

## Reflections from scholars on barriers and strategies in sport-for-development research

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### Abstract

Although there is a plethora of literature calling for changes and improvements to the methodology and theory in sport-for-development (SFD) research, a first-hand account of the initial barriers and challenges faced by scholars in SFD research has not been undertaken, nor has there been a synthesis of strategies that scholars have tapped to overcome these issues. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine barriers and challenges that scholars encounter when they initially consider engaging in SFD research. Additionally, this study serves to explore strategies that are used to overcome these barriers and challenges. We interviewed eight well-established SFD scholars for this study. The initial barriers to engaging in SFD research are scholars' perceptions that SFD organizations have had negative experiences working with academics and challenges posed by the higher education system. A number of concrete strategies were identified for targeting these barriers and working within higher education to advance SFD research. Drawn from the findings, implications for engaging in the SFD field are elucidated and future research directions are outlined.

While the ideology of sport-for-development (SFD) has been around for centuries, dating back to the tradition of the Olympic truce that suspended wars and postponed legal debates, the field has only recently emerged as a subject of heightened attention, both in practice and in academia. Research articles and commentaries have been published in journals within the sport management field and other interdisciplinary journals. In addition, several books

focusing specifically on SFD and a journal dedicated to this topic (*Journal of Sport for Development*) have recently emerged. These research efforts and the overarching goals and effectiveness of SFD have been met with intense scrutiny. Several scholars have offered critiques of SFD, its efficacy, and noted challenges in conducting research in this space.<sup>1-6</sup>

Although there is a plethora of literature calling for changes and improvements to methodology and theory in SFD research along with increased calls for the need to monitor and evaluate outcomes (which is different than research per se, explained below), little attention has been paid toward the initial barriers and challenges faced by scholars when considering adopting SFD as their research agenda. In a self-reflective article on the difficulties researching marginalised populations, Sherry<sup>7</sup> light-heartedly noted how she “found [herself] reaching for the ‘compulsory’ glass of wine at the end of the day . . . and began to wonder if perhaps it was not just [her] research participants using alcohol as a crutch” (p.281). Additionally, scholars have noted how the academic tenure and reward system can impede research agendas, compelling them to focus on quantity over quality in publications and spend time attempting to acquire grants versus collecting data or working on manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> The genesis of this manuscript emerged after a few debriefing sessions between the authors as we considered how best to navigate through the SFD research space. We encountered initial barriers and frustrations engaging in SFD research, generating curiosity as to the perceptions of other scholars with regards to barriers they encountered and how they navigated them.

**Keywords:** Sport-for-development, Sport-for-development and peace, Sport for social change

Despite these experiences of SFD researchers, a first-hand account of the initial barriers and challenges to engaging in SFD research faced by scholars has not been undertaken. In addition, there has not been a synthesis of strategies scholars have tapped to overcome these issues. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine barriers and challenges encountered by scholars when initially considering engaging in research in SFD and to explore the strategies that were used to overcome these barriers and challenges. To guide this investigation we developed two research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the perceived barriers and challenges that may discourage scholars from initially engaging in SFD research?

**RQ2:** What strategies are employed by these scholars to address and overcome the perceived barriers and challenges to initial engagement in SFD research?

## Background

The growth of SFD within the past few decades has rapidly expanded both in practice and within academia.<sup>9</sup> Whilst the focus of this article does not permit for an extensive review of the SFD literature, it is important to recognise the research, both theoretical and practical, which has contributed to a better understanding of SFD across contexts. Before doing so, it may be helpful to distinguish between research and evaluation, as these terms are often confused. Research in SFD is not just about conducting program evaluations and publishing the results or providing feedback to organisations, which is a common misconception. Rather, research more broadly is undertaken to produce knowledge, build theory, and enhance an understanding of a phenomenon, which may or may not include programme evaluation (e.g., Hayhurst's<sup>10</sup> study of SFD organisations and programmes). In the current study, we were interested in scholars' perceptions of initial barriers to conducting *research* in SFD and strategies for addressing these barriers. As such, scholars were explicitly asked to talk about research in SFD and not just evaluation, although the discussion illustrates that some scholars in this study also seemed to equate research with evaluation, whether intentionally or not.

