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Analysing the content of sport policies: disciplinary approaches and new directions

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ABSTRACT

Over time, there have been various important contributions that have advanced the application of different conceptual and theoretical approaches to analysing policy processes across the field of sport. On the other hand, there remains a significant gap in relation to appraising different approaches that may be used in analysis of the particular content of sport policies. This article addresses this gap through considering four distinctive disciplinary and conceptual approaches to analysing sport policy content: (i) specific sport-orientated analytic frameworks, such as the Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sport Success (SPLISS) and the Physical Activity Environment Policy Index (PA-EPI); (ii) discourse analysis approaches; (iii) political science frameworks for analysing policy design; and (iv) theories from political philosophy. Fundamental characteristics of each approach will be considered through the article, derived from a critical appraisal of their differing utilisations in sport policy research to date and the potential contributions that each may make to future analyses of sport policy content. As a result, the article offers concluding recommendations for sport policy research which encompass expanding usage of different approaches where suited to analysis of specific types of sport policies and combining approaches where their synergies would enable more substantive analysis to be undertaken.

Introduction

This article addresses a significant gap in the theoretical foundations of sport policy analysis, which can be initially identified through key definitions of policy offered as:

> a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation (Jenkins 1978, p. 15)

> an attempt to define and structure a rational basis for action or inaction (Parsons 1995, p. 14)

> articulating policy goals through policy deliberations and discourses, and using policy tools as an attempt to attain those goals. (Howlett et al. 2009, p. 4)

These definitions recognise policy both as a process consisting of various decisions, actions and non-actions, and also as recognised sets of desired goals and means as represented through policy documents, laws and other policy instruments, and potentially in other associated texts and discourses.

To date, the greater focus of theoretical attention in the field of sport policy research has been towards analysis of policy processes and influences thereon, a trend which can be traced back to seminal articles by Chalip (1995) and Houlihan (2005) that influenced the early development of the field. Houlihan (2005), in particular, put the case for developing understanding of sport policy making processes through use of meso-level theories such as the Advocacy Coalition and Multiple Streams Frameworks, which have subsequently been identified by Ouyang *et al*.'s (2022) systematic review as being among the most commonly applied within sport policy research. Other theoretical approaches advanced in the sport policy field have been orientated towards understanding of processes of policy implementation and enactment (e.g. O'Gorman 2011, Hayton *et al*. 2023), such that Ouyang *et al*. (2022, p. 1) recognise the overall weight of 'attention [which] has been brought to policy formation and implementation' by sport policy researchers.

On the other hand, there are various pointers to limitations of analysis of the desired goals and means expressed in sport policies; that is, the content of sport policies as we refer to in this article. While the first editorial of the *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* advocated that 'the established, emerging or implicit propositions in . . . policies require more substantial and sustained investigation' (Houlihan *et al*. 2009, p. 4), a similar case was made in a further key editorial almost ten years later when Grix *et al*. (2018, p. 618) advocated that 'close reading and analysis of sport policy documents would bear fruit for sport studies scholars'. Such empirical studies are not completely absent, but Lindsey *et al*.'s (2023) review of youth sport policy research specifically identifies that the diversity of theories applied to understand policy making processes is not replicated in studies of policy content. Similarly, a 2018 special issue of *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* features twelve articles oriented towards 'Theory and Methods' of which only one (Whigham and Bairner 2018) considers approaches to analysis of sport policy content specifically.

This article addresses this gap, with its key purpose being to prompt researchers towards further utilisation and development of different theoretical and disciplinary approaches in analysis of sport policy content. To do so, we offer an overarching and original appraisal of the utilisation, benefits and constraints of different approaches that may be applied in this effort, through drawing on both existing analyses of sport policy content and wider engagement with theory and conceptual approaches developed in other disciplines.

The differing scope of sport policy literature and that within other disciplines mitigated against adopting a formal and bounded review process. Instead, we undertook bespoke searches of literature as the process of developing this article unfolded. A broad search was initially enacted to identify the trends in, and exemplars amongst, previous studies of sport policy content. This search encompassed eleven leading sport policy, management, and sociology journals[1] to identify all articles across time that featured 'policy' or 'policies' in their title. Considering article titles, abstracts and, in some cases, full texts enabled demarcation of a subset of studies focused on analysis of sport policy content and underpinned by particular disciplinary or conceptual approaches. Further reading then enabled recognition of the following four clusters of studies and related disciplinary approaches namely: specific sport-orientated analytic frameworks, discourse analyss, political science frameworks that differentiate features of policy design, and theories from the political philosophy discipline. Initial identification of these clusters was followed by further searching for and reading of additional research literature both associated with sport policy and from other disciplines, and the scope of this literature engagement will be explained further in the subsequent sections on each cluster.

The four identified disciplinary approaches are not the only ones that may potentially be applied in analysing the content of sport policies; there are a small number of studies in the sport literature that are not associated with the four disciplinary and conceptual approaches featured in this article (e.g. utilisation of new public management and Deleuzo-Guattarian post-disciplinary social theory by McSweeney and Safai (2020) and Horton *et al*. (2014) respectively) as well as other articles that present more descriptive accounts of sport policy content. However, there are different rationales for focusing on the four approaches presented in the article.

First, they offer distinctly different approaches to analysis of policy content. These differences span their analytic or normative orientation, their scope for enabling analysis of policy goals and/or means, their possibilities for comparison of policies across countries and/or across time, associated methodological implications, and potential to link analysis of policy content with associated policy processes. These differences in disciplinary and conceptual orientation, as well as in their utilisation in existing sport policy analysis, are summarised in Table 1 and are a key focus for further explanation in the sections that follow.

