Sports Tribes and Academic Identity: Teaching the sociology of sport in a changing disciplinary landscape.

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Abstract

Using data from 15 semi-structured interviews with UK-based early / mid-career academics this paper offers an empirically informed assessment of how lecturers teaching / researching the sociology of sport are managing their careers in a changing HE landscape. Those interviewed were involved in the delivery of sociological content to a range of sports-themed courses with the interviews focusing on the changing fashions in studying sport (including a rapid increase in enrolment on certain sports-themed courses), and on the nature of the relationships with colleagues working in the same area (i.e. sport), but who teach / research it from a different discipline. The paper draws upon the processes of individualisation which lay at the root of reflexive modernisation to better understand the lived experiences of those interviewed. Using the metaphors of tribes, doors and boundaries, I assess the extent to which those interviewed felt there were opportunities for an inter-disciplinary pedagogic approach to 'sport'. The paper explores the relationship between the sociology of sport and its parent discipline (i.e. sociology) and where it might feature in a future (post-disciplinary?) landscape.

Keywords

Despite sometimes being labelled as *Mickey Mouse* courses and taunted by accusations of students and staff 'playing in a sand-pit' (Rowe, 1999; Beckett, 2006), the popularity of studying sport is manifest.[1] What constitutes 'the sociology of sport' has been subject to previous examination (Carrington, 2013; Kirk, 2014; Malcolm, 2011; Silk, Francombe and Andrews, 2013) [2] with the sociology of sport presently occupying an uncertain position between sociology and sport and the potential to leave it, and those who teach it, marginalised from both. Twamley, Doidge and Scott (2015) have collated the experiences and thoughts of sociologists on their own academic career and this paper seeks to build on previous research (Aldous, 2014) by focusing on those working in an area peripheral to mainstream sociology (i.e. sport) and within an increasing neo-liberal corporate HE environment which has potential to erode, rather than create, collegiality. The theoretical underpinning of this paper draws upon Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994) to explore how the embodied subjectivities of lecturers (i.e. their agency) connects and evolves with wider social structures and the potential for their reflexivity in contemporary HE. The paper begins by briefly reviewing the issues which promoted this study: the significant growth in students studying 'sport' at undergraduate level, academic disciplines and disciplinary boundaries and the suggestion of 'academic tribes.'

Sports Degrees, Sociology and Academic Tribes

Higher education in the UK has recently undergone a period of significant change (Collini, 2012; Giroux, 2014; McGettigan, 2013). From polytechnics becoming 'new universities' in the early 1990s, the introduction of student loans and tuition fees, the removal of the cap on student numbers through to the current period of 'austerity' , the changes have been both sustained and disruptive. While the discipline of sociology[3] is seen to be undergoing a period of crisis (Holmwood, 2011; Michie and Cooper, 2015; Nussbaum, 2012), undergraduate *sport*-themed courses have significantly expanded. Initially taught as Physical Education in specialist teacher training colleges, it is now primarily taught in post-1992 universities with a wide range of sport-themed degree programmes on offer,

- Physical Education (with or without QTS)
- Sport Development
- Sports Coaching
- Sports Journalism
- Sport and Social Sciences
- Sports Management / Marketing / Business
- Sport and Physical Activity / Exercise / Health

- Sports Science / Sport and Exercise Science (formerly Human Movement).

Each sports-themed degree programme varies in the weight given to the bio/physical and social sciences with different nomenclature used to promote and distinguish each programme. Biglan's (1973) typology helps to understand the 'hard' (bio-) and 'soft' (social) sciences and the fundamental epistemological dimensions and distinctions that inform how each programme is constructed, delivered and consumed. The growth of modular degrees has seen sociology contribute to many of the new sports related programmes. However, sociology has long faced criticism on its value and contribution ('is it a really a science') with Urry (1981) suggesting it lacks a 'centre' and is a parasite on other disciplines. Brewer (2007) responds by arguing that sociology has a history of multi-disciplinarity going back to a period 'before disciplinary boundaries became as institutionally entrenched as they are now' (see O'Reilly, 2009: 220). Sayer (2003) suggests traditionally defined academic disciplines can be parochial, imperialist and stifling of innovation, although there is growing embryonic discussion on inter-disciplinary, trans- or even post-disciplinary pedagogy (Evans, 2014; Tinning, 2015). Burton and Stock (2011) suggest that without disciplinary-style gatekeepers, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' definitions vis-à-vis cross-, multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity; this has resulted in a variety of different meanings being attributed to the terms, some which concur but others which conflict.[4] Evans (2014:51) draws upon Giroux's work to suggests the challenge of crossing a border is considerable and that,

> To 'unlearn' (or at least seriously problematise) the foundational assumptions, concepts, ideas, of one's discipline and the criteria used to assess and evaluate the knowledge it produces is, of course, a pretty big ask as is that of becoming multilingual, expert in the languages of different disciplines, cultures and codes.

