In recent years, Papua New Guinea has also been subject to a nine-year secessionist revolt on the island of Bougainville, lasting from 1989 until 1998. The Autonomous Region of Bougainville is currently seeking independence from Papua New Guinea (The Commonwealth, 2016).

This brief historical overview provides a snapshot of the diversity and complexity across the participating countries. Together with the social, cultural, geographic and economic peculiarities of each nation, these factors highlight once more the need for clearly defined and locally informed research. In other words, as international researchers we were aware of the importance of a collaborative and participant-focused study design, in order to attend to the complex community environments around the respective SFD projects. We now turn toward discussing in more depth the participatory and locally informed research design that has underpinned our engagement with the NA and NRL programs in the Pacific islands.

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4. Participatory research design

Before outlining our participatory research design in more detail, it is important to situate our work within the relevant ontological, epistemological, and research paradigms. In line with previous work in PAR settings, a central tenet of our approach has been the empowerment of the research participants, consistent with a critical theory paradigm (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002), with a particular focus on the coproduction of knowledge. Reza (2007) argued that PAR differs from a traditional constructivist approach to research in that it contains a unique political component: the research is intended to promote social change. As such, we entered into the research process with a desire to assist in the ongoing development of the SFD programs and to understand and utilize the emerging impacts and outcomes of each program. The discussion to follow provides reflective insights into the issues we faced and the importance of working with a research design that was flexible and responsive to local community needs. We highlight how our participatory approach influenced the continued implementation and improvement of the two programs and demonstrate the benefits of using innovative research tools to make sense of unique sociocultural contexts. The ongoing research design and implementation phases of both the NA and NRL programs will be discussed under the following five thematic headings: (1) pre-evaluation; (2) research ethics; (3) data collection; (4) challenges and unintended consequences; and (5) research innovations.

4.1. Pre-evaluation

A key component of the programs was the creation of an extensive and inclusive design process for research monitoring and evaluation. To ensure that the research approach and data collected for each nation and each program were culturally and methodologically appropriate and engaging, in-country workshops were held with local program staff and board members before the beginning of any official research activity. Here, the aim was to get to know and cooperate closely with the respective national sport bodies to initially work through a program logic model approach that aimed to identify the inputs, participants, outputs, outcomes, and, ideally, impacts of the SFD programs being implemented in each nation. The next step involved open discussion on how best to design these programs to meet the specific developmental aims. In short, we attempted to create a more balanced research process by striving to work with local communities to understand local needs, value the perspectives of those most closely involved, and ensure program aims were relevant. Hence, the pre-evaluation phase was designed to not only 'look back' and identify existing limitations and future opportunities for measurement and evaluation, but also to 'look forward' and assist the staff and board members with the planning and development of their SFD programs.

Staff and board members in each nation worked with the research team in a collaborative approach to develop current resources into new activities and projects that specifically met the SFD program development aims. Although the aims from the Pacific Sports Partnerships funding bodies were predominantly developmental, there was also scope for the in-country national sport bodies to develop their own capacity for governance, policy, and program delivery, effectively working with the research team to prepare a strategic and operational plan for the 3-year funding period. The benefit of this design phase was the development of clear program outcomes that were desired by the local community prior to any activities being implemented. Previous work has often critiqued SFD programs for imposing interventions and working from the agenda of aid organizations or other external funders (Kay, 2012), where the power of actors in high-income countries relative to those in LMICs is a commonly articulated theme in the majority of this work (e.g., Black, 2010; Hayhurst, 2009; Lindsey & Grattan, 2012).

For the research team involved in the different projects, the approach outlined above was time-consuming but inherently valuable, as we became extraordinarily familiar with the variety of established and planned program activities, were able to get to know and engage with local staff from the beginning of the project planning phase, were able to identify preexisting sources of data, and managed to develop sound professional relationships with the key individuals in each nation. Moreover, key stakeholders and influencers were engaged in the research process, including nongovernmental organization partners (e.g., Save the Children, UN Women), government departments (e.g., Ministry of Sport, Education and Culture), national sport federation staff and boards, and community participants (e.g., teachers, coaches and community leaders).