Most individuals reading this article are likely aware of the cliché in academia "publish or perish". While the thought of perishing is mildly extreme, there is a very real awareness of academics on the need to publish in order to succeed and obtain tenure and promotion. In one study highlighting perceptions of faculty regarding academic pressures, Miller,

Taylor, and Bedian<sup>11</sup> note tenure-track faculty "emphasize productivity at the expense of creativity and innovation" (p. 435). The authors continue to suggest the trepidation of unconventional research potentially results in studies that lack substance or restate obvious questions. In another assessment on the culture of academic pressure, Carson, Bartneck, and Voges<sup>8</sup> highlight the negative impact that competition can have on academics who compete for the same funding dollars and top tier journal publications. Specifically, they indicate constant rejection can lead to lowering standards and publishing becomes more vital than discovery and knowledge acquisition. Specifically, along with guiding the direction of ideas and findings, the peer-review process is crucial in determining individual advancement and achievement.<sup>12</sup>

Moving forward, some SFD research and evaluation has begun to highlight the impact sport can possibly have on various societal issues. Research has illustrated the importance of sport in increasing social capital and also minimising the social exclusion of marginalised populations, such as individuals suffering from homelessness, and those recovering from drug and alcohol addiction.<sup>13-15</sup> Other literature has detailed the impact sport can have towards fostering intercultural exchange, particularly with countries and regions in war torn areas.<sup>16-18</sup> Beyond simply elucidating the ability of sport to potentially yield a positive impact on society, scholars have begun to focus on the importance of how sport is implemented.<sup>6</sup> Recognising that sport alone is not capable of creating societal change, Coalter<sup>2</sup> recommends to avoid making "overly romanticized, communitarian generalisations about the 'power' of sport for development" (p. 1386). While sport can serve as a valuable mechanism in certain sport-plus or plus-sport programming, it is not realistic to assume it can by itself solve large-scale problems,<sup>1-2</sup> and should be packaged with other educational and cultural activities to achieve optimal effect.<sup>6,19</sup>

Several scholars have offered critiques of SFD, its efficacy, and noted challenges in conducting research (and evaluation).<sup>16</sup> Coalter<sup>1-2</sup> critiques the academic process and outcomes of many SFD initiatives, suggesting the necessity of a more 'logical' approach to monitoring and evaluation along with programme implementation. As stated by Comelissen,<sup>20</sup> "one of the biggest problems with the sport-for-development movement is the lack of an evidentiary base, and the often substantial gap between theory and practice" (p. 507). Several well-established scholars have reflected on the direction of research in the field and the role of sport within the SFD context.<sup>2, 21-22</sup>

Whilst there have been many claims about the positive benefits sport can have throughout society, there have also been numerous critiques on the lack of empirical evidence and calls for stronger monitoring and evaluation efforts.<sup>1-2, 23</sup> As Black<sup>24</sup> notes, "emphasis on practice has come, for the most part, at the expense of critical and theoretically-informed reflection" (p. 122). These efforts are seemingly easier said than done, as effective research and evaluation can be expensive, complex, and time-consuming for scholars with multiple competing demands of research, teaching, and service.<sup>9</sup> And of course, it must be reiterated that not all SFD research is evaluation work (nor should it be), and the critiques and basic research carried out by some SFD scholars make significant contributions to the field and theory building, beyond just monitoring and evaluation efforts.

Literature critiquing SFD commonly suggests that the value and impact of sport should not be overestimated or overvalued.<sup>25</sup> In a review and critique of the SFD field, Hartmann and Kwauk<sup>25</sup> draw forth two critical reflections. First, they suggest that sport participation and programming does, and should, not guarantee positive impact, noting these gains need to materialise within proper conditions and suitable resources. Second, they note sport initiatives should collaborate with non-sport programming for a wider range of development goals to be accomplished. This opinion is supported by Schulenkorf and Sugden,<sup>23</sup> who argue that involvement of passionate leaders and change agents is a more critical component than the act of sport itself, and that greater focus on ancillary aspects of sport events should occur. More specifically, Hartmann<sup>26</sup> suggests "the success of any sport-based social interventionist programme is largely determined by the strength of its non-sport components" (p. 134).

In an effort to stress the potential of SFD along with the necessity for stronger findings, Levermore<sup>27</sup> claims "more evaluation is required to determine the exact nature of [sport's] potential" (p. 189). Kay<sup>5</sup> stressed four major issues within SFD research and evaluation that have emerged in recent years: (a) the belief that sport provides social benefits beyond direct participation, (b) rhetoric and policy endorsing the ability of sport has heightened expectations of practitioners in the field, (c) benefits claimed often overreach the research that was conducted, and (d) the necessity for stronger data to further prove or disprove the impact of sport. Literature has also illustrated the need for academics to assist in the monitoring and evaluation efforts of SFD organisations or initiatives due to these organisations' lack of time, limited staff and lack of research-based skills.<sup>6,15</sup> In

addition to conducting research for the sake of knowledge production in SFD, scholars can also play a role to advance research agendas that encompasses broader, long-term assessment of benefits and challenges of participants.<sup>22</sup> While many SFD organisations have become more skilled at evaluating and quantifying outcomes, scholars may still be able to bring more complex and sophisticated methodologies to their SFD work. Thus, practitioner/scholar engagements and collaborations could be crucial for continuing to build the credibility of the SFD field.<sup>9</sup> However, as evidenced above, there could be barriers to conducting research in SFD, some of which may be posed by the higher education system. Therefore, this research was undertaken to help shed further light on the barriers and challenges initially encountered by scholars when they first consider engaging in SFD research, with the view towards uncovering strategies employed to help address these issues.