Second, the four approaches vary in the extent to which they have previously been utilised in analyses of sport policy content, as well as the purposes and focus of these analyses. The article does, therefore, identify possibilities for and potential constraints on future analysis of sport policy content through utilisation of each of the approaches. Future directions for the analysis of sport policy content is an issue which is also returned to in the conclusions to the article, after each approach is considered in more detail in the following sections.

Sport-orientated analytic frameworks

The set of current analytic frameworks developed and orientated specifically towards analysing sport policy content is extremely limited.[2] Of these, the most prominent is the Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sport Success (SPLISS) framework developed by Veerle de Bosscher and colleagues, which has underpinned multiple studies of national policies and systems for elite sport. Other frameworks for analysis of countries' policies for physical activity have also recently emerged which, whilst not solely oriented towards sport, are worthwhile to consider alongside SPLISS given their similarities across dimensions in Table 1. Some such frameworks for analysing physical activity policies have been developed on behalf of global policy organisations (e.g. Bull *et al.* 2015, Oldridge-Turner *et al*. 2022) but, here, primary focus will be given to the Physical Activity Environment Policy Index (PA-EPI) developed by an academic network (Policy Evaluation Network, n.d.) who continue to research its application.

The orientation of SPLISS, PA-EPI and other similar physical activity frameworks is in line with a longstanding strand of mainstream policy analysis that is instrumentally directed to 'solving' policy problems (Bacchi 2009). In this regard, a stated goal of PA-EPI is 'to prioritize actions needed to address critical gaps in government policies and infrastructure support' (Policy Evaluation Network, n.d.). Similarly, De Bosscher *et al*. (2006, p. 186) initial presentation of the SPLISS framework indicated its purpose to address an 'information deficiency' which made it 'difficult for politicians to select the right priorities for their sport policy'. While later recognising naivety on their own part in 'thinking that we could identify a uniform best practice' (De Bosscher *et al*. 2015, p. 15), subsequent SPLISS publications have retained an underlying orientation towards 'seek[ing] broad principles of efficient and effective elite sport policies' (De Bosscher *et al*. 2016, p. 84). There is, therefore, a fundamental normativity in these frameworks' orientation and prioritisation towards effectiveness and/or efficiency of particular policies. However, SPLISS and PA-EPI lack scope for consideration or critique of other normative values, such as equity, that may underpin sport policies – a limitation that is both found and addressed across other disciplinary approaches later in the article.

In line with their overarching purposes, both SPLISS and PA-EPI frameworks seek to specify features of policies considered as important in achieving particular policy outcomes.[3] The latest iteration of the SPLISS framework consists of 104 'critical success factors' associated with elite sport policies, and groups these into nine pillars such as 'financial support' and 'talent identification and development systems' (De Bosscher *et al*. 2006, De Bosscher 2018). The PA-EPI framework, on the other hand, comprises eight policy 'domains' alongside seven 'infrastructure support domains', for which there are a total of 45 'indicators of ideal good practice' for physical activity policies (Woods *et al*. 2022). 'Sport and recreation for all' represents one of the eight policy domains, incorporating three good practice statements, and sport clubs are also mentioned in the 'Education (schools)' policy domain. Compared to SPLISS equivalents, PA-EPI's policy and infrastructure domains and

Table 1. Key characteristics of approaches to analysis of sport policy content.

Table	Relevant examples applied in sport policy research	Analytic and/or normative orientation	Analysis of policy goals and/or means	Methodological approaches and implications	Possibilities for comparison between policies in different locations or over time	Links with analysis of other aspects of policy process
Sport-orientated analytic frameworks	SPLISS (De Bosscher et al. 2006, 2015, 2016, De Bosscher 2018) PA-EPI (Policy Evaluation Network, no date; Volf et al. 2023)	Primarily analytic applications, but frameworks underpinned by normative orientation towards standardised policy means considered likely to be effective to the achievement of specific policy goals	Scope for analysis of policy means only	Positivistic orientation, principally quantitative analysis	Yes, inherently comparative – comparisons mainly applied across different countries to date	Frameworks have some overlap with elements of policy implementation
Discourse analysis	Foucauldian DA (e.g. Shehu and Mokgwathi 2007, Piggin et al. 2009a, 2009b, Evans and Nistrup 2020); WPR (e.g. Brömdal et al. 2020, Lucas and O'Connor 2021); CDA (e.g. Jedlicka 2014, Lund 2014, Whigham 2017, Whigham and Bairner 2018, Moustakas 2023)	Primarily analytic orientation with regards to policy discourse and content, but some normative analysis of ideological values of given policy text (or corpus of text) vis-a-vis broader social and political context	Varies across different theories, e.g. some Foucauldian analysis identifies construction of discourse as means in itself towards policy goals; other forms of discourse analysis (e.g. CDA) specify differentiation of means, ends and goals	Social constructivist epistemology, qualitative approach to analysis	Social constructivist epistemology emphasises contextual and temporal implications, partially constraining direct comparisons	Analysis can seek to uncover power in either policy making processes or in consequences of policy
Policy design	Geeraert (2014); Lindsey et al. (2021); Houlihan and Lindsey (2013); Sam (2011); Tak et al. (2018)	Frameworks primarily analytic in orientation, but applications have normatively sought to consider consequences of particular designs for policy effectiveness and, in some cases, democratic values	No direct tools for analysing policy goals, but some analysis considers contributions of policy means to goals	Possibilities of diverse quantitative and qualitative methods, as applied in the political science field	Potential for frameworks to inform empirical comparison, but not utilised for sport policy analysis as yet	Wider literature and, for example, Schneider & Ingram's theorisation, connect analysis of policy design (as a 'noun') with policy design processes (as a 'verb')
Political philosophy	Meir and Fletcher (2020); Murray (2009); Murray and Murray (2011);	Diversity of normative theories, underpinned by different sets of values (e.g. utility, equality, freedom)	Varies across different theories, e.g. utilitarian theories progress from analysis of goals to consideration of means, liberal theories limit consideration of policy ends.	Different potential approaches, both in use of theories and implications for choice of methods or data.	Theories could potentially provide normative 'benchmark' for comparison.	Not directly, but some theories may encompass democratic values or considerations relevant to policy making

respective indicators are significantly broader. This breadth may partly represent PA-EPI being at an earlier stage of development than SPLISS, but also necessarily reflects the range and diversity of policy approaches that may be adopted for an issue such as physical activity.