It could be argued that it may have been easier, cheaper, and less time-consuming to deploy a single research design across all programs and nations; however, this level of deep engagement with the different program activities—and the linking of activities to the desired development outcomes and impacts for each nation or region—ensured that we identified and implemented a specifically targeted research design for each location that was impact-focused, thereby addressing a common criticism of SFD research (i.e., that it is too descriptive of activities at the expense of the individually stated development aims). Unfortunately, the engagement of a research team in the design phase of a project is largely uncommon. Often, when working with industry partners the stages of bidding for funding and program design have already elapsed. A retrospective engagement of researchers often goes hand in hand with inadequate attention directed at monitoring and evaluation processes, including a lack of research elements as strategic parts of the overarching program framework. In other words, research is often considered as an afterthought only, rather than being part of a holistic and strategic process to understand initial program design and ongoing implementation. Down the track, this presents a significant challenge not only for researchers, but is also a lost opportunity for those operating on the ground; programs miss out on the value of holistic and iterative research that can inform locally relevant program design and desired development outcomes.

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4.2. Research ethics

For researchers engaged in a project with an active focus on the participants, and one which aims to privilege the participant voice and cultural context, the requirement of presenting institutional research ethics committees with all details of the interview, multipage participant information statements, and written consent forms created significant challenges. For example, although English may be the language of government in many Pacific nations, it is not the first language for many research participants. Varying degrees of written literacy caused moments of shame and embarrassment for research participants during interview and focus group sessions, as we were required to provide participant information documents and consent forms that they were expected to read and sign. Especially in a group setting, some participants felt ashamed when they attempted to read the numerous pages and took significantly more time than other members of the group. Furthermore, the requirement of signing an academically drafted document that was difficult to fully understand created significant distress. The discomfort and unease for many participants was palpable, and the research team was required to develop new, supportive strategies to ensure that the research participants were able to fully understand the project and, more importantly, to provide true informed consent.

Importantly, the previously listed challenges are not simply addressed by translating documents into other languages, but by providing information and obtaining consent in a locally relevant manner, without assuming strong levels of literacy. To respond to this issue, the research team, when appropriate, would sit with individual participants and speak with them about the project, and their rights as a participant. Often this occurred with the assistance of a local friend or colleague to interpret when needed; subsequently, the research team could seek truly informed consent via voice recording. This approach prioritized the protection of participants and provided equitable access to information. As a consequence, their level of comfort with the process increased and misunderstandings could be clarified. Unfortunately, this flexibility is rarely reflected in the rather strict research ethics guidelines of universities. In fact, these types of institutional processes exemplify arguments within SFD work that knowledge and resources flow from high-income countries to LMICs, subsequently perpetuating colonial discourses (Darnell, 2010, 2015; Lindsey & Grattan, 2012). The unease around English language skills created a clear power imbalance, as local participants were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with standard research protocols. In the future, it can and should be expected that institutional research ethics committees reflect on their own practices and processes that aim to secure and encourage ethical behavior in different social settings. Based on our experiences in these LMIC settings, some of the existing requirements for seeking consent are in fact anything but ethical.

4.3. Data collection

Similar to much of the published research in the SFD domain, our primary methods of data collection postdesign phase included traditional elements of qualitative inquiry: individual interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. These were conducted with a variety of different participant groups, including national sport organization staff and board members, program stakeholders from government and industry, program participants, volunteers, teachers, coaches, and officials. However, due to the scope and cultural complexities of these programs, it very quickly became obvious that these methods were not sufficient to adequately capture experiences in the field. In fact, from the first round of fieldwork, we found that the programs and participants themselves required the development of more appropriate and innovative methods of data collection. The following section will discuss the first phase of this development in further detail by briefly presenting the three nontraditional and engaging methods that we employed during our research: reflective surveying, stories of change, and photography/videography.

4.3.1. Reflective surveys

The sheer size and scale of the NRL program in Papua New Guinea meant that traditional methods of data collection were insufficient in providing a voice to literally thousands of participants across the different regions of the country. Therefore, a supplementary research approach was developed, which used reflective surveys delivered via iPad software that were managed by the program development officers. These reflective surveys were used to collect data from participants, including teacher training program participants, program development officers, and program classroom teachers. In contrast to standard survey instruments, the reflective surveys did not simply request feedback from participants regarding their experience with the program; rather, they asked them to reflect on what they learned about themselves and others through their experience and how they may change their behavior or approach in the future. Additionally, in line with a PAR approach, reflective surveys were used to gain insight into areas for program revision or extension, from both the program deliverers and also those directly and indirectly engaged with the program as participants.