## Method

To gain insight into the barriers, challenges, and strategies encountered and employed by scholars when they initially consider engaging in SFD research, we conducted a qualitative investigation with eight international, well-established SFD scholars. Qualitative methods were adopted for this exploratory study because this enabled us to ask probing and clarifying questions in order to gather rich data.<sup>28</sup>

### *Participants and Procedures*

Eight SFD scholars were ultimately selected to take part in semi-structured interviews. In an effort to identify potential interviewees for our research we began by locating peer-reviewed articles incorporating the term "sport-for-development" through a Google Scholar search. We also conducted key word searches for "sport for social change" and "sport-for-development and peace" to further identify published articles related to SFD. To narrow down the list of scholars, the next step entailed locating articles with high citation rates published in peer-reviewed journals both inside and outside of sport, such as the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Journal of Sport for Development*, *Journal of Sport Management*, *Sport Management Review*, and *Third World Quarterly*. Finally, we aimed to identify academics publishing from a range of research perspectives (e.g., international policy development, community sport, youth sport and development, social inclusion, and conflict resolution), along with representing different geographic locations (e.g., North America, Europe, Australia, and Africa).

Initially, 12 well-established scholars were identified as possible study participants. A personal email was sent to each with an invitation to take part in a one-on-one phone or Skype interview. We followed up with two reminder emails one and two weeks later after making initial contact. In the end, eight scholars volunteered to be interviewed and take part in this investigation. Additionally, each professor gave permission to have their names and institutions included in findings and reports: Dr. Cora Burnett, University of Johannesburg, South Africa; Dr. Simon Darnell, University of Toronto, Canada; Dr. Wendy Frisby, University of British Columbia, Canada (now retired); Dr. B. Christine Green, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.; Dr. Mary Hums, University of Louisville, U.S.; Dr. Roger Levermore, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology; Dr. Nico Schulenkorf, University of Technology, Australia; and Dr. Emma Sherry, La Trobe University, Australia. Each audio recorded interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed from the limited SFD literature that particularly articulated barriers and challenges to engaging in SFD research and potential strategies for addressing these challenges and barriers,<sup>1-2, 6, 15, 17, 29-31</sup> and from the literature outlining challenges posed by higher education.<sup>8,11</sup> Interview questions revolved around topics such as the challenges encountered when considering whether to embark upon SFD research, potential barriers posed by the higher education system, and strategies employed to address these challenges.

### Data Analysis

During the initial stage of data analysis, we coded the transcripts to a priori themes drawn from the aforementioned literature on SFD and higher education systems focused on research challenges and potential strategies for addressing these challenges.<sup>1-2, 6,8, 11,15,17, 29-31</sup> The authors expected additional themes to materialise from the data,<sup>32</sup> which led both authors to utilise a more inductive and open coding process to analyse the transcripts line-by-line to identify data demonstrating the challenges, barriers, and strategies. All of these codes were then collapsed into prominent themes.<sup>28, 32</sup>

Coding and analysis were performed by both authors independently. Following the individual coding process, the authors discussed their findings three times in an attempt to debate and then agree upon themes and enhance the dependability of the analysis. To conclude the coding

process, the authors identified key quotations that best characterised the emergent themes.<sup>33</sup> Data saturation was achieved by continuously acquiring data until the data set was complete, which was indicated by replication or redundancy.<sup>34</sup> To enhance the dependability and credibility of the study, triangulation of investigators was employed, and member checks were carried out with the scholars.<sup>35</sup> They had the opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure accuracy and representativeness as well as the interpretations of the study. None of the scholars had any changes to their transcripts and they agreed with study findings and interpretations.

### Results

#### *Barriers and Challenges to Initially Engaging in Sport-for-Development Research*

The results of the current study revealed that scholars perceived two major barriers and challenges to initially engaging in SFD research (research question one); the perception that practitioners have had challenging experiences working with academics in the past and thus are reluctant to engage in research and evaluation exercises with academics, and the perception that the higher education system presents substantial barriers to engaging in SFD research for scholars. These two themes are explored in detail below.

