

TOWARDS SPORT AND EXERCISE SCIENCE EDUCATION INFORMED BY
SOCIOLOGY

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Towards Sport and Exercise Science Education Informed by Sociology

Gavin Thomas, Dr Mykolas Kavaliauskas, Prof. Győző Molnár & Dr Rhiannon Lord make a case for thinking more sociologically when it comes to sport and exercise science undergraduate degree programmes.

Introduction

Sport and exercise scientists can and do work in various settings, but regardless of the work-environment many aspects of the role involve social interactions with, for instance, athletes, clients, and other practitioners. Even when practitioners are not directly interacting with others, their work is directly situated in and influenced by their socio-cultural environment and acceptable knowledge production practices. Sport and exercise scientists should therefore be encouraged to actively reflect not just on the biophysical-technological milieu, but also on psychosocial aspects of their practice. Consequently, actively engaging with sociological perspectives can positively contribute to the preparation of practitioners, researchers and academics (i.e., the three primary groups identified in issue 76 of the Sport and Exercise Scientist members' survey) for the complex, yet realistic challenges they will encounter over their professional career. For instance, socially and culturally informed sport and exercise scientists are likely to comprehend that individuals have multiple, intersecting identities (such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability, to name but a few) that make the challenges (e.g., competitions) and opportunities (e.g., new training plans) they experience unique to them. Therefore, the importance of being aware of intersectionality and having cultural sensibility for sport and exercise scientists should not be underestimated.

Where is Sociology?

Through the BASES accreditation process, a range of psychosocial knowledge, practices and skills are identified as necessary to become an effective sport and exercise scientist. These include, but not limited to: communication, emotions, ethics and cultural values, identity, leadership, problem solving and meeting the holistic needs of athletes and other clients. Specifically, within the BASES accreditation competency profile (Competency 9 - 'understanding of the delivery environment') there is a requirement to evidence the ability to adapt practice and to meet the needs of a variety of groups with different intersecting identities. This presupposes the importance of perceiving society and social actors through an analytical lens that centres around intersectionality and highlights the importance of developing and maintaining a reflexive, socially and culturally informed professional practice.

Despite the recognition that working as an effective sport and exercise practitioner involves actively engaging with social actors and processes, and human actions always performed and interpreted within their socio-historical and cultural context, sociology, as a discipline, tends to have a marginal status in comparison to the 'dominant' three disciplines: physiology, biomechanics and psychology. For example, BASES (2023) defines sport and exercise science as 'the application of scientific principles to sport and exercise, achieved through one of the following three branches of science (biomechanics, physiology, psychology), or through interdisciplinary approaches'. Whilst sociology may be deployed under 'interdisciplinary approaches' that 'contribute to the body of knowledge or solve a real-world problem using

two or more disciplines in an integrated fashion', arguably, there is currently limited emphasis on the importance of socio-cultural knowledge and its application in sport and exercise science. This marginalisation is further demonstrated by the fact that BASES do not have a separate division and/or interest group for sociology or, at least, it is very unclear where it is positioned within the broad spectrum of sport and exercise science.

Limited engagement with the discipline of sociology is somewhat expected because historically the sub-discipline of sociology of sport has struggled, and arguably continues to do so, for legitimacy and acceptance as a field of enquiry. The discipline faces a two-fold challenge from both mainstream sociologists who have questioned the merit of sport as a worthy subject of enquiry, and also from some scholars in sport sciences/kinesiology, who see limited value in incorporating socio-cultural aspects into scientific enquiries (Pike et al., 2015). In part, this marginalisation of sociology in sport sciences may be due to universities putting emphasis on promoting natural sciences to attract students, and research and enterprise income, and for influencing policy and practice (Giulianotti and Ansgar Thie, 2023). These factors have led some sociologists of sport to disengage with sport and exercise science as a subject of enquiry, often in favour of a focus on health and health-based exercise (Markula, 2015) where they have been able to meet the pressures of audit culture and secure external funding more readily. Yet academics, within the field of sociology of sport, have demonstrated the considerable influence the discipline has to play in attracting increasingly socially and politically active students, funding and the attention of policy makers who are under increasing pressure to create cultural change. Colleagues in the field have successfully raised socio-cultural awareness and effectively worked with policy makers to address growing concerns around athlete well-being and (lack of) inclusivity in participation and employment within sport, for example. This, in turn, raises questions around the level of preparedness of future sport and exercise scientists who are entering employment where there is increasing attention and demand for healthy and equitable culture(s) and cultural sensibility and literacy.