SPLISS and PA-EPI also have broad similarities, but some distinctions, in relation to their consideration of policy means and goals. Both frameworks' pillars, domains, critical success factors and indicators principally concern policy means, and in some cases relate to their implementation. In terms of policy goals, SPLISS is again more specific than PA-EPI, with policies' effectiveness signified by numbers of medals won in Summer and Winter Olympic Games and countries' 'market share' of medals. This specification of pre-determined outputs means that SPLISS does not offer scope for specific analysis or critique of (elite sport) policy goals and, moreover, Henry *et al*. (2020, p. 526) wider critique of SPLISS argues that such measures may also be a 'relatively blunt instrument' as different countries' elite sport policy goals can be more varied and distinctive than encompassed in the two SPLISS measures. Nevertheless, SPLISS' design as an 'input-throughput-output' framework particularly enables analysis of the relationships between different pillars (as independent variables) and these measures of elite success (as dependent variables).

On the other hand, the PE-EPI framework gives limited consideration to potential policy goals, referring only broadly to potential outcomes such as improvements in 'population levels of physical activity' and the 'physical activity environment' (Woods *et al*. 2022, p. 51). The potential range and complexity of desired outcomes of different physical activity policies would make specification of comparable measures even more challenging than for SPLISS. However, this challenge means that PA-EPI framework currently provides for neither analysis of policy goals nor relationships between policy means and goals.

Henry *et al*. (2020) recognise the underlying epistemology of SPLISS as being 'positivist' in the way that data from 'mixed methods' (De Bosscher 2018) is utilised in analyses of countries' sport policies. Qualitative and quantitative forms of data are both initially drawn from policy documents and surveys, and then transformed into dichotomous values for each of 750 elite sport policy factors from which aggregate 'scores' for each of the 96 critical success factors and nine pillars are calculated. Information on PA-EPI indicates a similar approach of applying quantitative ratings to evidence collated from policy documents, to ultimately provide a scores of 'high', 'medium', 'low' or 'none/very little' achievement against each 'indicator of ideal good practice' (Volf *et al*. 2023).

These aspects of methodology align with the intended utility and application of SPLISS and PE-EPI frameworks to enable comparison. While applications of PA-EPI have thus far been limited to Ireland (Volf *et al*. 2023), two major iterations of empirical SPLISS research have compared elite sport policies first in six and then in fifteen different countries. Resultant comparative insights include, for example, that provision of facilities, top level coaching and access to international competition have a significant influence on countries' 'success' (De Bosscher *et al*. 2015). There may also be potential for SPLISS and PA-EPI to offer comparison of countries over time, although this has not appeared in published work to date and there may also be comparative challenges if methodological adaptation is needed to reflect new developments in policies over time (Dowling *et al*. 2018).

Possibilities for wider application of SPLISS, PA-EPI and other such frameworks also need to be balanced with concerns as to their geographic generalisability. Henry et al. (2020) recognise that the framework's specified set of variables may not be universally applicable nor explain elite sport success across, for example, countries with distinctive sport systems, such as the United States, or countries which specialise in particular sports, such as Kenya and Ethiopia in distance running. In turn, fundamental differences between countries' sport systems can be linked to broader differences between countries' political, economic and cultural contexts. Such factors, as well as policy processes that lead to the emergence of particular policies, are not directly represented in SPLISS and PA-EPI.

Moreover, differences between SPLISS and PA-EPI highlighted within this section indicate that tighter specification of normative assessment criteria can be more feasible for elite sport policy, given its orientation to relatively closed systems encompassing sport organisations alone. Policies towards issues such as 'sport for all' or youth sport are associated with open systems in which policies encompass implementation not just through sport organisations but also crossover with other policy areas and sectors as well. Policy goals in such areas can also be more varied and complex than those for elite sport policy. Consequently, any development of similar analytic frameworks for other areas of sport policy would have to consider trade-offs been comprehensiveness, generalisability and accounting for policy diversity across different country cases which, in comparison to SPLISS, would be even more challenging to balance.

Discourse Analysis Approaches

Studies drawing on discourse analysis represent a second common, if broad, approach towards analysis of sport policy content in existing literature.[4] The breadth of such applications of discourse analysis brings challenges in terms of distilling common characteristics of this analytical approach. Titscher *et al.*'s (2000) guide to textual and discourse analysis has identified eleven different methods of analysis within the field of discourse studies, and Bacchi (1999) recognises 'important disputes' over meanings derived from the analysis of discourse. Whilst discourse analysis approaches commonly focus on scrutinising texts as a means of understanding social realities, particular methods are differentiated by their relative emphases on the content, structure, and contexts of a given text. Nonetheless, it can be argued that all forms of discourse analyses of sport policies are characterised by a critical analytical approach which endeavours to situate a given policy text (or corpus of text) within its broader social and political context.