The NA programs in Tonga and Samoa also used iPad-facilitated surveys. In addition to the approach used by the NRL program, iPad-facilitated surveys were used to collect detailed pre- and postprogram health and physical activity data from SFD netball program participants to supplement the in-depth research interviews conducted. Moreover, capacity-building surveys of women involved in the netball training and professional development programs were conducted to identify potential women's leadership and empowerment outcomes, again in addition to in-depth interviews with a sample of these women.

The use of technology facilitated real-time engagement with the program and lessened the burden of the research on those delivering the programs on the ground. Through the use of iPad-facilitated software, the survey results were directly

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entered and stored within an accessible cloud-based system, limiting the administrative duties of data collection and data entry for in-country program staff. The software used in these programs facilitates off-line collection, as it can be used in the field without internet connection for an extended period of time. Once an iPad is returned to the office with internet enabled, all data are automatically uploaded for program review and research purposes. Another benefit of using iPads to collect data in these Pacific nations is the relative novelty of this method; participants enjoyed using the iPad and the visual component of the survey questions and responses, in comparison to a traditional paper-based survey or facilitated interview.

Reflective surveys allow a research team to extend an often-used method of data collection through the incorporation of reflexivity, on behalf of both the researcher and the research participant. An important part of this process was the explanation, in organisational settings and in one-on-one discussions with key staff, that these surveys were an opportunity for their insight and expertise to be captured, which would directly impact the program (PAR), as well as personal growth (reflexivity). Therefore, we are not arguing for the dismissal of a standard survey as a method of collecting data within the SFD context, but we recommend that programs use the opportunity provided during a research project to actively engage participants in the research process, not only as a source of data.

4.3.2. Stories of change

Stories of change, also referred to in the research literature as Most Significant Change, is a dialogical, story-based research technique (Dart and Davies, 2003). The collection of participant stories of change was a key requirement of the Australian government funding and the NRL program initially employed public relations or media content approach to collect stories of change. Here, in-country staff used the video function on their iPad to record an interview with a participant. However, due to the scale of these programs and the lack of expertise from many in-country staff in the skills required to both effectively use the video software and undertake an engaging research interview, this approach did not achieve the desired results. With tens of thousands of program participants each year, the ability of the program staff to collect the stories from every child was simply unmanageable. Building on the local experiences of the in-country staff members, the research team therefore developed a novel and innovative method to collect stories of change from the child participants in the NRL program. In particular, we suggested adding an additional in-classroom session to the 5-week SFD program where students were asked to write *their* story about the program, which had a dual benefit of also leveraging the educational engagement aim of the program. For students in elementary grades or with low levels of written literacy, an option was provided to draw a picture of their experiences. To ensure that the children's voices were unfiltered and that their stories were told "as is," the only instruction provided was for each child to tell "their story" about the program. The story-of-change approach developed was both relevant to understand the children's perceptions of the program, and it was undertaken in a manner that was situationally appropriate for primary school-aged children. In addition, the Papua New Guinea tradition of storytelling for education and knowledge sharing was familiar and culturally appropriate. Overall, this amendment to the research design facilitated a meaningful and culturally appropriate method to engage the children in another classroom literacy activity, while simultaneously providing a rich body of data for analysis. In line with the principles of PAR, the use of a story-of-change approach provides those least privileged (young children) with a voice and the ability to enact change within the program and their community through these stories as part of a broader monitoring and evaluation program.

4.3.3. Photos and videos

Although less innovative than the previous two methods, another important extension to the research approach in both programs was the collection of photos and short video clips of program sites and activities. The photos/videos were collected by both the research team and program staff in each country. By providing iPads for the reflective surveys to all in-country program staff, we were serendipitously able to provide the staff with a simple tool to record photos and videos of their day-to-day activities. Through these images and videos, the research team was able to gain a deeper insight into the variety of program locations, participants, and activities being undertaken.