This paper focuses on the existence of 'sports tribes' and the ability to 'cross the border' and the suggestion that we are entering a period of post-disciplinarity.

Brew (2008:427) notes how disciplines form part of the day-to-day reflexive discourse amongst academics, with studies showing how academics understand their particular disciplinary identity (Bexley, Arkoudis and James, 2013; Mather and Seifert, 2014; Smith, 2010). For Brew (2008) anthropological metaphors have often dominated discussion of disciplinarity with academics described as 'living in tribes,' occupying 'territories' and exhibiting 'tribal characteristics' which produce and reflect disciplinary knowledge and the characteristics that determined the conditions in which people work (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Whilst such

metaphors imply a relatively coherent set of practices they can be over-stretched leading Brew (2008) to call for more fluid metaphors and models to capture emerging uncertainties of disciplinarity identity.

The theoretical underpinning of this paper is how the embodied subjectivities of lecturers (as agents) connect and evolve with/in wider social structures. Giddens' (1991) concept of structuration is used to overcome the limitations of a purely symbolic interactionist or macro level analysis.[5] Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994) explain the concept of reflexivity as a permanent revision of social agency in the light of new knowledge and new circumstances (i.e. late modernity). With the social order problematized, identification of new opportunities for social action and / or wider social transformation becomes possible with the concept of reflexivity connected to emancipation, chances, and opportunities (Archer, 2010; 2012), and a capability for the redirection and reorientation of individual life trajectories (Caetano, 2014; Numerato, 2015).

The different dimensions to reflexivity make it necessary to be sensitive to the complex, multidimensional and contemporary view of this phenomenon (Archer, 2007; 2012). Beck (2001) sees the emergence of 'do-it-yourself' biographies as a consequence of the loss of solid identity foundations. Giddens' (1991:5) reflexive project of the self consists of the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative, with reflexive modernisation defined by the gains of agency over structure in late modern societies. Few aspects of life are seen as unable to be controlled by the individual or which are not subject to individual decisions; this gives rise to an ongoing process of biographical construction and identity-building based on individual choices and how 'in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so … we have no choice but to choose' (Giddens, 1991:81). How do the lived experiences of academics, who are still involved in regular teaching, help in understanding the complex relationships that exist in the higher education system? Building on previous studies, the paper now identifies how the voices of early / mid-career academics are identified before discussing their agency and their construction of a 'do-it-yourself' career biography.

Research Methods
This study sought the views of academic staff working in British (primarily English) universities. Participation was voluntary with individuals responding to an e-mail notice sent

to subscribers of the BSA Sport Studies Group list-serve with the self-selecting, representative nature of the subscribers to this Group noted. 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with those currently involved in the delivery of sociology (and who identified themselves as sociologists) on a range of sports-themed undergraduate courses. The sample comprised early / mid-career lecturers (but excluded readers / professors). All respondents were actively involved in teaching primarily within 'ex-polys', although some were working in a 'Russell Group' university. Both female and male academics were interviewed although gender differences are not examined here.[6] Some of the respondents were known to the author (as might be expected, since we all swim in the same waters).[7] University ethical procedures were followed and although the respondents were willing to talk openly, it was agreed that for the conversations to remain open and avoid self-censorship, full anonymity would operate. An interview schedule was constructed, based on the earlier discussion of academic tribes and border crossings. The schedule was designed to be sufficiently flexible to cover those areas identified at the outset but which would also allow the participants to discuss any issue they felt relevant to the study.

The adopted framework for data analysis was interpretive; echoing Fanghanel (2009) the data should not be seen as yielding a literal representation of reality – but rather a narrative account of the academics' positions and perceptions. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were then subject to data immersion with reading and re-reading. Data analysis packages, such as NVIVO were considered, but the approach chosen allowed the study to progress in an imaginative manner which allowed themes and patterns to emerge from the data (Robson, 1993). The initial interview transcript wordage was reduced whilst maintaining the essence of the data with analysis of the interview transcripts and prolonged contemplation allowing categories emerge; subsequent manipulation of these categories and extensive use of manual memos allowed for accommodation and modification on the a priori themes (Veal and Darcy, 2014). A deep knowledge of the data allowed the clustering of data around key analysis headings and sub-themes. The resulting sample does not purport to be representative but is seen to offer an exploratory account and one that is transparent and qualified in terms of its method.

