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The methodological dance: critical reflections on conducting a cross-cultural comparative research project on 'Sport for Development and Peace'

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Abstract

Social scientific research requires engagement with individuals, groups and or organisations embedded within specific sectors and locations. The 'Sport for a Better World?' project aimed to examine the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) sector within multiple international locations through fieldwork conducted by a four-person research team. This paper discusses the methodological benefits and challenges of this methodological approach, with a particular focus on working with individuals and groups as gatekeepers, encultured informants, translators and volunteers. In turn, we describe and contextualise the levels of exchange expected by stakeholder partners as well as the implications of our identity as white, international researchers. Overall, we argue for the importance of understanding: the agency and needs of local actors amidst transnational networks; the extent to which history and politics inform everyday experiences and contemporary research encounters; and the likelihood that unequal power relations, particularly along lines of race, class and geography will affect data collection and interpretation. We also discuss various methodological strategies we negotiated in-the-field, and how these insights inform our understandings of the social, political and cultural environment in which SDP programmes operate in different locations.

Introduction

In 2014, we began work on a social scientific research project, entitled 'Sport for a Better World?', funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, examining the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) sector. This 2-year project was essentially comparative in method, with research being conducted in five international locations – Jamaica, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Zambia – and centred on three major themes, specifically the ability of SDP to advance human rights, empower people with disabilities, and facilitate peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-conflict contexts. The research project was thus located within the large body of research conducted into SDP over the past fifteen years undertaken predominantly within the Global South (See Beutler 2008; Kidd 2008; Levermore & Beacom 2009; Darnell 2012; Coalter 2013).

In this paper, we discuss some key methodological issues and challenges that we encountered during our research project. Data collection in our diverse locations was centred largely on qualitative methods, primarily fieldwork and interviews with SDP stakeholders such as officials and volunteers

with non-governmental and governmental organisations, sport federations, as well as local user groups of SDP programmes. These stakeholder groups or 'clusters' were central to the sampling framework within our research design. Research was undertaken primarily in five different locations – Jamaica, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Zambia – in order to maximise the cross-cultural comparative reach of the findings from the study. Further research was undertaken at SDP conferences and at the headquarters of major international SDP stakeholders such as leading Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy bodies. The project focused on major SDP fields of peace-building, disability, and human rights in each location, in order to secure a consistent and comparative focus for the research in different settings.

The project highlighted the methodological complexities of conducting research using multiple researchers, with multiple partners, in multiple locations. To that end, in this paper we discuss and reflect upon the individuals who assisted our research including gatekeepers, encultured informants, translators and volunteers. We also consider the relationships formed between us as embodied researchers, with the socio-cultural baggage we carry, and the SDP organisations we worked with as well as the forms of exchange and expectation that emerged within such partnerships. Thus, whilst focusing much of our attention on the individual and organisational networks that we formed, we also consider our own identity as researchers within multiple international contexts.

The broad aim of the paper is to enhance the social scientific understanding of the methodological challenges, dilemmas and issues that arise when conducting research within the fields of SDP, as well as within international development and peace-building efforts more widely. To date, research into SDP has generated some valuable insights and reflections on methodology. Notable studies have been single-authored (Hayhurst 2013; Forde 2015), drawn from summaries of the literature (Darnell & Hayhurst 2014), or based on data from one or two locations or regions (see, for example, Nicholls *et al.* 2011). Critical analyses of the process and politics of monitoring & evaluation within SDP activity have also emerged (Levermore 2011; Kay 2012; Jeanes & Lindsey 2014). These studies have provided important insights into the challenges of research within SDP activity, such as how to measure its effects and impacts, as well as the complexity of researching the SDP sector itself as global North subjects. However, less attention has been paid to emergent relationships with local SDP actors as research partners or gatekeepers particularly across various locations and/or when involving the perspectives of more than one researcher. This paper therefore seeks to add to methodological considerations in SDP in two broad senses: first, by providing a more strongly comparative cross-cultural dimension, in being centred on five very different research locations; second, by drawing on a team-based study, which has featured the four of us working on the same project but in different settings and with different partners.