The scope of sport policy articles that specifically refer to the use of discourse analysis demonstrates its widespread applicability. These articles span research not only on general sport policies in particular countries (Green 2006, Shehu and Mokgwathi 2007, Piggin et al. 2009a, 2009b), but also specific sport policy issues including school sport (Lund 2014), sport-for-development (Hayhurst 2009, Hasselgård and Straume 2015), match fixing (Tak *et al.* 2018), gender and competitive eligibility (Brömdal *et al.* 2020); active ageing (Evans and Nistrup 2020) and anti-doping (Jedlicka 2014). Whereas the frameworks identified in the previous section focus on national policies, discourse analysis has also been applied to sport policies at global (e.g. Jedlicka 2014), continental (e.g. the EU, Moustakas 2023) and local levels (e.g. Yu *et al.* 2018, Evans and Nistrup 2020).

As Grix *et al.* (2018, p. 616) argue, discourse analysis 'is understood as both a "method" of data collection, but also a "methodology"' and even a 'theory' by some'. Across published articles in the field of sport policy analysis, there is variation as to whether discourse analysis is presented and utilised as a 'theoretical foundation' (Lund 2014, p. 246) in itself, or as 'a methodology which lends itself to a variety of theoretical perspectives' (Jedlicka 2014, p. 431). In terms of the latter approach, there are relevant differences between studies of sport policy content that are underpinned by policy-specific theories and those that draw on sociological theories.

Sociological studies have predominantly utilised Foucault as a theoretical lens to examine sport policies (e.g. Shehu and Mokgwathi 2007, Piggin et al. 2009a, 2009b, Evans and Nistrup 2020). Foucault conceives of policy discourse as a social practice which in itself has material effects. As Piggin (2014, p. 26) argues in his explanation of a Foucauldian approach to sport policy analysis, 'questions of discipline and freedom are central to Foucault's theories, and are of great importance for sport policy contexts, where judgements are made about the allocation of resources and criteria of inclusion and exclusion'. The particular Foucauldian concept of governmentality emphasises how policies may shape the 'conduct of conduct' and, in the case of Evans and Nistrup (2020), how the 'empowerment' of older citizens is presented as means towards wider active ageing policy goals. Therefore, with Foucauldian approaches emphasising the underlying power relations which facilitate the ability of policymakers to discursively frame the legitimacy of their policy goals, this approach emphasises analysis that simultaneously considers, and suggests the mutual constitution of, the means by which policy goals will be achieved.

The principles of a Foucauldian approach have also acted as a basis for sports policy analysis, even where Foucauldian theory is not the primary consideration of a given policy-specific analytical approach. For example, Brömdal *et al*. (2020) and Lucas and O'Connor (2021) both utilised the specific and discourse-focused 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach to policy analysis proposed by Bacchi (1999, 2009). This approach emphasises the need to deconstruct the creation of particular representations of 'problems' to which policy 'solutions' may then be proposed and, as such, is 'firmly rooted in Foucauldian theorisations of power, governmentality and discourse' (Lucas and O'Connor 2021, p. 591).

Bacchi's approach – and the two aforementioned sport policy analyses that utilise it – tends to foreground consideration of the objects or goals of particular (sport) policies. In contrast, Tak *et al*. (2018) discourse analysis of policies in South Korean football presents a classification of different 'policy instruments'. This conceptualisation differs from Bacchi in centring attention towards particular means that are proposed to eliminate match fixing rather than this policy goal itself. Elsewhere, scholars scrutinising discourses related to 'sport-for-development' such as Hasselgård and Straume (2015) and Hayhurst (2009) have drawn upon post-colonial, post-development, and actor-oriented theory to critically examine the interplay between discourse and its implementation in practice, balancing analysis of overarching policy goals and means by which they are achieved.

A final common theoretical approach to sport policy discourse analysis is centred on the work of Fairclough and his 'critical discourse analysis' (CDA) approach (Jedlicka 2014, Lund 2014, Moustakas 2023, Whigham 2017, Whigham and Bairner 2018). In contrast to post-structuralist Foucauldian theory, the neo-Marxist theoretical underpinnings of CDA have been argued to include Althusser's conceptualisation of 'ideological state apparatuses', Bakhtin's 'genre theory', and Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' (Fairclough, 2015, Titscher *et al*. 2000). Fairclough (2015) emphasises the importance of moving between contrasting levels of analysis when scrutinising specific texts, representing discourse as an outcome of the relationship between 'text', 'interaction', and 'context'.

In the sport policy field, CDA has been applied by Lund (2014) in analysing the socio-political conditions which have influenced school sport policies in Sweden and by Jedlicka (2014) in analysis of the development of the World Anti-Doping Agency's Code. Whigham (2017) and Whigham and Bairner (2018) also draw upon specific frameworks aligned with CDA to illustrate the contested discursive framing of sport policy by pro-independence and pro-union political actors in Scotland. Despite different nuances evident across these sport policy analyses, there is an explicit emphasis placed on analysing both policy 'means' and 'goals' through the use of CDA – particularly so in Fairclough's more recent work on 'political discourse analysis' (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012) which explicitly identifies both 'goals' and 'means-goal' as specific analytical features.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned contrasts in terms of theoretical positions and influences, discourse analysis approaches remain commonly aligned with social constructivist epistemologies and qualitative methodologies. Discourse analyses of sport policies methodologically span examples that interrogate a single policy document (Shehu and Mokgwathi 2007, Jedlicka 2014) to others that encompass analysis of 'about 100' policy documents (Yu *et al*. 2018) and 'around 1000 pages' (Lund 2014) of policy text. Some studies analysed policy documents over expanded time periods that ranged from five years to Brömdal *et al*. (2020) whose research encompassed policy documents published from 1938 to 2019. Nevertheless, the alignment of social constructivism and discourse analysis does not provide an epistemological or methodological basis that is specifically orientated to direct comparisons of policies over time or between countries. Instead, the emphasis in discourse analysis on grounding policy texts within the specific socio-political context within which they are situated prioritises in-depth critique of the 'social conditions of production' of a given sport policy.