Discussion

In seeking to understand the agency and reflexivity of those interviewed a number of themes were discussed. This section focuses on three related topics: 1) the experiences of those

teaching 'the sociology of sport'; 2) relationships with colleagues in sport and in sociology and the possibility for inter- disciplinary working; and 3) career planning. In an area which has seen significant student recruitment, and responding to a neo-liberal climate in HE, to what extent are academics being strategic in their career behaviour.

Sociology and sports-themed degree programmes

It quickly became evident in the interview stage that the physical location of the individual in their institution would strongly inform the subsequent discussion. While some were located in education departments, others were based in a dedicated department or a school of sport; no clear or stable pattern was identified in where the sociologists of sport could be found. Where the individual was physically based (in terms of their office) was seen as a perennial problem as Respondent 1 explained,

> What's interesting is that they don't know where to put us (that is the 'School of Sport'). Currently we're in a department of Applied Social Sciences; before that we bounced around – first in Education then we were moved to Health and then …

> Where's the 'natural' home for sociology? I think that's its main vulnerability as a subject. I don't see myself as sat in a neatly defined subject area. I like to think I could move about a bit – but that does make me more vulnerable. My friend who's just got a post as a Professor of Health Economics told me I should decide which subject I was! [Respondent 13].

It is noted was that none of the respondents worked in sociology departments. This is not always the case, with a small number of high profile 'sociologists of sport' working in sociology departments (see Carrington, 2013 for the situation in the USA), but who did not participate in this study.

The strong recruitment to sports-themed courses was seen as being due, in part, to a rise in 'non-traditional students' attracted to courses that were perceived as being less academic and more vocational. A growing number of students were described as arriving with BTECs / National Diplomas in PE or Sport and Exercise Sciences rather than with via the traditional 'A' level route . Teaching students who often lacked the more traditional academic skills and who had little prior knowledge of sociology led to Respondent 2 teaching an introductory module they described by as 'very contextual, contemporary and theory-lite.' Similarly,

Initially [the Level 4 module] it was orientated around sports events … issue led, with social and cultural theory introduced slowly along the way. The students engage with the issues - they like the debate and discussion - but once you start bringing in the ideas of cultural imperialism or the westernisation of global sociology they do struggle …. given that most of the them want to be PE teachers or sports coaches - they don't want to engage with the theory! They want to learn how to teach and coach – rather than talking about issues of gender identity, race or diaspora. [Respondent 3]

I think the students are a bit more receptive to gender and sexuality – and once they've had exposure to gender theory – critical thinking should be an implicit part of all their teaching - they are a bit more receptive to social stereotypes and cultural constructions … we did have few head scratching moments in understanding race as a social construct - particularly with respect to black athletes in the 100 meters race. Unless you are at a Russell Group university where you get students who really believe in knowledge for knowledge's sake – it's a very difficult task to (teach) … something that doesn't have some kind of specific employment outcome to it [Respondent 4]

There was little evidence of students being introduced to any of the main sociological paradigms, with core social theorists (such as Foucault and Bourdieu) introduced in the second year. There was a sense that students were often overly strategic in their learning (motivated only by summative marking), and a general reluctance to actively engage in their studies, an attitude summed-up by one of those interviewed as being 'too cool for school.'

The increasing marketization of HE, was seen as having a negative influence on module planning and delivery. Programmes and / or modules with low enrolment were viewed as 'failing' and therefore subject to closure with 'performance indicators' recognised being not only to have good enrolment on the module but also to ensure positive student feedback, a minimal number of fails and a good average mark for the module assessment . It was therefore important to ensure the students 'enjoyed' sociology and / or recommended it to their friends, as Respondent 1 explained,

I try to be creative in how I get theory across. I can do that in a seminar of 15 – but not in a lecture theatre with 100+ students. I've got to go full-tilt … really engaging, part stand-up comedian, part YouTube expert and try to hook them onto sociology at Level 4. When they come to pick their second year options – if they've just been blasted with theory … your options just won't get picked.