Specifically, we discuss three main methodological issues that arose from this ongoing study: gaining and maintaining access with research groups; the exchange and expectation issues that have emerged from our evolving relationships with research and 'user' groups; and, issues relating to identity and international relations, for example in regard to our white, educated, middle-class, and global North identities within a global South context. We submit that these insights illustrate the importance of undertaking qualitative SDP research in ways that recognise the following: the agency and needs of local actors amidst transnational networks; the extent to which history and politics inform everyday experiences and contemporary research encounters; and the likelihood that unequal power relations, particularly along lines of race, class and geography will affect data collection and interpretation. All of these issues need to be considered in order to conduct SDP research that is nuanced, critical, robust and ethical. That said, we underline here that the focus of this paper is the methodological issues arising from our research project; we do not have the scope or space here to enter into discussions of the project's detailed research design or substantive findings.

Gaining and maintaining research access

Gatekeepers and encultured informants

Many social investigations into the SDP sector have required the construction of academic-stakeholder partnerships. One good reason among many for developing these links relates to the practicalities of doing the research. Conducting research into SDP in complex and largely foreign environments requires the researcher to gain access in order to facilitate engagement with, and blend in among key research groups. NGOs tend to be the ideal partners and potential gatekeepers, conveniently located and positioned between the international development sector and local recipient populations (See Pisani 2008; Lewis & Kanji 2009). With this in mind, many research methodologies are designed around, and dependent on, particular levels and kinds of cooperation that are afforded by these key stakeholders. Very rarely are academics able to initiate research into the SDP field, and its myriad stakeholders, programmes and campaigns, without this type of initial support.

In the SDP context, NGO officials may act as constructive initial gatekeepers; subsequently, snowball methods may be applied, often by contacting many of the gatekeeper's colleagues and contacts, in order to maximise the number and diversity of potential participants within the project. Gatekeepers, broadly defined as 'key people who let us in, give us permission, or grant access', were in many instances a valuable and necessary part of the organisation and management of our fieldwork enquiries (O'Reilly 2009, p. 132). Often, the initial research entrée highlights the 'strength of weak ties', in the sense that, up to the point of beginning research, the researcher will have relatively limited prior links and ties to those contacts who provide

the strongest access to these research groups. In Kosovo, for example, initial links were enabled through a mix of fortunate meetings with local NGO officials at international conferences, wider links to international colleagues in higher education who had taught in Kosovo, and some prior ties with international NGOs which undertook work there. All of these contacts provided direct links to their organisations and close colleagues, and, to assist research snowballing, provided lists of many other key stakeholders in the SDP field across the nation. In the context of Zambia, contacts were made with NGOs at various events prior to the field visit but more robust contacts were made 'on the ground' where snowballing seemed a normal part of initial physical contact with gatekeepers. The Zambian case highlighted the use of gatekeepers as a controlling presence to access as well. When talking to one gatekeeper, flippant or snide remarks about the potential usefulness of another, was noted on several occasions. This highlights that we need to be mindful that gatekeepers can be instrumental in shaping the access we are afforded as researchers and thus influencing the data we collect.

A strong benefit for researchers in the SDP sector is that there is very strong potential for engaging with stakeholders who have a relatively strong critical sociological imagination on a variety of key topics, notably how SDP work is undertaken, how SDP organisations interact, and the national and international contexts for SDP activities. For some NGO and Intergovernmental Organisations (IGO) officials, these critical perspectives may be based on university training in the social sciences, including taking courses or degrees that focus on SDP. More broadly, diverse local, national and international SDP stakeholders will possess and will exercise, in the phrase of Boltanski (2011), a 'pragmatic sociology of critique' meaning different forms of pragmatic, critical, sociological perspectives on social relations and social organisations, in this case with respect to SDP.