Discourse analysis approaches also connect policy content with other aspects of the policy process. Applications of discourse analysis to sport policies have sought to uncover influences shaping the content of policies and have considered implications of policies for practice and for different sets of organisations or population groups. However, the limits of doing so through drawing solely on policy documents are recognised. Shehu and Mokgwathi (2007, p. 196) caution that 'interpretive slippages

often arise from treating policy pronouncements, phrases and themes as conceptual evidence of a hidden hegemonic agenda'. Studies which complement analysis of discourse in policy documents with further sources of empirical data, such as interviews, may therefore be better placed to make such interpretations.

Political science frameworks for analysing policy design

Within the wider political sciences field, there is a substantial body of research orientated towards theorising and empirically analysing the design of public policies. Policy design is recognised in this field as an 'umbrella term' (Cairney 2021) with a broad distinction often being made between 'design' operating as a *verb*, whereby attention is given to the processes of designing policies, and operating as a *noun*, referring to the content of resultant policies themselves (e.g. Howlett 2014, Siddiki and Curley 2022). The latter branch of policy design literature has particular relevance for this article, especially as conceptualisations of policy design from the political sciences literature are rarely drawn upon in sport policy research. Specific references to conceptualisations or aspects of policy design were found in fewer than ten sport policy articles,[5] with some further references made in individual books and chapters (e.g. Sam 2011, Houlihan and Lindsey 2013). Fulsome utilisation of particular conceptualisations of policy design is rarer still. Therefore, this section reviews key developments and the increasing sophistication in the theorisation of policy design (as a noun) in the political sciences literature over time, with references to specific studies of sport policy providing recognition of their positioning in relation to the wider field.

Academic interest in policy design initially flourished in political science in the 1970s and 1980s (Howlett 2014, Peters and Fontaine 2022). Conceptual development was focused on policy instruments (also termed as policy tools), namely the particular mechanisms identified in policies that serve as the means towards policy goals (Siddiki and Curley 2022). Two strands of developing work on policy design from this time have found their way into subsequent analyses of sport policy. First, the 1980s saw initial development of descriptive classifications of different policy instruments. Hood's (1983) taxonomy of nodality (information), authority, treasure and organisational policy instruments (see Table 2 for descriptions of each) was a particular landmark, which was subsequently a reference point for studies of sport policy in the United Kingdom by Houlihan and Lindsey (2013) and Lindsey *et al.* (2021). The second early focus of policy design work concerned the consequences and impact of individual policy tools and instruments (Howlett 2014). Such a focus can be identified in Keat and Sam's (2013) and Sam's (2005) studies of the practical implications of New Zealand sport policies that respectively utilised distribution of decentralised funding and the instigation of task-forces respectively as specific policy instruments.

After the initial emergence of categorisations of policy instruments, further impetus came to advance more comprehensive frameworks of elements of policy design. Schneider and Ingram's (1997) theorisation of the 'Social Construction of Policy Design' included specific exposition of six elements identifiable in policy designs. These elements included the goals of policy, and related distributions of benefits and burdens to particular target groups that would be identifiable in policy designs. Other elements of Schneider and Ingram's (1997) framework were orientated to policy means and differentiated policy instruments from procedural rules set by policy makers. Further policy design literature in this period also considered procedural policy means, which reflected wider shifts from policy approaches reliant on government directives to enacting influence through 'new modes of governance' (Howlett, 2011, and reflected in Girginov's (2012) representation of policy instruments associated with the legacy aspirations for the London 2012 Olympics and Geeraert's (2014) analysis of EU sport policy respectively).

These dimensions and distinctions in consideration of policy instruments are captured in Table 2 (replicating and adapting one presented by Howlett, 2011) which links Hood's early taxonomy of 'substantive' policy instruments with further 'procedural' ones. Similarities in approach between such taxonomies of policy instruments and the differentiation of policy elements in the SPLISS and PA-EPI

Table 2. Taxonomy of substantive and procedural policy instruments and sport policy examples, developed from Howlett (2011, p. 53).

Policy Instrument & Description		Governing Resource			
		Nodality Central position of government in flows of information	**Authority** Capacity to make and enforce laws and regulations	**Treasure** Capacity to raise and distribute money	**Organisation** Mobilisation of capacity within government or other organisations
Potential Examples of Instruments in Sport Policies	**Substantive**	Public information campaigns regarding sport participation	Laws and regulations for the safety of sport facilities/grounds	Funding for particular sport programmes	Establishment of new bodies to implement sport policies
	Procedural	Processes for collation of performance measurement information	Advisory codes for sport organisation governance	Specification of criteria for public funding of sport organisations	Management or co-ordination of networks of sport organisations

frameworks are evident, albeit with the latter being specific to particular (sport) policy areas while the former may be applied across different policies areas. Similarly, taxonomies of policy instruments also support comparative application across geographic and temporal contexts, although such applications are absent in studies of sport policy design to date.