It was commonly recognised that engaging with sociological theory was a necessary criterion for critical thinking and something which differentiated a degree from other forms and levels of study. Respondent 12 recalled how,

> We had one module taught by a pure sociologist who was really good but they only dabbled in sport. The module was full of theory … the full gamut! A traditional theoretical landscape albeit with sports-based case studies - but the students just didn't enjoy it; some of the students said 'mate, what has this got to do with me? – What's theory? I'm not bothered about that.'

Beyond the immediate teaching environment, the head of department was seen as highly influential. Managers with backgrounds in PE teaching, sports science or business management were often seen as failing to understand the basics of what constituted sociology. Some respondents explained how they used this to their advantage as it allowed a degree of latitude on the content of the module; however, others had to fight for the inclusion of sociology in the curriculum. Respondent 6 recalled how,

> … at (university X) sociologists were made redundant a few years ago because they weren't recruiting enough students, but it was also because there wasn't a belief in the subject by the head of the department; also at (university Y) which has a very strong history in the sociology of sport – they're now battling against a head of department who is an out-and-out natural scientist – and who wants to impose on sociology academics the same conditions that, he believes, are imposed on natural scientists.

Respondent 7 noted how,

> the university had a sport and exercise department where the head and deputy head of department were both social scientists. (This) … made it easier because they could appreciate how a sociological strand could contribute and complement the biosciences. That's since changed – it's a different department and the head of department is from a physiological background – and certainly the department is more easily affiliated and defines itself as a bioscience research institute.

Those interviewed felt that their individual agency, their sub-discipline and wider pedagogic issues were typically seen as unimportant by administrators and managers who were solely focused on student numbers, internal and external measures of student satisfaction, and employability rates.[8] Those who had a line manager with a 'broader take on the social sciences' or who valued an inter-disciplinary approach, were in a rare, but advantageous, position. More commonplace was the head of department who was seen to operate within certain, narrow epistemological parameters which created a difficult working environment for the sociologist and a discipline predicated on asking questions and seeking to challenge the status quo.

Sports Tribes and Disciplinary Borders

This section examines the nature and quality of professional relationships with colleagues who deliver to the same programme but from a different discipline. Those interviewed did register experience of 'friendly banter' with colleagues with local-level relationships often described as collegiate. Respondent 7 identified how they were,

> situated in the School of Education and so a lot of my colleagues are teachers who have worked in schools, or coaches who have worked with young people (and) come from a background where you need to understand the social issues: demographic issues, gender, religion, ethical – all those vocational issues / real life issues … we try to use these real life examples to gain a better understanding.

Although no-one thought they needed to constantly defend the relevance of sociology and / or a qualitative approach to teaching or research, there were some who encountered sports science colleagues who felt that sociology had little to offer to the students. Highlighting the 'natural resistance' of natural science to the social sciences Respondent 9 explained how,

> apart from the odd individual I would say that most sports scientists don't value the work of sport social scientists – they just don't understand it, don't want to understand it, don't want to engage with it, and will seek to push it out. They [i.e. sports scientists] are much more entrenched in their disciplines and have such a positivistic, quantitative traditional sense of what science is – or should be!

> Their world view is very black and white … and they don't like the grey areas - the nuances that sociology creates. It's something about people who do sport; I don't want to use the word 'brainwashed' – indoctrinated is a better word – from a very early age they have been playing sport – and it's all about the positives of sport – about how it's

good for you. These common–sense narratives are so instilled it leads them to see sport as something distinct from everyday life; so to unpick and challenge it with students …. they don't want to understand the nuances, they don't want to engage on a philosophical level [Respondent 2].

They should be embracing it [sociology] as adding another level. But I think it's about protection of subject; so long as you're linked to natural sciences … you're seen as doing hard / proper science – because you are dealing with obesity! Whereas I would question the whole notion of the word 'obesity' – but debate just isn't happening [Respondent 5].

The above experiences recognise O'Reilly's (2009) call for the study of sport to be more inter- / post- / trans- / disciplinary but also how this might be viewed as a threat to the disciplines. There was recognition that at both the paradigm and practical level there was insufficient 'literacy' of the other's discipline,

Social sciences sit … in a different department to sport sciences – and there are tensions across departments. They have 'sociology of sport' modules as part of the sports science degree and the dynamic is very different; they are more quantitative, positivistic sciences – whereas ours is more social sciences. In the School of Education where I work there is more appreciation of the social factors that impact upon schools and kids and educators – whereas if you ask them in the School of Health and Applied Sciences – the physiologists, biomechanics, psychologists - you would get a very different response [Respondent 11].