This method of data collection has become a de facto photographic/videographic journal, and can in some way compensate for the inability of the research team to be on the ground at all times. This approach to exploring and understanding the day-to-day realities of those involved in the program shares common principles with photovoice methods. Photovoice is based on the theoretical literature of education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and nontraditional approaches to documentary photography (Wang, 1999). The important elements of the method include providing participants with the opportunity to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, promoting critical dialogue, and allowing participants' perspectives to reach policymakers (Vaughan, 2013). By adopting this type of approach, we were able to gather rich insights into the pertinent aspects of the program for staff (see also McHugh, Coppola, & Sinclair, 2013), which could then be presented to decision makers at an organizational level. Traditionally, photovoice methods encourage participants to engage in critical thinking styles about issues in their communities and the effectiveness of program interventions (Wang & Burris, 1997). Deeper insights into the most pertinent issues and emerging "changes" can thus be generated by accessing the reflexive commentary of individuals directly immersed in the sociocultural context.

4.4. Challenges and unintended consequences

Developing an engaging, participant-focused, and innovative research design has been an exciting and intellectually stimulating process; however, it is not without its challenges. Some challenges identified are likely to be common across

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many SFD programs. On the other hand, other challenges, including the increased reliance on technology compared to traditional research methods, may be unique to our specific research context.

An important challenge across all programs and nations represented in this project has been the adoption of technology, despite being designed to decrease the workload of the in-country staff in data collection and data entry. While hardware and software platforms were relatively easy to operate for an experienced user, local program staff were often fearful or hesitant to use the "brand new" iPads. This fear was based on two key concerns: first, the risk of losing or breaking the device itself; and second, the fear of the data "disappearing." After a period of time, and with ongoing practice sessions and encouragement by program management and the research team, these fears and concerns had abated and, on the whole, staff engagement and feedback has since been positive.

A more complex challenge has been the lack of interest or perhaps understanding of research or monitoring and evaluation more generally. The in-country program staff have a very clear understanding of monitoring (record keeping and measurement against targets), but less so of critical analysis and engagement with the data for explanatory and/or exploratory purposes. There was also an initial hesitation by local staff to engage in any research activity, for fear of saying the "wrong thing." This meant that there was an educative role for the research team to develop a strategic understanding that appropriate research can be a positive element for SFD programs. For example, the explanation that research and/or monitoring and evaluation exercises may well provide the evidence base for further development of the program and to support requests to funders for additional and ongoing resources was something new and exciting for many local program staff.

The final challenge is the phasing out of the research team at the completion of their research engagement: first, to train and develop in-country staff in the often unfamiliar area of research; and second, to hand over the monitoring and evaluation process as ongoing operations to the in-country national sport organization. With a key program aim of empowering local communities, it is the role of the research team to provide opportunity and development for in-country staff to effectively assume the monitoring and evaluation role in the future. Unfortunately, this process rarely receives any consideration from authorities and it lacks financial and human resources to effectively manage the transition toward local ownership.

4.5. Research innovations

The Pacific Sports Partnerships research projects have been in progress since 2014, and they have grown and evolved substantially in that time. Because of the PAR approach and the existence of a reflexive and engaged research team, the development of both the researchers and the research design is ongoing. Future initiatives for these research projects include the (a) theoretical analysis of spontaneous photos taken by staff, (b) capacity building of local researchers, (c) theoretical extension of the program for gender and sport diplomacy outcomes, and (d) use of local maps with children to discuss safe spaces to play.

First, the photos and videos spontaneously taken by in-country program staff are both reflective of program locations and what is important to the local staff and their communities. Research and analysis methods will be developed, drawing on the concept of photovoice, to interpret and discuss this rich source of research data. Second, a key component of all in-country programs is currently focused on the engagement and training of in-country staff as active and recognized members of the research team. This is already partially in place in the netball programs in Tonga and Samoa, and includes the naming of these in-country staff who are directly engaged in the research data collection as authors on research publications. Building the capability of local program staff, and reducing the reliance on external researchers from high-income settings, is a key outcome of the PAR approach within these projects. This approach may also be extended to sharing and discussing emerging research themes with the staff participants for their reflections.

