

▷ ETHICS AND SPORT



ethics, knowledge and truth in sports research

an epistemology of sport

Graham McFee



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Ethics, Knowledge and Truth in Sports Research

The study of sport is characterised by its inter-disciplinarity, with researchers drawing on apparently incompatible research traditions and ethical benchmarks in the natural sciences and the social sciences, depending on their area of specialization. In this groundbreaking study, Graham McFee argues that sound high-level research into sport requires a sound rationale for one's methodological choices, and that such a rationale requires an understanding of the connection between the practicalities of researching sport and the philosophical assumptions which underpin them.

By examining touchstone principles in research methodology, such as the contested 'gold standard' of voluntary informed consent in the natural sciences and the postmodern denial of 'truth' in the social sciences, McFee demonstrates that epistemology and ethics are inextricably linked. Drawing on a wide range of examples, from the laboratory to the sports field, McFee explores the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'truth' in sports research and makes a powerful case for a philosophical deepening of our approach to method and methodology in sport. This book is important reading for all advanced students and researchers working in sport, exercise and related disciplines.

Graham McFee is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Brighton and at California State University Fullerton. He was Vice President of the British Society of Aesthetics. He has written and presented extensively, both nationally and internationally, on the philosophy of Wittgenstein and on aesthetics, especially the aesthetics of dance.

Ethics and Sport

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Preface

You are under the impression that the problem is *difficult*, when it's *impossible*. I want you to realise that you are under a spell.

(Wittgenstein, Ms. 158 p. 37: see Wittgenstein, 1993 p. 488; emphasis added)

A great many books introducing research methods for the social sciences are useful for undergraduates in sports studies, or something similar: for instance, Chris Gratton and Ian Jones (2004) *Research Methods for Sports Studies*. But, as MRes programmes in sports studies (and similar) come on stream, the demands of postgraduate study, and perhaps even some advanced undergraduate study, require more sophisticated treatments of the kinds advanced here. Crucial for sound high-level research into sport is the rationale for one's methodological choices. Such a rationale requires understanding the connection between the practicalities of researching sport and the philosophical assumptions which underpin them. While journal articles might partly satisfy that requirement, teaching this material myself convinced me of the value of a text focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of key ideas here. Moreover, it grows from a connection between *ethical* issues for sport research and *epistemological* ones. In sketching an account of such connections, and their consequences, this work offers something to those teaching and learning research methods for sports studies at a higher level. It therefore naturally supplements the primers for such methods.

Further, these problems may be less urgent in natural-scientific enquiries into sport, where the researchers are typically doing what Thomas Kuhn (1970: 10) rightly calls "normal science". For there, researchers are utilizing small numbers of tried-and-trusted methods and assumptions: and need not step outside them (although *some* do!). So this text focuses specifically on the epistemology and ethical demands of broadly *social-scientific* research into sport for researchers, primarily postgraduate researchers: that is, research based in, for instance, sports sociology, sports history, philosophy of sport. For these are my personal interests; and my claim is that there, unless one gets the philosophy clear, much research – otherwise good – becomes hopelessly flawed.

At the centre of the philosophical concern, as in the quotation from Wittgenstein (in the epigraph), is the thought that many issues here set aside as

mere *difficulties* for understanding research, and the place within of both researcher and researched, are actually impossibilities, reflecting conceptual confusions.

I am conscious, too, that some critics might think that no-one holds the views criticized here. Well, first, while I hope that is true, my experience of teaching fledging researchers, as well as discussions with established researchers and reading what they write, make me doubt it. And some of the examples sketched here suggest that I may be right: indeed, my world seems to teem with the scientific and the postmodernist, in some variety or other. But, second, were the contemporary situation that happy one where the book was presently unnecessary, I would justify it as an intervention to keep things that way!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those whose comments on texts or presentations were part of the development process of this text, including all the editors of the published work (see Related papers/presentations) – who I also thank for permission to reprint material. Those to be thanked include generations of students (especially research students) at the University of Brighton. A large number of friends and colleagues contributed here, directly and indirectly. Let this alphabetical list stand for them all:

Tom Carter, Scott Fleming, David Gilbourne, Paul Gilchrist, Roger Homan, Mike McNamee, Paul McNaught-Davis, Caroline Marlow, Richard Royce, Andy Sparkes, John Sugden, Alan Tomlinson.

Mike McNamee, who appears as both a friend/colleague and read through the whole first draft, deserves special thanks. And so does Paul McNaught-Davis, and the village of Joncelets, France.

I would especially single out for thanks my wife, Myrene, for all her help, from discussing the topics with me, through making the illustrations, to reading the whole text as proofreader and commentator; but also my grandchildren, Samantha and Ryan, for their input (while Myrene was babysitting all of us); and Al Flores, of California State University Fullerton, for his generous discussion of many of these points, especially those concerning “deceptive” research.

Related papers/presentations

Ideas from this text are prefigured in things I have written, some of which are published: in no case is earlier work simply reprinted here, not least because the items include a fair amount of repetition. (In some instances I identify more closely where in this work to find that contribution.)

1. "Triangulation in Research: Two Confusions" *Educational Research* Vol. 34, 1992 pp. 215–19 – in Chapter Two.
2. (with Paul McNaught-Davis) "Informed Consent? A Case Study from Environmental Physiology" in A. Tomlinson & S. Fleming (eds) *Ethics, Sport and Leisure: Crises and Critiques*, Aachen: Meyer & Meyer, 1997 pp. 111–25.
3. "It's Not a Game: The Place of Philosophy in the Study of Sport" in John Sugden & Alan Tomlinson (eds) *Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport*, London: Routledge, 2002 pp. 117–37.
4. "Why Do Sports Psychologists Neglect Freud?" in Mike McNamee (ed.) *Philosophy and the Sciences of Exercise, Health and Sport*, London: Routledge, 2004 pp. 85–116.
5. "The Quest for Understanding Sport: Generating Knowledge through Researching Art and Action", keynote address to the 1st International Conference for Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, Liverpool: John Moores University, 18 May, 2004 – in Chapter 6 and Chapter 10.
6. "Research Quality and Qualitative Research in Sport", read at University of Loughborough, February, 2005.
7. "Right Reason: Searching for Truth in the Sports and Exercise Sciences", *European Journal of Sports Science*, 2006 pp. 65–70 – in Chapters 1 and 6.
8. "Ethical Considerations and Voluntary Informed Consent in Sport", read at a conference on "Ethical Issues in Leisure Research", University of Gloucestershire, March, 2005, and published in S. Fleming & F. Jordan (eds) *Ethical Issues in Leisure Research* (LSA Publication No. 90), Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association, pp. 13–30 – Chapter 7 and 8.
9. "Paradigms and Possibilities", versions read at British Philosophy of Sport Association national conference, May 2005; to Sport & Leisure Cultures seminar, Chelsea School, University of Brighton, May 2006; to European College

- of Sports Science, July 2006; and published in *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 2007 pp. 58–77 – in Chapters 5 and 6.
10. “The Researcher’s Hat: An Ethical Issue for Conducting and Reporting Research”, *LSA Newsletter*, 2008 – in Chapter 9.
 11. “The Epistemology of Qualitative Research into Sport: Ethical and Erotetic?”, *Qualitative Research into Sport and Exercise* Vol. 1, No. 3 in McFee, 2009 pp. 297–311) – especially Chapter 6.

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Part I

Overview