'Inter-disciplinarity' was seen as a popular 'buzz-word' within universities, but for various individual and structural reasons this was rarely carried through into teaching and / or research,

Because we sit in Education I don't know any of my colleagues in regard to sport who sit over in Health. If I pass them in the corridor I wouldn't know who was a sports psychology, or physiology, or whatever … I've no idea who any of them are! (Respondent 5).

The 'pressure to publish' was seen as having a negative impact on collegiality and discouraging interdisciplinary collaboration although 'inter-disciplinarity' was viewed less as a threat and more as an opportunity to work with experts from different fields (such as health economics and health sciences). Increased inter-disciplinarity would create greater scope for collaboration

between the disciplines and overcome the traditional gladiatorial battles but as Respondent 6 recognised, this was often a matter of individual agency,

> It's all there if we get off the battleground and stop accusing each other of not understanding what each other is doing / does and I don't think what you are doing is very good.

The potential for collaborative working was also identified by Respondent 7, albeit with some difficulties,

> It (has been) said that as a research centre we are too diverse. Natural scientists want to work in a team and all do the same thing and use the scientific method and to produce hundreds of papers with numerous authors. We get accused of not being a coherent research group – but for me that's a non-argument. We're in a very strong position as a research centre because we bring in a lot of money through contract evaluations.

The respondents readily recognised and accepted the metaphor of 'academic tribes' with animated discussion taking place on where (and why) they positioned themselves. In seeking to explore this metaphor the analogy of a 'door' between the departments (i.e. between the sociologists and their sports scientist colleagues) was used. Respondents were asked if they thought the door was open, closing or closed with a range of experiences offered,

> Here I think the door is closing – although some colleagues might suggest the door is locked - never to be opened again! The door might reopen if student numbers came in – or if we bring in massive grants – which again is that quantitative and scientific approach! [Respondent 13].

> It would take effort to keep the door open; I think we're well positioned to do it – but it would take us swallowing a little bit of our pride. We'd need to open up some time and space in the university – but that's at a premium [Respondent 8].

> The door is open – but it's not everywhere. I don't want my optimism to ignore those in some institutions who are experiencing real difficulties [Respondent 6].

Given that relations were often strained between the sociologist and their non-sociological colleagues, what was the state of relations between sociologists of sport and other sociologists? Individuals did engage with internal seminars and research groups which met informally, although some suggested that the 'real' sociologists could only be found in the university's sociology department. Respondent 4 stated how they had,

more in common professionally with colleagues outside of sport. I do have good working relationships with colleagues in the department, but in terms of my identity - it's with other sociologists rather than other PE people.

Sometimes I think we have painted ourselves into a little corner as sports sociologists: this is our own discipline – and we draw a line around it. Many of us are reading sociological theory but we don't get out into the sociology world – people go to NASSS or ISSA but they tend not to go the BSA.[9] I think there are some missed opportunities to connect with the wider sociology [Respondent 8].

Participants were initially contacted through the BSA Sport Study Group but there was a sense that these sociologists of sport did not always strongly identify with the BSA. However, it was necessary to maintain professional networks through organisations such as the BSA, with the making and maintaining of contacts at conferences described as very important and productive activities.

Academics who insist on working within specific disciplines have been viewed as hindering progress, with Brewer (2013) calling for 'the problem' to be the focus and that a multidisciplinary approach could be achieved if individuals were willing and able to move beyond their own disciplinary 'comfort zone.' Echoing Sayer's (2001) suggestion that the boundaries, parochialism and imperialist tendencies of disciplines stifle scholarship and innovation, some of the challenges that face society (identity, culture, nationalism, migration, the body, obesity, sexism, masculinity, racism, ageism) could all be explored under the umbrella of 'sport' as the social sciences *invoke moral and philosophical ideas about dignity but also (that) technical dimensions … are best understood by breaking down barriers between medicine, the natural sciences like biology, chemistry and environmental sciences, and the social sciences'* (Brewer, 2013: 185). The fear of the fragmentation of sociology and the collapse of disciplinary borders (Letherby, 2005) could be allayed if the discipline were able to (allowed to) maintain its core ideas and protect its position as the guardian of humanity (Burawoy, 2008).