Third, in 2015 the Australian Government developed a sport diplomacy strategy and now requires programs to report on the public diplomacy outcomes of aid programs. Through this new development, the research team is engaged in the development of appropriate methods and measures for, often intangible, sport diplomacy outcomes. The development of this new research component is in part to support the industry partners to meet the program-funding requirement, but also clearly serves as an area suitable for further theoretical advancement. Finally, for many participants, the sport programs provide a safe space for play and personal development (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Future research in key areas of conflict or postconflict rehabilitation (e.g., in the Autonomous Region of Bouganville) could use local maps with children to discuss safe spaces to play, through drawing or coloring activities. The use of age-appropriate methods for discussing difficult or challenging issues, such as personal or community safety, have been under trialed in other volatile communities (for example in Columbia in areas with drug cartels c.f. Terre des Hommes, 2016) and will be translated as appropriate for the Pacific context.

5. Conclusion

Due to their scale and complexity, the two SFD programs presented in this article required innovative, inclusive, and flexible research designs to deliver appropriate recommendations for enhanced program delivery. Without these characteristics, any research design would have failed to capture relevant and meaningful in-depth data from local participants. In short, flexible designs ensured that rich descriptions of outcomes and opportunities for practical and theoretical developments were achieved, which underpinned both industry reports as well as academic research outputs.

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The PAR approach that underpinned our research ensured that the voices of local people were privileged over the voices of the researchers; in fact, local community members were actively engaged in the project from inception: in design, data collection, and recommendations for program development and improvement. At the same time, our international research team conducted this study with the intention of being inclusive and reflexive, which meant involving local communities as true partners, rather than data sources. Based on our findings—but perhaps more importantly through the *processes* of our engagement—we are able to conclude that a reflexive and reciprocal approach leads to a much deeper, richer, and more meaningful understanding of SFD in context.

Questions remain, however, about whether complex issues of power, inequality, and colonialism can be truly addressed by engaging with PAR and promoting locally driven methods. For example, critique has been leveled at PAR for failing to 'decolonize' knowledge production and for actually reinforcing epistemic privilege by claiming authenticity and 'voice' (Janes, 2016). For instance, there are arguments that any 'decolonizing effort' is at risk of reinforcing colonial binaries. In fact, by engaging in often, simplistic oppositional analysis between Indigenous and Western knowledge epistemologies, we may fail to recognise more complex social conditions and knowledge spaces (Agrawal, 1995; Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Reuben, 2012). Applied to our study it could be argued that in a country like Papua New Guinea, which is home to hundreds of cultural and indigenous tribes that speak over 800 languages, it is simply impossible to represent 'local voices'. This in turn means that questions of equality, representation, and privilege will always remain.

In this article, we have attempted to be transparent about the differences in research knowledge between ourselves, as international scholars, and the wide variety of communities we partnered with. A number of practical tools were developed that aimed at minimizing distance and increasing engagement. In particular, we removed ourselves from the data collection process as much as possible; ensured data were collected in local languages; promoted the perspectives of local communities; and supported two-way learning via technical and cultural workshops. The latter also resulted in a number of innovations in our research projects, including the effective use of electronic data collection that was facilitated by iPads. Supplemented with face-to-face interviews and program observations conducted during regular on-site visits, the overall pool of rich and relevant data was significantly expanded. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that the use of advanced technology such as iPads will automatically generate a situation of inequality and external influence, which may lead to unintended consequences, including negative social impacts such as jealousy, frustration, or (perceived) dependency. To explore these consequences and potential solutions in more detail, from a decolonization perspective and beyond, should provide fascinating opportunities for qualitative research in the future.

Overall, in this article we have presented our practical research engagement in SFD projects across five Pacific Island nations. Based on a critical discussion of traditional as well as innovative qualitative research approaches and methods, we have attempted to inform the development of progressive yet culturally sensitive PAR in the field of SFD. Despite the numerous challenges faced in both theory and practice, we conclude that the employment of an inclusive, flexible, reflexive, and locally relevant research design is not only beneficial to participants and their communities, but it is equally rewarding for researchers in the field.

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