*Perceived challenging experiences working with academics.* All scholars perceived that many practitioners – across a variety of contexts, from local community-based organisations to international level NGOs – have not always had positive experiences working with academics. Because of these challenging experiences, a barrier can be erected that scholars may find difficult to overcome when making initial overtures to SFD organisations. Several scholars spoke about their perceptions regarding the suspicion practitioners have about those in higher education based upon their previous experiences working with academics. Frisby's comment is illustrative of this suspicion as she reflected upon the local, grassroots organisations in particular that she has worked with in Canada:

*They can see through you and there is some suspicion around, and rightly so, academic researchers and service providers who've maybe come in and out of their life and exploited them and got what they needed for their careers and moved on...I hear stories of previous researchers who have come in and said we're going to give back in some way, and [SFD organisations] never hear back from them.*

Speaking in general about the SFD field, Green commented on her perception of this suspicion: “I think the key is, we have a lot to overcome in terms of an image of an academic. I think we’re initially perceived as users . . . we need money to do something that’s of value to me.” While Burnett also shared her perception about the suspicion national and international NGOs have about academics in terms of “exploiting others . . . these are the ethical issues I think,” she also mentioned that some practitioners (local, national, international) may believe that academics are abusing the SFD community: “I think working with NGOs is very difficult. . . . They say to me you are abusing our community. You ask the same questions, but you don’t bring the balls, you don’t bring the equipment. What’s wrong with you?” Specifically, Burnett is referring to her context of South Africa and southern Africa, drawing from her knowledge of several practitioner and academic engagements carried out in this part of the world that were not perceived as helpful by practitioners. In addition, Burnett expressed her opinion about some scholars in the Global North who have a sense of entitlement and such privilege may contribute to the negative perceptions SFD practitioners may hold of academics: “There is ignorance and entitlement of some academics from the Global North, especially post-graduate students delivering papers with great confidence and ignorance, not having been in the field.”

Furthermore, some of the scholars perceived that the unhelpful deliverables many in higher education provide to organisations contribute to these not-so-positive experiences of working with academics. These unwieldy deliverables are often not user-friendly and the research and evaluation results are not communicated to organisations in appropriate forms for their use, as Green opined, drawing from her experiences working with youth sport organisations: “I think that’s a challenge. Are we producing evaluation results that they can use in their funding request or marketing materials so they can improve their programmes? . . . The type of report you produce might be very different.” Schulenkorf also spoke about his perception of the SFD field in general, and that where and how scholars publish their findings are not accessible or meaningful to practitioners:

*We publish it in some obscure journal that has an impact factor of this or that and has absolutely no meaning to the people that are there. So unless you’re able to use your data and use your findings and communicate them back in a more meaningful way to the participants and to the people that we’re helping out who are organising the projects, there’s not much point in actually doing so. . . . It’s important to get away from the academic writing to get the*

*message across.*

One other contributing factor was identified by Hums as a lack of involvement and credibility of researchers among practitioners. Here, Hums spoke from her experience working with adaptive sport and human rights through sport organisations. Due to previous challenging experiences working with scholars in these contexts, Hums perceived that these organisations learn not to trust academics, causing academic researchers to often lose credibility in the eyes of the organisations, which presents a fundamental challenge to engaging in research with them: “I think one of the issues we have is lack of credibility, sort of street credit within the industry. I think that makes a big difference in our work being accepted.”

*Perceived barriers and challenges posed by the higher education system.* Scholars in this study perceived barriers and challenges posed by the higher education system to be a second contributing factor discouraging scholars from initially engaging in SFD research. Levermore began by explaining how, in his opinion, SFD is not regarded very highly in some academic circles, which may discourage scholars from considering SFD as a viable line of research:

*You have those who are real development experts who think it’s a bit of a Mickey Mouse sideshow and it’s not important . . . One of the reasons they get put off by sport-for-development is that some of the people . . . think that sport can solve anything. It’s just taken as a little bit of a joke.*

Similarly, Darnell shared his perception about how SFD is regarded by mainstream development experts:

*[Development scholars] don’t really consider sport to be part of the development studies field . . . I think this [SFD] is something that attracts people who have backgrounds in sport rather than people who have backgrounds in critical development studies. . . . If you just turn up and have kids throwing balls around, people from the broader development paradigm would be sceptical about it.*

Additionally, all scholars identified academic pressures and rewards as a key constraint which may discourage researchers from engaging in SFD research, due to the possible lengthy time commitments for project development and for carrying out the research longitudinally, and due to the fact that goals of higher education systems may not necessarily be aligned with goals of the research. For instance, Schulenkorf shared his view drawn from personal experience:

*From a university perspective, while they applaud you and go 'that's very nice' . . . and you may get a pat on the shoulder. What matters here is the research outcome and ideally in an 'A' journal . . . and clearly the impact you are trying to achieve is very different to the one the university wants to have.*

Schulenkorf is alluding to the fact that many SFD scholars are engaging with organisations over the long term to conduct their research or evaluate programmes and provide recommendations to these organisations for programme improvements and development. However, these goals may be at odds with designing research to publish quickly in top-tier journals. Levermore also provided his opinion on the perceived lower-tier status of SFD research within top tier journals: "The problem with sport-for-development is that it's not easy to get into the big management journals, and as a result of that, you don't get rated highly [by the institution] for the research exercise." Frisby agreed with Schulenkorf and Levermore, commenting that the academic reward system may discourage young scholars from pursuing research methodologies used in SFD, such as participatory action research (PAR), that take considerable time: "I think the other thing is the reward system in the Academy . . . pumping manuscripts out quickly and PAR work is not quick. For graduate students, it is much tougher to do." Damell, who was a doctoral student of Frisby's, also commented on the publication pressures: "I guess this is one of the pressures of research, you have to get the publications out. When the project is over we move onto the next thing, but I wonder if there is more we should be doing with following up [with SFD organisations]."

In addition, lack of resources for conducting SFD research, in terms of university and external funding options (grants and contracts), were also identified as barriers preventing some scholars from engaging in SFD research. For example, Sherry shared her view: "One of the things with this type of research is it is incredibly difficult. It's very hard to get money, and any money that you do get is on an absolute shoestring." For Damell, he perceived that in-depth research in SFD did not lend itself easily to funding: "While you're doing that in-depth, critical work, the funding passes you by and then you are left with nothing." Levermore agreed: "There's not much money out there for the field, and the projects take a long time, and we need to do our teaching and have other demands." Drawing from her experience in seeking funding over 20-plus years, Hums shared that "who's going to give money to a pencil-headed professor who wants to study . . . implementation of the Convention of Rights to people with disabilities?" Finally, Hums also

gave her perspective on trends in academia to gain tenure and the necessity to pursue grants, which may prove difficult in the SFD sphere:

*When I started it was all about publications. Actually, when I started it was about solo publications . . . now collaboration is okay but they want you to be first author . . . in terms of the tenure ride they want you to get money.*

#### *Strategies to Address Perceived Barriers and Challenges*

Whilst the scholars identified two key barriers and challenges to initially engaging in SFD research, they also perceived several important strategies for overcoming these barriers and challenges (research question two).

*Strategies for addressing negative experiences of practitioners.* As mentioned, scholars in this study perceived that SFD practitioners have had negative experiences working with academics, which may diminish their interest in allowing scholars to conduct research with or evaluate their organizations. To help overcome these potential negative perceptions, all scholars in the current study spoke to the necessity of spending time building relationships, trust, and credibility with organisations and practitioners. For example, Frisby shared about her approach working with marginalised and disenfranchised populations to help allay suspicions that practitioners may have of academic researchers:

*It's trust. It all goes back to building trust, that this is going to be a safe place for them. Many of them are quite suspicious about that, and if you can't do that with a partner, you know the project is not going to move forward.*

Levermore agreed: "It is just about networking and developing trust with practitioners." Similar to Frisby and Levermore, Burnett also emphasized the importance of developing trust with NGOs in her South African context:

*We have to develop trust. To build that trust, we have to negotiate understandings with the NGOs we work with. . . . I take six months to orient them to the development framework. I say I will not publish anything unless you give me the go ahead. . . . So, it's all a process of engagement and trust that you have to build up.*

Thus, it appears one of the key strategies to carrying out effective research is to spend the requisite time necessary to build strong relationships, trust, and credibility with practitioners.

In this same vein, Burnett not only perceived the importance of developing user-friendly tools to assist practitioners with the research process, but also the necessity of having impartial researchers involved in the process: “They need user-friendly tools to capture M&E (monitoring and evaluation), but need outsiders to link to existing data and do an impact assessment without undue bias.” Finally, Hums shared her opinion that theory should be deemphasized because this can be beyond the scope of a practitioner’s interest, and that scholars should focus on hard data and results to provide tangible information to assist in day-to-day operations such as acquiring funding: “I think [those in the SFD field] need, not theories about management evaluation; we need someone to actually go in and say, you know we’ve seen this. We need numbers [for the practitioners].”