There is potential for collaborative working with the main challenge being to build links beyond the spectrum of the social sciences and humanities and, thus, to include all those who with an enduring interested in 'sport.' However, the interviews revealed little evidence of inter-

(let alone post-) disciplinarity in the study of 'sport.' One of the barriers was identified as the creation of a market in higher education wherein each discipline sought to protect its own particular area of interest. A more acute fight for the social sciences and humanities is taking place given the increasing prioritisation of STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine) subjects and the suggestion that social science based sports programmes are not sufficiently related to graduate employment. [10] The 'two cultures' debate initiated by C.P. Snow (1959) identified a polarization between the arts / humanities and the bio-sciences with the 'two cultures' seen as alive and well in the UK HE system based on the discussions on disciplinary boundaries and claims of legitimacy. Reflecting and reproducing wider neo-liberal ideology, universities now compete externally against each other and internally with faculties and departments individually seeking greater student numbers, research funds, student satisfaction, and REF ratings. These externally created structures encouraged individualism and self-promotion among lecturers to create a Hobbesian environment pitting all-against-all. The reflexivity proposed by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994) suggested that responsibility for individual trajectory was increasingly determined at an individual level with a 'zero-sum game' in which agents prevailed over weak structures. However, those interviewed here described how they sought to 'cobble together' their career biography in response to an external environment.

Whilst there was some evidence to suggest increasing exchanges between the social sciences, this was virtually absent in relations with the bio-sciences. Those interviewed did show disciplinary self-reflexivity and the potential connections between different academic disciplines. However it was recognised that disciplines were (re)produced by their practitioners with recruitment practices limiting the ability to include those who dissent from the orthodox. The current hegemony of the bio-sciences in studying sport should not, indeed cannot, be seen as the only approach to study sport. How to get the different disciplines to become more literate of the other and facilitate a broader approach to the teaching and researching of sport remains a significant challenge.

Career reflexivity

The introduction of £9,000 annual tuition fees (1998), the removal of the cap on student numbers (2013), the prioritization of STEMM subjects and the emphasis on the 'employability agenda' have seen significant increases in recruitment to PE, Sports Coaching, Sports Journalism and Sport and Exercise Science (SPEX) programmes. Responding to demands for

students to be 'more employable' was offered as a partial explanation for the increase in students enrolled on these particular sports course because they are seen to offer a clearly defined vocational pathway; in contrast, social science sports courses were not seen to offer a comparably clear career route. Those interviewed noted that many of the sports programmes to which they were contributing had limited vocational graduate job opportunities with Respondent 1 stating how their institution had four PGCE places as they "churned out 1500 student from sports courses" with Respondent 14 equally concerned,

> Sports science has virtually no jobs! It doesn't equip students to do anything much beyond that – and so their employability claims are very questionable. I really don't know why it recruits so well! I think the students only think as far as 'I like sport.' We are giving them too much credit for weighing it all up; when I asked some first years why they are doing a sports degree … one said 'my Dad thinks it's a good idea and I like football' – another said 'PE was my favourite teacher.' We need to be more reflexive and try to remember when we were 17 before we criticise them too much!

The metaphor of sport-themed courses as experiencing 'bubble' recruitment was recognised with the graduate employment market viewed as having insufficient vacancies. Respondent 12 suggested how,

> It won't burst instantly – they will continue to recruit but then word will get back and things will emerge that there aren't so many jobs in PE and sport. I don't think students are aware of that and it will take 4 - 5 years to get through – thousands of graduates will be coming out with degrees in PE and coaching all trying to find jobs in the field – which just aren't there.

One problem facing those who teach the sociology of sport is that because they are critical observers, they do not 'fit' comfortably into the sport-related industry. Students who enjoyed sport at school were seen as the most reluctant (at least initially), to recognise social barriers to sport and move beyond the level of personal 'culpability' for issues such as obesity, the lack of engagement in PE and the various forms of discrimination in sport.

As to whether the sociology of sport would *morph* into 'something else' the respondents accepted that they would need to become (or remain) flexible in terms of *who* and *what* they taught; 'health' was described as an emerging area. If the student market did change Respondent 5 described how they would 'go back to being an applied practitioner or rebrand myself as a pure sociologist – instead of a sociologist of sport.' Respondent 12 felt they would

need to become more 'flexible', with Respondent 3 anticipating how 'sociologists of sport will need to have more than one string to their bow. If the worst came to the worst I could go to the sociology of education.'