A further area of associated development in policy design literature concerns how policy designs may evolve over time. Thelen (2003, cited in Howlett 2014, p. 198) recognised that new policy designs emerge from preceding ones through processes she differentiated as 'layering, drift, replacement, conversion and exhaustion'. Similarly, there was also consideration of policy design processes (as a verb) in the theorisation of 'Social Construction of Policy Design', with Schneider and Sidney (2009, p. 109) summarising how 'politics produce policy which, in turn, feeds back into the input processes resulting (presumably) in appropriate changes in policy design'. Dowling and Washington's (2021) analysis of long-term athlete development frameworks in Canadian sport policies represents the only identifiable use of Schneider and Ingram's theorisation in the sport policy literature but does so considering longitudinal processes of policy design alone, without utilising the accompanying differentiation of characteristics of the designed content of policies. Conversely, studies of sport policy design that draw on classifications of different policy instruments (e.g. Girginov 2012, Tak et al. 2018, Lindsey et al. 2021) only do so in snapshots of policies at particular times. Significant potential exists for future sport policy research which utilises political sciences theorisations that encompass policy design both as a noun and a verb.

Contemporary political sciences research also recognises the complexity of modern policy designs through a focus on developing analyses of 'policy mixes', namely the 'combination of multiple policy instruments that serve a single or multiple goals' (Bouma et al. 2019, p. 34). For example, Howlett (2014) notes that combining different sets of multiple policy instruments may result in differing complementary or contradictory effects. As a limited application of such ideas to sport policy, Lindsey et al. (2021) considered the mix of policy goals for physical education and school sport in England and utilised Hood's (1983) taxonomy of policy instruments in explaining what they termed as 'skewed outcomes' in provision and participation across schools and young people. However, Lindsey et al. (2021) study still only touched upon some of the greater conceptual depth, and also methodological possibilities, that exists within the broader policy design literature.

Different political sciences applications and critiques of policy design research also indicate potential enhancements for analysis of sport policy content. Policy design researchers have commonly adopted a descriptive-analytic orientation, as is the case in the few studies of policy design in sport. Other more normatively orientated political science applications have commonly sought to

identify policy instruments and mixes that most effectively achieve goals set by policy makers themselves (Howlett 2014). Sport policy research that adopts such an approach would be novel and would have greatest potential in policy areas, such as school sport or 'sport for all', in which different policy instruments may be used in different combinations across time or contexts.

Nevertheless, as identified with the SPLISS and PA-EPI frameworks earlier, research focused on the effectiveness of policy designs has been criticised for an overly rationalistic and technocratic orientation (Peters and Fontaine 2022). Sport policy researchers may thus also pay attention to other theoretical work on policy design that encompasses alternative normative values. Again, Schneider and Ingram's (1997) work is a reference point for potential sport policy research in being particularly focused on considering how policy designs may have particular implications for democracy, and Schneider and Sidney (2009) similarly note further possibilities of considering the impact of policy design on justice and citizenship.

Methodologically, there is more variation in policy design research across the political sciences field compared to the exclusively qualitative approach of the few policy design-informed studies in the sport policy literature. Adopting quantitative approaches from the political sciences field offers potential to compare the utilisation of particular instruments across country contexts and areas of sport policy, as well as their consequences for particular outcomes. As well as seeking to replicate such quantitative approaches, there would also be practical benefit in sport policy researchers in drawing on technological capacity for automated language processing that has recently been developed in policy design research which supports analysis of large arrays of policy texts. (Rice *et al*. 2021)

Theories from Political Philosophy

Political philosophy is fundamentally concerned with issues of how states and governing institutions may 'justly distribute resources, powers, rights and liberty'

(Wolff 2016, p. 204). Contributions from the political philosophy discipline are therefore eminently relevant to considering public policies associated with sport and also those that are made by other bodies that govern sport. There are, however, significant gaps in such research to date, not just in relation to sport policy, but also across other policy fields as Heikkila and Jones (2022) note in their wider review of theoretical approaches to policy analysis. Similarly, philosophers Lever and Poama (2019, p. 2) also bemoan:

> there has been a veritable explosion in normative political philosophy since the 1970s … until recently, this explosion had produced no systematic interest in ethics and public policy.

In relation to sport specifically, McNamee (2017, p. 1) acknowledges 'the paucity of philosophical discussions of sport policy' and the relative 'neglect' of political philosophy in doing so. Both McNamee (2017) and searching for this article identify[6] that sport philosophers' attention has been largely directed towards anti-doping policies (e.g. Tamburrini 2006, Loland and Hoppeler 2012) and, more recently, policies regarding the eligibility of transgender athletes in sport (e.g. Gleaves and Lehrbach 2016, Torres *et al*. 2022).

These foci replicate a wider trend for academic interest in ethics and policy to be commonly focused towards issues of 'popular controversy' (Lever and Poama 2019, p. 3). Both sport policy issues to which attention has been given also relate solely to rules and regulations as a form of sport policy, which connects to Torres and López Frías' (2023) recognition that philosophical consideration of justice in sport has largely been limited to issues associated with sporting competition alone. Other sport policy issues, including the promotion of 'sport for all' and the positioning of sport as a contributor to governments' wider social policies, have not received significant attention in the sport philosophy field. Torres and López Frías (2023, p. 6) consequently advocate that that 'incorporation of larger social benefits into analyses of justice in sport demands the use of a greater variety of justice principles'.

In this regard, political philosophy theories could be utilised in different ways to enhance analysis of sport policy content. One approach may start from sport policy documents themselves to identify and interrogate philosophical positions that may explicitly or, more likely, implicitly underpin them. For Levy (1988), this type of analysis enables consideration of 'what, if any, normative principles can give those policies coherence and conceptual unity' (pp. 7–8) or, conversely, supports critique of the extent or absence of such coherence and unity. Identification and utilisation of particular philosophical theories for such an approach would depend on the orientation of the sport policies under analysis.