In all locations, we sought gatekeepers to aid our effectiveness and to enable us to seek out those with local knowledge, experience and established networks. Whilst gatekeepers were essential, we also found that 'encultured informants' provided additional context. According to Spradley (1979), 'encultured informants are consciously reflective about their culture, and enjoy sharing local knowledge, or are in a status position where this is expected of them' (In, O'Reilly 2009, pp. 132–133). In Rwanda, we spent a significant amount of time with a programme coordinator who facilitated, chaperoned and managed our three-week fieldtrip. Whilst his position within the organisation provided all the formal operational knowledge that we required, such support was outside of his programme's official schedule. During travel from one town to another, or within different social spaces, he provided us with rich insights into Rwanda's history, culture and the complexities of post-genocide development. Hence, gatekeepers certainly provided research access and the networks for snowballed research, but encultured informants also unpacked and contextualised the social and cultural patterns in great detail beyond official programming and commentary. Of course this unpacking is often from the perspective of one encultured informant who is often keen to have their story told.

As highlighted above, one risk with gatekeepers is that they can close as well as open research access, in terms of directing researchers away from potential research groups for a wide range of reasons. However, to our knowledge not all gatekeepers sought to shepherd our research access in specific directions to the exclusion of others. In some cases, gatekeepers provided us with contact details for people or organisations with whom they had limited or no contacts, or whose contributions they would otherwise criticise. In post-conflict contexts, where major ethnic divisions are still strongly apparent, there is at least in theory the possibility that one community will be unable or unwilling to facilitate access to groups from the 'other side'. In Kosovo, access between Albanian and Serbian groups was facilitated through NGOs which engaged with both communities. However, we did find local contacts with strong specific ties to be particularly helpful in enabling links, for example by driving us into these other communities, meeting with individuals from 'the other side' and, perhaps most strikingly, viewing and reflecting on commemorations to the opposing war dead in these locations. In Sri Lanka, the SDP sector's operational hub is stationed in the capital city, Colombo; this location presented a logistical challenge when trying to access former conflict zones and to engage with groups of differing ethnic and religious affiliations based elsewhere within the country. Such a challenge provided a convenient yet legitimate reason to deny access to some groups in the major conflict zones. In addition, we found that Sri Lankan-based organisations tended to operate in isolation to one another, thereby producing narrow networks of individuals who are not best placed to enable the widening of research pathways.

One specific way in which gatekeepers acted as controllers of research access or information related to the translation role. During interviews, we usually deployed a translator to communicate with research groups in non-English speaking locations. Most of these translators focused on quick and accurate translation of statements; our interviewees often had sufficient English to understand keywords that were used by translators and to confirm their accuracy and intention. However, there were incidents when two translators appeared to be screening or adjusting the comments of the interviewees, usually to take the critical or radical edge off these statements. One way around this problem came during the interview recording: we used a trusted native speaker with strong English language skills to transcribe these recorded interviews during which she had the opportunity to correct mistranslations of statements.

Translators

Translators and field guides also offer vital research support in locations where SDP researchers may be unfamiliar with local languages and

geography, most obviously when projects are being undertaken by global North academics in the global South. Translators and field guides played critical roles throughout our research. Translation contexts may be complex and involve multiple languages. For example, in post-conflict SDP projects, communities with different language backgrounds often come into contact with each other; at the same time, the international NGOs might speak other languages, leading to significant pressures on translation. At one event run by an NGO which we attended, the sessions were overseen by French officials who were speaking mainly in English, while the local participants spoke three other different languages each of which required translators. The result was that five languages might be spoken across no more than twenty people (plus the translators).