*Strategies for working with and within the higher education system.* The scholars also shared their opinions on various strategies for working with and within the higher education system to facilitate engagement with SFD research. Following your passion was a theme that emerged from conversations with many of the scholars, as typified by Frisby on the course of action she took when first carving out her research agenda:

*If this is your passion . . . I would say just go for it. I did my traditional thing and started going down this path . . . and they all advised me against going this route because it didn’t fit with the norms of the Academy . . . but I just kept going. . . . You’ll find ways, because people working in other fields run into challenges and they find a way to work around it. We need to do the same.*

Frisby continued by giving advice on developing an SFD publication plan very early in one’s career to help navigate the higher education system:

*If you get so involved in this work that you’re not conforming to the norms in the system of academia, you’re not going to be in academia for very long. . . . Come up with a publication plan pretty early in a project. . . . I can think of eight or 10 [scholars] who did this sort of work by just starting at their Master’s or their PhD and have been very successful because they built in a plan for the writing.*

Similarly, Levermore encouraged new SFD scholars to think outside the box and be creative as they design studies and engage with organisations: “Do something that has not been done by anybody else. Think outside of the box, and use your strengths. . . . Keep an open mind that sport doesn’t

always do good.” Levermore also suggested scholars consider how their SFD research will link to mainstream research agendas in order to gain credibility and traction for their work within the higher education system: “If you are doing something like this, keep it linked to the mainstream to give yourself as many opportunities as possible. . . . Speak general, and engage with the mainstream community as much as you can.” Along these lines, Damell shared how he drew from other disciplines for his work, and encouraged other scholars to do likewise: “The issues we are tackling [in SFD] are ones development studies people have been paying attention to for a long time. . . . I try to draw from this broader perspective and encourage others to do the same.”

Scholars in this study also advocated that SFD scholars should collaborate with other researchers, both inside and outside of the field and from different geographic areas in order to best advance knowledge and address issues related to academic pressures through building a supportive, collaborative group of researchers. For instance, Sherry shared that “someone in the States could learn from Africa, from someone in India, and the more we can cross culturally collaborate probably the stronger the research will be in the long run.” Burnett agreed: “We need to find people to grow the field together. We work a bit in isolation. I think we should really pull together to exchange knowledge.” Damell added: “I think collaboration between researchers is really significant. This field can be lonely, and you get to the end of a project and think, ‘did I actually make a contribution?’” Relatedly, Levermore thought that new SFD scholars should reach out to senior development and SFD scholars to collaborate with them, as these individuals can help guide longer-term projects and potentially have access to funding:

*It’s an entirely different pond, an entirely different ball game with senior researchers. Because they’ve already got that experience, they’ve got that credibility that allows them to do 5-10 year research projects. And they can get access to resources.*

Many of the scholars in this study also mentioned that it was vital to involve students in SFD research and field work, not only to train and encourage young potential scholars and practitioners in SFD theory and practice, but to also gain credibility for SFD within academic circles as student interest grows. For example, Hums iterated that “I hope we can get the SFD message into our classrooms so that the people who are future sport managers and scholars get SFD on their plate in an understandable way.” Burnett also thought that “we really need to engage students and get

them out there into rural areas. Get them into compromising contexts so that they can learn, but under guidance.” In addition, Levermore advocated for involving international students in SFD research to better position the relevance of SFD within curricula and academic disciplines:

*Involve students from Indonesia or the Phillipines, or Malaysia, or from South America . . . because we are focusing on very few geographic areas at the moment. We have to explore what’s really going on elsewhere to give viability to SFD in academia and practice.*

In terms of research funding, Damell urged scholars to consider third party funding for their projects, instead of relying on SFD organisations:

*The structure I was imagining is that we would be bringing our own kind of third party funding. You find an organisation that is willing to partner with you, but then you have to go and get the money from somewhere else.*

Bumett also raised an interesting criticism of SFD scholars about not getting into the field and being on the ground with the research, and challenged researchers to do this when engaging in SFD research and working within the higher education system:

*The most irritating is you have entitled people who have fantastic theoretical perspectives, but they just want to push the context to fit the theory. I think that’s total ignorance. I think people are not making their hands dirty, not being in the field, not understanding what they are writing about.*

Finally, given Bumett’s challenge above to scholars to get out into the field more, Sherry provided a cautionary note about becoming too imbedded when conducting SFD research:

*I became particularly embedded. I would have participants ringing me up because they were about to commit suicide. . . Things happened in my life that made me less involved. I have a better understanding of the role I can have to help and sometimes that’s just listening. I can’t fix it. I’m not trained to fix it.*

All of these strategies helped the scholars in this study navigate the challenges of the higher education system, or point towards new ways to do so.