Such an approach may, for example, recognise that the instrumental orientation of many governments' sport policies towards wider social and economic goals is aligned with utilitarian philosophical positions which normatively seek to maximise overall good (utility) across a relevant population. In respect of sport policies with such an alignment, this may open up lines of analysis based on philosophical critiques that utilitarianism potentially involves an acceptance of negative consequences for some people or, alternatively, through considering the relative merits of different policy goals based on their scope to maximise a broader conception of utility. Approaches set out in policies could also be assessed to the extent that they represent: (i) 'rule-utilitarian' principles which consider that specified policy means are justified only if they create greater overall utility than other potential rules (or specified means), and/or (ii) a policy approach which does not pre-determine particular means but specifically allows particular decisions to be taken in particular circumstances towards the maximisation of policy goals (an 'act-utilitarian' approach). While there is certainly greater sophistication to such analytic approaches than can be sketched here, limits emerge from adopting the orientation of sport policies as the starting point. Analyses do not progress normatively beyond the policy or policies under consideration and, as such, Levy (1988, p. 8) characterises this as a 'remarkably empirical' approach.

A different approach aligns with the widespread consideration in political philosophy of the prospective merits of 'ideal theories' which provide frameworks of normative principles which may then form the starting point by which particular policies may be analysed. As an illustration of such a theoretically-driven approach, Rawls' liberal-egalitarian exposition of 'justice as fairness' is arguably the most well-recognised such ideal theory. There remain, however, few in-depth applications of Rawls' theorisation to sport policy. As one example, Murray (2009) uses Rawls' normative position on state neutrality to critique the use of public funding for professional sport stadia in the United States. Murray and Murray (2011) take a wider approach, utilising Rawls' accounts of human nature and political decision making to consider various aspects of sport governance. In particular, they contend that Rawls' normative principles may justify state funding for aspects of youth and participation sport (Murray and Murray 2011). As such, both Murray's (2009) and Murray's and Murray (2011) articles are distinctive in comparison to much existing work in the sport policy field which acknowledges, but lacks a substantive normative critique of, expansions in state intervention in sport over time (Houlihan and Lindsey 2012). Thus, Rawls' theorisation, or other variations of liberal political philosophy, offers a basis for further interrogation of the extent to which there may or may not be justification for state policy interventions.

Alternatively, Meir and Fletcher's (2020) application of Rawls' principles of justice to critique funding patterns for PE and sport across English schools is indicative of the potential for sport policy analysis to be underpinned by political philosophy theories concerning distributary justice. Other recent sport policy studies offer accounts of the merits or otherwise of the distribution of resources or opportunities utilising empirical data from particular groups affected (e.g. Dashper *et al.* 2019, regarding BAME communities in Wales; Christiaens and Brittain 2023, regarding disabled people in England), but without explicitly grounding analysis through particular normative positions or theories. This limitation points to the value of theorisations of distributary justice which present varying normative perspectives on 'how benefits and burdens ought to be distributed via political institutions, among whom, and to what end' (Carey 2020, p. 589). Rawls (1971, p. 302) own position, termed 'maximin', is that a just distribution is one which is to the 'greatest benefit of the least

advantaged members of society'. Alternative examples of theories of distributary justice in the political philosophy canon include prioritarianism (by which distributions should prioritise the needs of the worst off), sufficientarianism (which points to ensuring that people having a sufficient share of a good according to a particular measure) as well as utilitarianism, highlighted earlier, and more egalitarian distributary schema.

Such theorisations of distributary justice, and their differences, are obviously more complex and finely argued than can be suggested here but identification of varying ways in which they may be applied to sport policy analysis remains possible. A first common consideration would be to recognise the type of good(s) that sport policy may seek to distribute, for example, funding (in the case of Meir and Fletcher's analysis), opportunities, participation or some form of welfare derived from sport. Analysis of a specific sport policy could then consider the extent to which its proposed distribution of these goods may (or may not) align with any of the theorised positions on distributary justice, which would support consideration of potentially resultant consequences. Alternatively, analysis could take a particular theorisation of distributary justice as a normative 'benchmark' to which a policy or multiple policies (across time or contexts) could be compared.

The forgoing indicates the wide-ranging scope to apply different political philosophy theories to analyse various aspects of sport policy. Unlike the normative orientation of the earlier sport-orientated analytic frameworks towards specification of means considered to be effective in achieving particular policy goals, political philosophy theories give different normative principles by which sport policy goals and/or means, or the combination thereof, may be considered. The scarcity of existing research which applies political philosophy to analyse of sport policies means some caution has been applied in regard to considerations in Table 1. While the form of argumentation in political philosophy primarily lends itself to qualitative analysis of policy content, there could also be potential quantitative applications, for example, to cases of funding distribution. Also, particular political philosophy theories that could underpin comparison of sport policies across different contexts or time have been suggested in this section. However, in offering broad principles, some political philosophy theories may potentially constrain specificity in comparative analyses of sport policies. The breadth of political philosophy theories, however, means that their potential does not solely apply to analysis of sport policy content but also to other aspects of policy processes such as issues of democracy in policy making or the extent to which consequences of sport policies may also be considered as just.

Conclusions

This article's account of the usage and utility of disciplinary approaches to analyse of sport policy content enables identification of implications for future scholarship. Whilst cognisant of risks of oversimplifying diversity within each of the four approaches considered, the overview in Table 1 illuminates and differentiates some of their key characteristics in terms of their underpinning orientation, methodological implications, and existing and potential applications. As a result, important patterns within the sport policy field can be identified as well as some new directions that would mark significant developments in future research.