Translators may also find themselves strategically positioned to relay, edit or manipulate questions and answers. In Sri Lanka, on occasion, some translators would answer questions on behalf of the interviewee or provide them with what they considered to be ideal answers. In some cases, there were instances of questions being lost in translation, especially when going through a double translation, for example from English to Sinhalese and then to Tamil. A potential disconnect then arose between ourselves and the multiple languages and dialects that were alive across our different locations. This potential disconnect led not only to practical challenges to our research methodology but also to caution when engaging with translators who clearly 'belonged' to specific ethnic groups or organisations. While these situations provided valuable insights into the cultural and social conditions of SDP, the solution was more complex; first, we needed to recognise the potentially political position of the translator; second, we had to account for miscommunication and where possible ensure clarity; and third, where possible, we sought to identify 'encultured informants', who were more likely to understand our needs with a broader approach to information gathering and sharing.

Volunteers

Volunteers with NGOs are key groups for SDP researchers. Local volunteers have the particular value of having an 'in-between' status and perspective: they usually enter SDP projects as local users, and are from the communities in which SDP projects are implemented, so have deeply grounded local insights. As officials with SDP NGOs, they are also well positioned to comment on intervention activities and strategies of these organisations and the SDP sector as a whole. Thus, their in-between status often enables local volunteers to provide a rich critical insight into the tensions between the social aims of the NGO and the practical circumstances of the local community in which SDP is conducted. These critical observations are not always made *sotto voce* to the researcher, but may be presented to other NGO officials. For example, in one research location, we were at an informal NGO meeting at which the international NGO coordinator argued that the high levels of local unemployed young people should be directed into playing sport on a daily basis. The local NGO volunteers responded sceptically, pointing out that, in practical terms, they would be unable to provide the facilities, transport, food, and free labour (as local volunteers) required by this level of sport participation. The volunteers also observed that the problem of unemployment would remain in place for those young people.

In another location local volunteers, who acted regularly as encultured informants, were also group leaders for foreign volunteers who were working for an NGO as a form of aid work. The volunteers were often university students working for various NGOs or IGOs and had been in the placement for a couple of months when we conducted our research. As their status is less liminal than our own, and because of our shared European ancestry, the foreign volunteers acted on occasion as conduits of knowledge that were distinct from either local volunteers or NGO employees. Gaining a wide variety of opinions from a cross section of people in all the contexts we explored in this research helped us to collect an interpretation of the impact of SDP that was as balanced as possible. Gatekeepers, encultured informants, volunteers and translators all contributed to our data collection efforts, but this form of recruitment and engagement could not be established without the prior permission and negotiations undertaken with senior NGO officials.

Research as a 'game changer'? Exchange and expectations

Social scientific research faces some complex methodological and analytical dilemmas in its relations with external organisations. From our perspective as social scientists, it is crucial that research retains a critical analytical perspective, notably in identifying the strengths and limitations of SDP organisations and the overall sector in which they operate while also pointing constructively towards alternative operations, strategies and arrangements. At the same time, researchers are often committed to providing practical support, guidance and advocacy, in order to assist and to support specific organisations and their wider networks in regard to their operations and strategies. This latter, more practical role for social researchers, tended to be heavily emphasised or even expected by some stakeholders in the SDP sector during our research. In short, it was often assumed that we were 'problem-solvers' for specific organisations in the sector. Hence, in discussions with SDP stakeholders, such an assumption needed to be counter-balanced with our reference to the wider role of academic research.

Another way in which the practical challenges of research may unfold in the day to day of SDP research is through presumptions of quid pro quo. In other words, having provided the researcher with access and interviews, partners and gatekeepers may expect something in return (Polsky 1967). A quid pro quo relationship should be reasonably expected in SDP research for two main reasons: first, for ethical reasons, as a way of 'giving something back' to the research group; second, for professional reasons, as there is a growing move in UK and European higher education towards funding

research that has positive social 'impacts' for non-academic partners. In this project, we have directed a significant volume of our work towards building impact relationships with international-level external partners, in order to contribute towards shaping policies and practices in SDP. In terms of 'on the ground' impact work, we have written short reports for local and national NGOs whose activities we have been observing. In Kosovo specifically, international NGOs put on symposia which largely functioned as awareness-raising events on SDP and to launch calls for future local partners on projects; we were invited to attend and to speak at these events, and in doing so we provided practical guidance on issues surrounding the implementation of SDP activities.