There was strong recognition of how the external and internal structures were continually changing. The neo-liberalisation of HE and the reduction of both students and academics to the level of individual, economic actors, was viewed as a negative development. Respondent 2 described how they were,

> scared at the prospect of corporate sponsorship – the Coke-Cola or MacDonald's lecture hall or sports hall - because there was no money coming from a centralised state source; which then compromises integrity and academic freedom. I'm very pessimistic that everything will soon have a price. We should be striking over academic freedom and the purpose of universities – this new liberal agenda has attacked the fundaments of what a university is for – the acquisition of knowledge and not just a job certificate. Students are just seen as cash cows – paying for a degree regardless of any content of knowledge they are acquiring. We're in a situation in which people are not encouraged to critique. We should be switching the students on, not switching them off.

Respondent 2's impassioned conclusion addressees Brewer's (2013) manifesto for a 'new public social science' and an acceptance of the need to work with 'big business.' Respondent 11 recounted their resentment at Brewer's proposal, and whilst accepting he 'might be right,' pointed to the raison d'être of sociology as being to ask awkward questions! There was consensus that sociology had been unable to assert itself since the 1980s yet a similar consensus that sociologists needed to be at the forefront of the critique of contemporary debates about sport, health and physical activity. However they were struggling to be heard,

> It's about getting that voice out in the wider media – turning the knowledge into something concrete that can change public opinion is very difficult. By extension – it has an impact on undergraduates wanting to come to university to study sport – and by extension those students who are interested in sport wanting to do more sociology [Respondent 9].

I don't see a future where students will be getting degrees in the sociology of sport – but I am confident that students will continue to get a degree in sport – be this coaching / health or sport sciences. I think students need exposure to sociology – especially on something like obesity. It's a topic that needs a social science perspective if it's to be understood holistically. I'm confident that there will be enough space in these more applied degrees for some sociology. But how seriously will it be seen by students and faculty - I'm not so sure. [Respondent 5]

The interviews concluded by asking if they felt optimistic about their future careers as sociologists teaching on sports programmes. Respondent 8 stated that because no-one in their department was returned in the 2014 REF, this was interpreted as them 'not fitting' within the wider school and university. Respondent 1 described their concern at the number of socio-cultural subjects which were closing and how,

My university is STEMM driven – so god knows how the people who study queer theory in literature are feeling at the moment; at least I can hang my hat on something to do with obesity – but most people are keeping quite; it was an unsettling time – not just at my place but everywhere.

However, Respondent 15 felt more optimistic about their future,

My glass is always half full as an individual – but looking at the sector as a whole it is moving more in the direction of the biosciences. I am less optimistic about that process and the direction it is going in. It comes back to agency and how individual people respond - and their ability to scope out agency and think about their transferability. It's not just making a contribution to understanding sport, it's also about understanding wider society; the study of sport is nothing – it's more about the society.

As in the work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994; 2001) cited earlier the processes of individualisation lie at the root of reflexive modernisation with responsibility for individual trajectory increasingly determined at an individual level in response to structural conditions and wider events. While Beck (1994: 13) states that 'individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves,' Giddens (1991) work positions a mediation between agency and structure, with greater focus given to the agents and the consequences of

their actions for structure. Therefore, agency (i.e. choice) emerges as the dominant factor in Giddens' approach. However, Giddens does not overlook the influence of sources external to the individual and cites socio-economic circumstances as 'pushing' individuals into choosing; as Giddens (1991: 81) puts it, 'we have no choice but to choose.' In light of the empirical evidence presented here, while there are limitations to the operationalising of personal reflexivity they do allow us to think critically about the dynamics of change in contemporary world and the role that reflexivity plays within it. However, it is only when lived practice, including the dimension of agency, becomes a central object of exploration, located within broader structural theory that an adequate explanation can be offered.

Those interviewed suggested that despite the extensive changes experienced by the HE system in the UK, traditional disciplinary boundaries in the study of 'sport' were not weakening; instead, there was a feeling that the social sciences were in danger of being overwhelmed by the bio-sciences. Although individuals were willing to look beyond their immediate discipline, the fundamental disciplinary tenets noted by Evans (2014) were firmly entrenched. Rather than the continuation of disciplinary competitiveness which creates disciplinary boundaries and the desire to secure one's job, funding and research excellence, there needs to be greater dialogue across disciplines; how individuals negotiate the different institutional spaces in which they find themselves and whether / how they can create meaningful border-crossings requires further study.