## Discussion

Noted scholars have discussed challenges of SFD, primarily

from a programme design, implementation and impacts assessment perspective.<sup>1-6, 23, 36</sup> Work outside of the SFD context has also examined challenges posed by the higher education system for scholars in carrying out research agendas primarily due to the academic reward system.<sup>8, 11</sup> What has not been undertaken before, however, is a first-hand account of the initial barriers and challenges encountered by scholars when considering engaging in SFD research and a synthesis of the associated strategies for addressing them. As the current study elucidates, many of these initial barriers and challenges to engaging in SFD research emanate from the higher education system itself. We believe it is critical to obtain a lay of the land in SFD research and to identify barriers and challenges currently encountered by active scholars in the field, and the strategies they are employing to effectively engage in SFD research, in order to advance SFD research, knowledge, and academic engagement.<sup>6, 19</sup>

Our first research question was concerned with identifying the perceived barriers and challenges experienced by scholars that may discourage them from initially engaging in SFD research. It was intriguing that all scholars in this study perceived that SFD organisations across a variety of contexts have had challenging experiences working with academics, which may cloud the ability and effectiveness of researchers to engage with organisations in research. This is a disconcerting finding and it is likely related to the pressures and time demands placed upon researchers by their institutions to publish or perish and to be prolific in publishing efforts while balancing many other demands of teaching and service inherent in the faculty role.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, these actions may undermine the credibility of the higher education system in the eyes of practitioners and inhibit the ability to advance knowledge and theory building in SFD if practitioners are disinclined to engage with academics for long-term research efforts. However, it must be noted that when asked specifically about examples of negative experiences practitioners have had when working with academics, the scholars in this study were reluctant to cite specific examples of organisations or academics, preferring to speak more broadly about their perceptions. It could be that SFD organisations have not had positive experiences working with all of the scholars in this study as well or even with the authors of the current study. Even these well-established scholars, as well as the authors, may not be beyond succumbing to the pressures of the academic reward system, which could perpetuate practitioner suspicion of academics engaging in research with SFD organisations in order to further their own interests.



Furthermore, while scholars in this study were specifically asked to reflect upon challenges and strategies for conducting *research* in SFD, it is apparent through some of the quotes that even these well-established scholars could equate research with programme evaluation. As noted earlier, research and evaluation are not one and the same. This could be problematic for the SFD field if scholars assume that monitoring and evaluation is the most significant form of SFD research and neglect engaging in basic research and critical reflections for the sole purpose of advancing knowledge and building theory.

In addition, scholars perceived that a key challenge and barrier to engaging in SFD research originated from within the higher education system. The institutional pressures discussed above may discourage scholars from pursuing innovative or novel SFD research agendas in lieu of easier or cleaner studies. As noted, the threat of competition or fear of rejection can often alter a scholar's research.<sup>8</sup> Whilst a principal barrier was posed by the higher education system, as perceived by these scholars, there are systemic issues here within higher education systems not necessarily unique to discouraging SFD scholars, but which may discourage scholars in other fields as well from taking on long-term, meaningful projects requiring immense time and energy due to the pressures and demands of the higher education environment. However, it is important for SFD scholars to advocate for their research agenda and its value with department chairs and deans. Perhaps as individuals in key decision-making roles come to understand the nature and demands of SFD research and evaluation, there will be adjustments and considerations incorporated into the promotion and tenure guidelines to account for the long-term nature of the projects and the limited funding available. When this occurs, more scholars could feel free to move into the SFD field earlier in their careers. Greater consideration could also be given to service and public engagement initiatives when weighting promotion and tenure requirements, which could promote stronger engagement with practitioners.

Our second research question delved into the strategies employed by these scholars to address and overcome the perceived barriers and challenges to initially engaging in SFD research. A few scholars have previously identified challenges with conducting SFD research and evaluation,<sup>1-4, 9</sup> but we believe this is the first effort to identify initial barriers and challenges and then to synthesise strategies for addressing these challenges drawn from scholars who have been working in SFD for a considerable time. A key strategy emerged to address the negative perception

practitioners may have of academics due to previous unhelpful experiences working with them, which is for scholars to take time to build relationships and trust with practitioners. This relationship focus of taking time to develop trust and understanding could be critical to effective SFD research when working with organizations centred upon marginalised populations who may have been abused by society in the past.<sup>13, 15, 38</sup>

The scholars identified a number of key strategies for working with and within the higher education system and several in particular warrant further elucidation. First, Levenson and others encouraged SFD scholars to collaborate together to enhance the credibility of the field and to link their work to mainstream development efforts in order to gain credibility and acceptance. We might suggest that SFD scholars also consider linking to other fields as well, such as sociology, business, psychology, health care, social work, and others to further gain traction within academic circles for SFD. There is much merit in broadening the scope of publication outlets for SFD research, as well as collaborative partners, as doing so can only help provide further legitimacy to this emerging field. Further, there is opportunity to utilise theory and research from these other fields within SFD to advance both scholarship and practice. Additionally, the scholars encouraged SFD researchers to get into the field and to connect with practitioners, participants, and organisations outside of their typical confines of higher education. We concur, as this strategy can assist with translating theory into practice, which is the age old dilemma within many academic circles. In particular, SFD is at a point where further theory building and development must be undertaken<sup>6, 19</sup> and this can only be done effectively if scholars situate themselves in and among those programmes they are attempting to theorise about.