A further contribution arises in relation to our potential advocacy role for SDP activity. SDP NGOs are under consistent pressure to legitimise their work in order to secure sustainable support from different funding sources. It is therefore understandable if NGO officials might look upon the arrival of an international academic with expertise in the SDP field as a potential opportunity for strengthening or advocating their case, particularly if that 'expert' may be meeting with actual or potential funding bodies. Inevitably, some impact requests have been beyond the capacity of an academic research project to respond. For example, some local NGO officials have asked us to help by providing more resources such as sport equipment or facilities; in response, we have stated that we have no budget to provide such support, but we can report these requests for more resource back to the NGO's central office.

Our work in Jamaica further highlighted the importance of at least two specific issues related to exchange and expectations when conducting SDP research in-country: the importance of networking, and understanding local expectations and interactions. First, as discussed, entering the field of SDP research requires at least some basic connections, relationships or networks with local organisations or stakeholders. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as an issue of gatekeeping; our access to research sites in Jamaica was initially facilitated by international funders and advocacy groups who connected us to groups and initiatives in Kingston. Through email discussion, we were then able to explain the project to local organisations and make arrangements to conduct fieldwork at times that were mutually convenient and beneficial.

At the same time, though, recent theorising in the social sciences as well as in development studies encourages us as SDP researchers to re-think the significance, meaning and implications of such networks. Traditionally, critical development studies have viewed the development encounter as one of invade/resist, whereby local people accept and/or reject the development interventions that are brought to bear upon them (see Asher 2009). However, from the perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT), which attempts to investigate and reconcile the social from the perspective of social actors instead of deploying theoretical presumptions about social structures or categories (see Latour 2005), the understandings of local actors shift. Rather than presuming a homogeneous subject in the developing world, one who accepts or resists the first world incursions of development interventions, an ANT approach attempts 'to trace the activity by which locals become included in an intervention, (while also) trusting in their agency and right to be convinced that becoming enrolled in "development" is in their interest' (Donovan 2014, p. 873).

What this means is that local SDP organisations, such as those we engaged with in Jamaica, are not only gatekeeping when negotiating access for international research and researchers, but indeed negotiating and contributing the terms of network formation that connect them (as 'local' organisations) to the larger field of SDP. Such networks are key because in the ANT framework, no place is truly global while other are local; the difference is in the number and quality of connections that some places have with others (Latour 2005). Motivated by an ANT approach to international development that is interested in 'how globally dispersed norms and practices come to a local development initiative' (Donovan 2014, p. 876), we see networks formed around research as significant in the formation and conceptualisation of the global SDP sector itself. In this sense, research and researchers demonstrate mediating roles in organising and connecting the field of SDP.

This is not to say that such networks are without contestation. Indeed, local SDP organisations' and officials' expectations of research and researchers are particularly significant when research capacity is internationally funded and conducted by global North subjects, such as the case in our study. In general terms, and despite post-colonial and critical indigenous assessments of western research traditions and practices (see Smith 1999; McEwan 2008; Nagar 2014), it remains somewhat of an inconvenient truth that global North researchers often take more from the research encounter and relationship than they give. The currency in such inequitable exchange is usually knowledge, with the results of the research frequently being more intelligible, instrumental and valuable for the researcher than the local organisations, officials or participants. As a result, there is a sense in SDP research, corroborated by our Jamaica fieldwork, that local organisations and people agree to participate in research (i.e. allow foreign research access to their programmes) because they presume that such research will go some way towards solving the challenges or struggles of their respective or particular SDP initiatives. These struggles or challenges can be organisational, institutional, economic, and/or political. For example, a local organisation might have difficult in aligning their programming with the goals of funders or proving the success of their programming through effective and robust evaluations; thus they look to First World researchers to make a positive contribution in alleviating such struggles. Such demands and desires on the part of local people are entirely legitimate; indeed, local people working in global South communities are often acutely aware of global power imbalances and therefore expect some benefit to their organisation for accommodating international researchers. And yet, as critical sociologists and anthropologists working in the

field of SDP, maintaining a place for critical, theoretical and in some cases non-instrumental research is of significant and even paramount importance.