Despite the contributions sociologists of sport have made, and their growing collaborations and connections to colleagues in sport science/kinesiology departments, marginalisation of the discipline continues through its limitation, or in some cases absence, in sport science education in the UK. To explore the inclusion of sociology in Higher Education sport degree programmes, we reviewed curricula content of the 50 undergraduate Sport and Exercise Science degrees accredited by BASES. Perhaps, expectedly, we found that sociology modules **comprised only 2%** of all available modules (unpublished data). In contrast, the three dominant disciplines made up the third of the total curricula provision with the other two thirds consisting of other physical science modules, e.g., strength and conditioning (see Figure 1). It is important to note that our analysis only included BASES accredited undergraduate degree programmes with '(Applied) Sport and Exercise Science(s)' and '(Applied) Sport Science' in the programme titles. Therefore, joint degrees (e.g., BSc (Hons) Sport Science and Coaching) or programmes with the named pathways (e.g., BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science (Strength and Conditioning)) were excluded and may have a different curricular makeup.

Towards Sociology...

Our analysis suggests that there is a gap in the direct application of sociology in sport and exercise sciences and, thus, a need to challenge the traditional disciplinary boundaries that

exist between the natural and social sciences. There is no doubt, sociology can play a significant and meaningful role in helping sport and exercise scientists by providing valuable insights into the socio-cultural aspects of sports and physical activities. By incorporating sociological insights, sport and exercise scientists can design more effective and reality-congruent interventions/training programmes that promote sports participation and physical activity by actively giving consideration to the socio-cultural realities of the environments in which those activities take place. Further developing and having a holistic awareness of the ways in which socio-cultural systems operate will aid practitioners of all domains (i.e., applied sport/exercise science support, research, or pedagogy) to be well equipped to make sense of and appreciate the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of athletes, clients, participants, students and other practitioners, which, in turn, will help foster inclusive and supportive environments. Therefore, we encourage scientists to consider making use of different approaches and knowledge systems through interdisciplinary pathways, in which sociology focused modules, if featured more extensively within undergraduate sport and exercise science degree programmes, would make a meaningful contribution. In turn, this would move the development and learning of aspiring and existing sport and exercise scientists towards a holistic understanding of and appreciation for not only the research know-how, but why and to what extent that is underpinned by socio-cultural values and practices. Perhaps a sign of progress is acknowledging the need for greater diversity and better support for underrepresented groups in their career progression by the BASES Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Advisory Group, which recently launched its first Professional Development and Mentoring Programme. This initiative can be perceived as an indication that BASES is moving towards becoming a forward-facing, progressive organisation, and as an extrapolation of its EDI approach it could/should consider inviting sociologists as panel members.

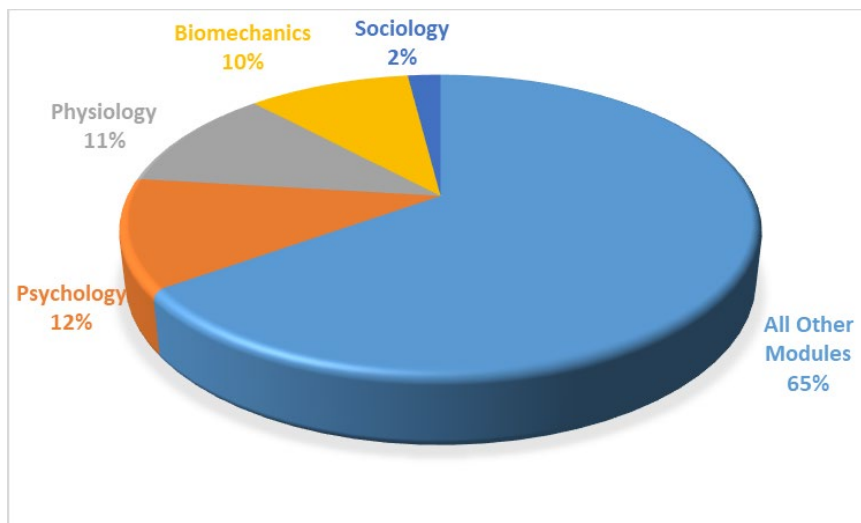


Figure 1. Curricula content of 50 undergraduate Sport and Exercise Science programmes accredited by the BASES.

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