### *Implications and Recommendations*

There are a number of key implications and recommendations for scholars engaging in SFD research that can be drawn from this study. It will be imperative for researchers to develop the human side of research, taking time to build trust and sustainable relationships with organisations, practitioners and programme participants. In turn, building and sustaining these relationships will help establish viable forms of academic engagement, which can move the SFD field forward, practically as well as theoretically. It must be noted, however, that developing the human side of research could be seen as counterintuitive to advocating for the objectivity of research. For SFD scholars,

this could prove difficult terrain to negotiate because science and academia call for objectivity and dispassionate engagement, while effective research in SFD seems to warrant building strong relationships and engagement with practitioners and likely research subjects. Maintaining objectivity is perhaps even more challenging when one considers that many SFD scholars are calling for more immersive and action forms of qualitative research. SFD scholars should also think in terms of long-term engagement and involvement, not necessarily performing speedy research with quick data collection and academic publications, which provide limited use for practitioners. By so doing, scholars can give attention to their target populations and organisations (interests, needs, skills, resources) and consider their research as a service to advance the SFD field and not just their own interests. For SFD practitioners, it is important to understand that scholars may have, in some instances, ulterior motives for engaging in research mainly to further their own interests related to the pressures and rewards of the academic system. Practitioners should do due diligence before engaging with scholars and recognise that in most cases, scholars will also need to derive benefits from the engagement.

Scholars must provide the deliverables that have been promised to practitioners in a timely fashion, and also be sure the deliverables are in the proper format for the organisation. Simply regurgitating scholarly manuscripts published in academic journals for impact reports when doing evaluations will do little by way of providing helpful and usable feedback for organisations or overcoming the negative perceptions practitioners may hold of academics. It will also be beneficial for SFD scholars to form collaborations with other academics from a variety of disciplines (e.g., sociology, psychology, anthropology, business management) to enhance their engagement and effectiveness in SFD research through employing multidisciplinary lenses, epistemologies and perspectives. Similarly, scholars in the Global North can collaborate with scholars in the Global South and other areas to gain a better understanding of socio-cultural contexts and nuances. In addition, an important implication from this study is that SFD scholars should involve their students in research efforts and bring the SFD agenda into the classroom. These efforts will help inspire new practitioners and scholars in the field, and assist in enhancing the relevance and credibility of SFD within academic circles. Finally, as discussed earlier, it will be important for SFD scholars to constructively challenge the academic reward system, helping administrators understand the complexities in the field and the lengthy gestation period that SFD research often entails.

### *Limitations and Future Research Directions*

This study does have its limitations, which can be addressed with future research. Admittedly, only a small sample of SFD scholars participated in this study and shared their views about initial barriers, challenges and strategies. We cannot suggest the challenges and strategies identified here are the only ones encountered and recommended by SFD scholars, and we welcome future commentary expanding on our findings. We recognise the scholars in this study mostly represent perspectives of the Global North. As initial barriers and challenges could be linked to socio-cultural contexts, future research should endeavour to gain perspectives from additional scholars representing even more diverse SFD content areas and geographic locations (i.e., the Global South) to help further our understanding of the field. Additionally, research can focus specifically on the differences in academic constraints to engaging in SFD research, since the academic reward and tenure systems can vary across contexts. There is also the possibility that social desirability bias could have occurred.<sup>28</sup> In addition, researcher bias may have transpired, as our own personal experience was the genesis for this research. As this is an exploratory and interpretive study, and as is commonly done in qualitative research, it is recognised that the authors may have their own biases and interpretations that influenced the findings.<sup>28</sup>

Stemming from this research, future investigations could gather perspectives from SFD practitioners as to their barriers, challenges, and strategies for working with academics, because their perspectives may counter those presented by the scholars in the current study. It would also be interesting to ascertain the motivations for engaging in SFD research among scholars working in the field, and importantly, the reasons why they remain involved in SFD in spite of the challenges and barriers illuminated in this study and other works. There is much work yet to be done in SFD and many scholars are needed to join in these efforts.

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