This results in something of a dilemma for researchers conducting international work in SDP. On the one hand, calls for participatory action research in the field of SDP aim to flatten power differentials and structures of inequality and to produce results that are of practical use for local people and organisations (see Darnell and Hayhurst 2014). On the other hand, though, such research potentially limits the autonomy and ability of the researcher to conduct research whose main goal is knowledge production – and even socio-political criticism – as opposed to programme review, organisational reform or monitoring and evaluation. Thus, while we see it as important to maintain space for critical and in some cases explicitly non-instrumental research, keeping research 'pure' in this way does run the risk of alienating local actors who likely feel that they gain little from the research encounter. Further, while the dominant research culture in global North universities that demands research have practical impact also 'pushes' against purely exploratory research, local organisations may also be 'pulling' researchers towards such instrumental, practical and useful studies. Such instrumental work is not bad in and of itself, but does highlight the importance of trying to maintain some space for theoretical and/or critical analyses that advance our social scientific understanding of the SDP sector and its activities.

Further complicating this picture is the emerging recognition that local people connected to SDP programmes may have little incentive to speak critically about such initiatives, particularly if these programmes facilitate access to international funding or bring funds to their community. Jeanes and Lindsey (2014) found that the local employees of internationally funded SDP NGOs were concerned about sharing information that might show that the ambitious outcomes of the programme were not being met. Local employees' concerns stemmed from the fear that sharing such results would mean the end of the programme in their community, and thus the end of their employment. With this in mind, in the context of Jamaica it has not always been clear if local organisations, officials, and participants are willing to speak openly and honestly about the possibilities and limitations of their work. It is reasonable to speculate that this reluctance connects to the pressure that local organisations face to prove that their interventions work as a means of maintaining their current funding and/or access new funding sources.

In sum, SDP researchers likely need to confront the fact that their reasons for conducting research may not line up with local motivations, pressures, and interests as it relates to the research process. Overall, the management of expectation and of being compliant to a degree of exchange has been a strong theme that has evolved within our methodological framework. The processual aspect of such work should be underlined here, as we strive to embed ourselves within our locations, maintain partnerships, and recognise the benefits and politics of the intended and unintended impacts of our research on the SDP sector per se. Whilst such negotiations and expectations were managed, we also had to consider and contend with our own identities as foreigners and outsiders.

Identity and international relations

The engagement of multiple fieldwork sites with four researchers is difficult. Each of us brought to the study established identities and world views as well as the research we have engaged in prior to this current project. As a group, we are either from Canada or the UK, one of us is a woman and one of us has a mobility impairment. Half of the team is trained in sociology and the other half in anthropology. This latter point may seem rather insignificant but we believe that it shapes fundamentally how each of us engages with the ethnographic method at the heart of the data collection for this project.

A critical issue for qualitative research in the field of international SDP therefore centres on the politics of conducting such research. There are two interrelated points here which concern the politics of identity and development. First, while we have different nationalities, genders, mobility's, and disciplinary backgrounds, the one identity marker which we all share is 'whiteness'. This fundamental identity marker served to underpin continuously our relationships with all research groups. Second, there is a well-established and long lasting debate concerning the political agenda of development with specific reference to Global North directives and power within Global South nations (Mosse 2004). This is a broad and wide-reaching tension that has been embedded within the SDP sector since its inception. Academics have made a series of observations, critiques and recommendations based on the imbalance of SDP positioning, programming and discourse (see Giulianotti 2004; Kidd 2008; Hayhurst 2009; Darnell 2010). Such debates have varied from issues of soft power, neo-colonialism or post-colonial positioning, saturation levels within the Global South, and transnational relations and partnerships (see Kay 2009; Levermore & Beacom 2009; Nicholls *et al.* 2011; Lindsey & Grattan 2012). Colonial politics aside, it is apparent that the SDP sector is engulfed in political tension, historical baggage and managing modern day diplomacy within the culture of aid, development and sport more broadly. As researchers we were not disconnected from such political processes, and our shared identities as white people, residents of Global North nations and professional 'experts' instigated challenges both practically and socially whilst conducting fieldwork.