Conclusion

Those interviewed accepted they might have to look elsewhere if they want to continue teaching sociology citing the emerging areas of physical activity, health and related societal conceptions of human body. Focusing on the delivery of sociological content within a rapidly expanding suite of sports-themed degrees revealed an overarching trajectory of sociologists engaged in a constant struggle to ensure their discipline was (and remained) on the curricula. Using the notion of 'sporting tribes', the 'critical' nature of sociology meant it sat uneasily alongside those disciplines that taught 'sport' in an uncritical fashion; at the core of contemporary sport is the notion of 'competition' with the purpose of sociology being to ask 'awkward questions' to students who typically hold positive attitudes towards sport; acting as a dissenting voice sociology was at constant risk of exclusion from the sports programmes by more 'positivist' academics. With academic disciplines reproduced by their practitioners there is a tendency to recruit 'people who are like us.' However, there needs to be a more permeable

boundary in the study of sport – if only to avoid students being significantly disadvantaged if a 'sociological lens' disappears from the study of sport.

In line with the reflexive modernisation approach identified by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994), the lecturers discussed their awareness of the reality of working in HE and of the embedded choices they were making. Some might interpret this as an exercise of their agency and relative autonomy in defining their career pathways. However, this should not be seen as them having absolute control; to paraphrase Karl Marx, they were 'making choices, but not in conditions of their own choosing.' It is thus necessary to locate their choices within the context of the UK HE system and wider neo-liberal structure of society and recognise that these structures underpin the possibilities of their actions and their objective choices.

The emergence of specialist degrees (identified at the outset of this paper) was seen to potentially limit the ability to create an interdisciplinary curriculum. As the HE sector becomes increasingly marketised, privatised and corporatized, the social sciences and humanities have need to ensure the status of the discipline by engaging in public debate with sociology seeking to promote itself as the 'flagship of the social sciences' (Fuller, 2006:1, in O'Reilly). Burawoy (2005) and Brewer's (2013) respective calls for a 'new public social science and 'post-disciplinarity' would allow sociology to make an important contribution to sports-themed courses even with (or because of) its critical approach, but not limiting it to a *'add and stir'* approach (even if the prospects do appear limited). While there has been disagreement on how to conceptualise the 'sociology of sport' and what it should be labelled Silk, Francombe and Andrews, 2014) there was a categorical sense that sociology needs to continue to make a contribution to sports-themed programmes, accepting this might be in the role of service teaching, rather than featuring as a core strand in the programme.

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[1] My own institution has experienced significant growth in recruitment to undergraduate degree programmes in Sports Coaching, Sport and Exercise Science and PE. This situation has been mirrored in discussions with colleagues working in a range of different HE institutions across the UK. See also McGhee (2015).

[2] The 50th anniversary of the International Sociology of Sport Association and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* in 2015 saw publication of a special issue which assessed the trajectory and challenges of the sociology of sport. A need was identified to advance interdisciplinarity and engage with those working beyond the sociology of sport to help ensure the future sustainability and progress of the sub-discipline.

[3] Sociology is used with a small 's' (as opposed to a capital 'S'), so as to problematize the suggestion implied of a singular, clearly defined discipline (Lemert, 2003). One also notes a distinction between a purely theoretical approach to sociology and the more applied approach found within the sociology of sport.

[4] Multi – relating to, or making use of several disciplines at once; Cross – coordinated efforts involving two or more disciplines; Trans - approaches that transcend boundaries of conventional disciplines; Inter - process of combining two or more disciplines fields of study; or professions (see Hunt and Thornsbury, 2014).

[5] Giddens' work reflects his constantly shifting theoretical positioning. While his work in the 1980s focused on structure / agency (structuration) this shifted in the 1990s to a concern for self-identity and reflexivity.

[6] It is necessary to acknowledge the importance of gender and its impact on HE experiences, particularly in the discipline of sport where some 70% lecturers are male, a percentage that increases as one moves up the HE structure.

[7] For this reason, it is not appropriate to include further biographical details such as gender, age, years of experience, as this would narrow the field and make it possible to identify the respondents.

[8] For example, see module evaluations, internal student satisfaction surveys, the National Student Survey, course KPIs, DELI statistics.

[9] NASSS - North American Society for the Sociology of Sport. ISSA - International Sociology of Sport Association. BSA - British Sociological Association.

[10] See *The Campaign for Social Science* which seeks to raise the profile of social science in the public, media and Parliament. The acronym STEMM is often is used in discussion of funding and educational policy.