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People are active in sports to varying degrees. Young people more than old people. Boys more than girls. And there are more differences, for example, between ethnic Swedes and immigrants, city dwellers and rural people, rich and poor. And there are regional differences within a country, which may follow known patterns, or not. And there are differences between countries. The existence of national differences in sports participation is an interesting problem. Why are the residents of country A much more active in sports than their counterparts in country B? One can of course imagine a number of factors that would explain this – levels of economic development, welfare systems, cultural traditions, national sports policy. Precisely the latter is the subject of study in the anthology *Participation in Sport: International Policy Perspectives*, edited by Matthew Nicholson, Russell Hoye, and Barrie Houlihan, and published by Routledge. The study covers 17 countries from five continents, with some of the world's leading sports scientists at the keyboards. We asked Hallgeir Gammelsæter, who has conducted research in these areas, for a review. The book is well recommended; not least, says Gammelsæter, for its comparative approach. However, he laments the almost total absence of transnational organizations in the analysis, and argues well why they must be included in such a context.

Interesting juxtapositions

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**Participation in Sport:
International Policy Perspectives**

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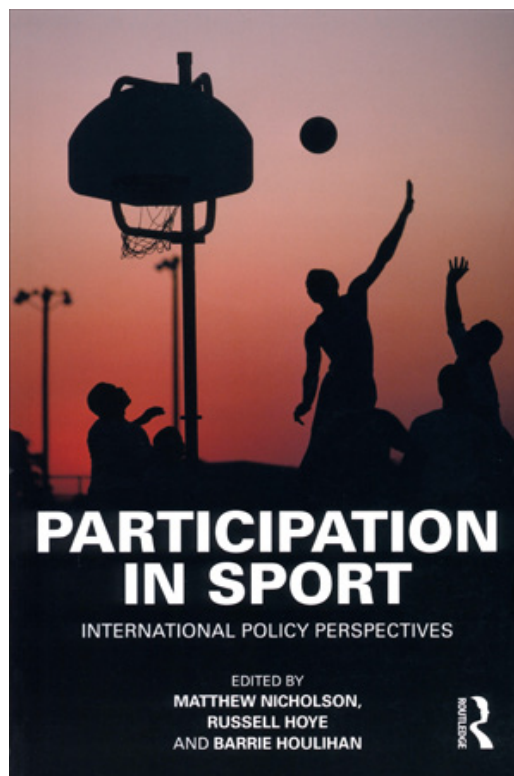
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Language experts argue that learning foreign languages improves the understanding and mastery of your mother tongue. This makes sense because learning more languages inevitably stimulates the sensitivity to linguistic similarities and differences and their contextual meaning. I think comparative research across countries provides the same kinds of benefits to social disciplines, and publications that stimulate learning across cultures should therefore be mandatory reading for all social researchers even if their primary research field is domestic.

Three experienced academics with sport policy as their specialty have put together a volume about national policies on sport participation covering 16 countries. According to the editors, the aim of the book is to help fill a gap in the literature as most of the attention on sport policy has been on elite sport policies. Hence, they want to broaden the research agenda in sport policy and point out that this is important because many governments now see sport participation as important in terms of enhancing nation-building, social capital, and/or health benefits.

This does not mean that the book sets out to determine the benefits of sport participation as such. Its aim is rather to study the relationship between improvements in sport participation, and patterns of cultural, political and structural arrangements in different nations. In the editors' own words they are concerned with establishing:



- which structural arrangements are more successful at improving a nation's sport participation and why;
- whether a nation's culture and sport structures have significant influence on the level of sport participation
- what role political ideology has in fostering sport participation;
- and whether there are patterns that might allow us to conclude how nations with high sport participation levels have achieved them and what nations with low levels can do to improve" (p. 3)

Diversity is secured by picking authors from countries that represent different continents, regions, and sport delivery systems, and care was also taken to include countries that reflected a variety of welfare systems. The Nordic countries are represented by chapters on Norway and Finland, and the altogether 16 nations included represent all continents except South-America, where the editors had difficulties attracting authors. In the concluding chapter the editors aggregate the "findings" in the preceding nation chapters, seeking to find answers to the key questions that they ask in the introduction. Along with the single country chapters this concluding text is worth reading, not only because it helps the reader to compare across nations, but it can also be read as a guide to which nation chapters to pick.

This kind of comparative book is challenging to edit because there is a big chance of ending up with either seemingly incoherent chapters, or conversely, chapters that appear as more or less copies of each other since they provide a restricted set of cross-national data. The former outcome might violate the comparative ambition, whilst the latter may produce a boring text devoid of context. This volume has

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avoided both these pitfalls. There is coherence across chapters, yet chapters appear as different texts that reflect rich differences across nations. The reason is perhaps that the authors of each nation chapter are experienced in the field and when they are advised by the editors to cover five key questions rather than restricted sets of data they exploit this freedom by approaching the key questions rather differently. Moreover, when covering countries as different as Bulgaria, Finland, India, and Japan, to name but a few, the project begs description of structural and cultural differences. As with the language issue, discovering these differences stimulates reflection.

Whilst the book aims to address sport participation rather than elite sport, the description of national sport delivery systems oftentimes also includes the national structure and culture of elite sport. This is a merit more than a weakness because elite sport, sport for all, fitness, and recreation are not unrelated sectors, although forms and quality of relations may vary greatly across nations. The book can, therefore, be read as a general introduction to how sport is organised in diverse countries.

What is almost completely missing from the treatment of sport participation in this book is coverage of sport participation initiatives in transnational bodies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), OECD, the United Nations/UNESCO, the European Union, and similar organisations. Notwithstanding the inclusion of almost a full page (!) on the role of a few of these organisations towards the end of the compilation, the book is firmly entrenched in a world view in which the nation state and national governments are still the basic entity for studying policy. However, since the project is premised on the observation that governments around the world now see sport participation as important, a reasonable expectation would be that it addresses the question of the dynamics that operates cross-nationally and lead to the diffusion of these ideas and policies. In a world that is increasingly, if imprecisely, referred to as global, and with sport being one of the more obviously global activities, this paucity on the nature and effects of transnational processes in the field reduces the value of the book.

While readers will not find much in the book about how sport participation (policies) spread across countries, it is recommended for introducing us to sport participation structures, cultures, policies, and practices in various countries and to the juxtaposition of these arrangements towards the end of the book. Its readership should not be confined to researchers with a special sport participation interest but it should be picked up by students of sport policy more broadly as well as by students of, and in, sport management.

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