In the case of Zambia, the issue of skin colour was of great significance. Zambia would of course still be called Northern Rhodesia if white rule was still in place, and many of the employees of various NGOs were well aware of the image of their programmes being largely run by white foreign volunteers. One NGO coordinator who acted as an encultured informant talked at length about his desire to see more ethnic diversity in both the foreign volunteers and the researchers that visit. This marked our researcher and our study as one and the same of so many others who have visited. The

comments related to whiteness were made at the beginning of the visit and whether this identity marker still had the same impact at the end of the research is unclear, but it was the only time we as a team were made to feel unwelcome in the Zambian context.

Whiteness was also apparent in relation to discussions of history and politics. Post-conflict and 'developing' nations represent real world challenges to international peacebuilding and development organisations. In the context of Rwanda and Sri Lanka, both nations have experienced turbulent relationships with such global bodies, as a direct result of civil-conflict and genocide. In the case of Sri Lanka, government officials removed international peacekeeping organisations from conflict zones during the final months of the conflict and later refused to engage with post-conflict justice and accountability processes, preferring instead to isolate themselves from formal international procedures. In 1994, the international community was shocked by the scenes of systematic genocide in Rwanda. Whilst heads of state and United Nations officials condemned the killings, little was done to prevent it or directly intervene at the time. We found that the consequence of non-compliance with international organisations or feelings of being let down by them, affected feelings towards outsiders who now wish to engage directly with the topic of post-conflict/genocide development via sport. In these contexts, whiteness was the clue to outsider identity; this carried not only a physical representation of difference but also a sense of caution among locals when recalling past experiences with internationals.

At the same time, the ethno-political divisions between researcher and research group are not simply colour-coded along lines of race, skin colour or visible physical difference. In Kosovo, the population is broadly homogeneous in being 'white European' in ethnic background, although some minorities (notably the Roma population) are commonly distinguished by larger communities (notably Albanians and Serbians) along the lines of skin colour and dress. For academic researchers, the main demarcation is between the local population and those generally classified and differentiated by local people as 'internationals'. After the military conflicts in the region of the former Yugoslavia came to an end in the late 1990s, Kosovo underwent reconstruction with major support from the 'international community', notably through American and European governmental and NGO support, with many thousands of 'internationals' based across Kosovo and working in these roles. Deep inequalities in finance and life chances, as well as cultural differences, represent the fundamental markers of divisions between internationals and many locals. The cost of living in Kosovo is very high for locals, but low for internationals, who are able to eat, drink and sleep at high quality locations for cheap prices by international standards. In addition, Kosovo's unemployment and poverty levels are among the highest in Europe. Moreover, most internationals are free to come and go without visa restrictions whereas, due to its marginal position internationally, Kosovo's nationals require visas to travel across most of Europe and beyond. Finally, the main languages in Kosovo – Albanian and Serbian – tend not to be familiar to Western European or North American researchers, meaning that translators are usually required when conducting fieldwork with local SDP user groups. In short, these historical, economic, social, and linguistic factors provided the main bases for the differentiation between locals and internationals. Our local respondents in Kosovo were therefore used to encountering and interacting with 'internationals', although there was, on occasion, an expectation of our different social needs, such as particular types of pubs or cafes that were frequented by foreigners which made for rather artificial research environments at times.

A final feature of our SDP research concerned the tensions that arise between, on the one hand, the critical social scientific literature regarding 'the West's' domination via globalisation and development processes (including in relation to SDP), and, on the other hand, the many pro-Western comments that are made by people in developing countries, including SDP project volunteers and user groups. Many of these pro-Western comments refer to the perceived contributions made by Western governments and organisations to local and national development, while drawing critical contrasts between instances of corruption or incompetence involving local or national politicians, business leaders, or administrators.

In Kosovo, the Albanian communities (which represent over 90% of the total population) are strongly pro-American and pro-British in terms of international foreign policy, as symbolised by the statue of Bill Clinton in the centre of the capital, Prishtina, and various murals in praise of NATO and the United States. Such support reflects Albanian recognition of NATO's role in opposing Serbian control of Kosovo towards the end of the Yugoslav civil war. In terms of conducting research, for any Western European or North American researcher, this background does help to ensure warm welcomes in social situations and easy access to research groups. However, it also leads to some interesting exchanges of views in relation to world politics, for example in regard to expected support for former political leaders such as Clinton and Blair.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to describe, contextualise and analyse the main methodological issues that have followed from our team-based, multi-site research project in the field of SDP. Indeed, combining as a team to write this paper has itself proven to be a reflective, interpretive and insightful process, which has contributed strongly to our pursuit of comparative analysis. Engaging with local populations, organisations and embedded individuals has been the cornerstone of our methodological strategy within our varying international locations. The contrasting cultural landscapes in which we have worked ensured that we had diverse fieldwork experiences; yet it was through these experiences that much of our commentary beyond methods and engagement was made.

In brief, the key methodological insights that emerge from this paper are the following. First, qualitative researchers working in the area of SDP can expect organisations (international and/or local), programme officials, and volunteers to be important gatekeepers in terms of facilitating access to the field. Our study has showed that gatekeepers, particularly encultured informants, are crucial to gaining and maintaining research access and thus need to be considered a central element of the qualitative SDP research process. Second, while recognising that the relationships between local actors and international researchers are in fact part of the SDP landscape itself, exchanges facilitated by such relationships both produce and constrain expectations regarding the terms and benefits of the research encounter. We have suggested that while SDP researchers should strive to maintain some distance in the service of critical analysis, they should also be prepared for the fact that in so doing, they may run the risk of alienating local actors who feel they have given more than they gained from the research encounter. Third, the identity of the researcher remains significant in the field of international SDP work. In the case of our study, identifying or being identified through the lenses of whiteness and internationalism has had both positive and negative implications; positive in being viewed as experts, negative in being understood as separate from or privileged in relation to local people.

In setting out these key points, our aim has been to enhance significantly our understanding of the methodological issues and dilemmas in team-based, multi-site and cross-cultural comparative studies both in the field of SDP and in the wider domain of development and peace-studies. A further aim has been to set out some potential methodological strategies and responses that researchers may pursue within such research contexts and in response to these issues and challenges. Overall, *our discussion has underlined the importance of building strong relationships with* skilled, experienced and **AQ2** informed locals *in order to collect accurate and valuable data in* unfamiliar locations. Indeed, without the permission and support of SDP officials and organisations on the ground we would have been unable to locate many of the individuals who aided our fieldwork and data collection. Yet, establishing such support and maintaining research partnerships can require negotiation and exchange. Whilst we are committed primarily to the research task, we accept and acknowledge our potential positions as advocates, consultants and 'experts'. That being said, this level of expectation can bring with it the position of 'problem solver' something which we felt less favourably towards. The process of knowledge exchange, acquiring access, practical engagement and creating real world impact was another methodological challenge we faced in each location. We were able to manage such expectations by being open to exchange and part of strategy discussions, but did so with caution and within the boundaries we negotiated. Highlighting the wider role and context of our research objectives also went some way to shaping our partnerships and managing the additional expectations placed upon us.

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