There are considerable differences in the extent of studies of sport policy content that are aligned with each of the approaches identified. The scale of research associated with, respectively, the sport-specific SPLISS framework and discourse analysis approaches each significantly outweighs utilisation of policy design or political philosophy theories. The extensive development and utilisation of the SPLISS framework reflects, in some part, the prominence of elite sport as a wider policy and academic concern, whereas the common utilisation of discourse analysis to analyse sport policy perhaps may be explained by its synergies with the sport sociology discipline to which it is closely aligned.

On the other hand, the breadth and depth of theories in the wider policy design and political philosophy fields may have inhibited sport policy researchers from engaging with these distinctive

disciplinary literatures. Nevertheless, the rewards from doing so would be significant, both in terms of specific studies and the wider sport policy field, especially given the concern that many published analyses of sport policy content do not specifically identify or align with any established conceptual framework. We would hope that the exposition in this article would offer direction for researchers to substantively adopt specific conceptual approaches to underpin analyses of sport policy content, and that this could also be taken as a marker of quality considered by journal editors and peer reviewers.

Considering choices and the utility of the different disciplinary approaches in future research depends on the particular question(s) to be addressed and also varies according to the particular area of sport policy to be investigated. For example, domain-specific frameworks such as SPLISS and PA-EPI are applicable to particular policy areas, elite sport and physical activity, and national-level policies. We noted earlier that seeking to replicate the SPLISS approach of identifying tightly defined criteria by which to judge policies may be more challenging for other policy issues characterised by greater diversity in policy goals and/or means. Policy design frameworks would alternatively be well-suited to analysing the mix of means that sport policies may consist of, but these frameworks offer less traction in differentiating the goals across and within policies. Discourse analysis approaches otherwise offer strengths in interrogating the inter-relationships between policy content, policy processes and their socio-political context which enables these techniques to be applied to analysing almost any type of global, national or local sport policy document. However, this orientation may be somewhat to the detriment of considering both the practical implications of particular sport policies and comparative analysis between temporal and/or geographic contexts. Researchers should make careful and considered decisions as to the selection of different disciplinary approaches in analysing sport policy content, and the expositions in this article and in Table 1 support such decisions.

In addition, we would point to the significant potential for novel and interdisciplinary synthesis of different approaches to analysing sport policy content. The approach taken by Tak *et al*. (2018) to examine policies addressing match-fixing in South Korea is a rare example of sport policy research that combines a 'critical' analytic approach akin to discourse analysis within a theoretical framework that enables differentiated analysis of varying policy instruments. Other possibilities exist where there is alignment in orientation and methodologies across the four disciplinary approaches identified. For example, the sophistication of PA-EPI analyses could be enhanced through differentiating the substantive and procedural policy instruments applied in physical activity policies. There may also be significant scope for analysis using PA-EPI or SPLISS to be enhanced through the automated language processing methodologies developed in the policy design field. If this example indicates the potential of drawing together two disciplinary approaches with similar features (as recognised in Table 1), there is also potential in combining approaches in which the orientation of one addresses potential limitations of another. For example, we would argue that discourse analysis approaches would benefit from drawing on political philosophy to more explicitly elucidate underpinning values from which particular critiques are made.

As a central argument, therefore, it is imperative for research on sport policy content to adopt a more considered and explicit approach to the discussion and defence of conceptual approaches underpinning particular analyses. As explored through this article, the contrasting axiological, methodological, and comparative utility of different disciplinary approaches highlights their relative analytical merits for contrasting research questions regarding the content of sport policies.

In turn, the exposition that is offered here supports sport policy researchers to make more informed and explicitly justified choices which align the purpose and questions of particular research on sport policy content with established conceptual frameworks. We hope that sport policy researchers embrace the possibilities afforded by different disciplinary approaches as suggested throughout the article. Doing so would not only maximise the quality and richness of future analyses of sport policy content, but also contribute to realise the long-identified but under-realised goal of

greater recognition of sport policy as a valuable and contributory area of study within the broader field of policy analysis.

Notes

1. The eleven journals initially searched were: European Journal for Sport and Society, European Sport Management Quarterly, International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, International Review for the Sociology of Sport, Journal of Sport and Social Issues, Journal of Sport Management, Qualitative Research in Sport Exercise and Health, Sociology of Sport Journal, Sport Education and Society, Sport in Society, Sport Management Review.
2. Articles on SPLISS (e.g. De Bosscher *et al*. 2006, De Bosscher 2018) and PA-EPI (Volf *et al*. 2022) were identified in the initial searching across eleven targeted journals. Websites for each framework (https://spliss.research.vub. be/. https://www.jpi-pen.eu/pa-epi.html respectively) were then examined for further relevant information and articles to add to the explanation in this section.
3. Further explanation of the process by which components of SPLISS and PA-EPI were derived are provided in De Bosscher *et al*. (2006) and Policy Evaluation Network (n.d.). Whilst not a specific consideration for this article, these processes both followed similar inductive approaches drawing on previous academic research and expert input. A fuller explanation of the methodology by which SPLISS data has been collected is also provided by De Bosscher (2018).
4. In the initial searching of targeted journals, studies utilising discourse analysis were the most commonly identified of the four approaches in this article. The availability of contributions by Piggin (2014) and Whigham and Bairner (2018) which provide both overviews of discourse analysis approaches and further exemplar sport policy studies mitigated any need for further searching.
5. From the initial searching of targeted journals, only Chalip (1995) highlighted political science literature on policy design and Tak *et al*. (2018) utilised a categorisation of policy instruments. To identify the scope of further sport research using conceptualisations of policy design, further searching was undertaken through Google Scholar combining 'sport' with each of the terms 'policy design', 'policy tools' and 'policy instruments'.
6. Few articles directly drawing on philosophy were identified in the initial search of targeted journals. A further search was then made of the Journal of Philosophy of Sport and Sport, Ethics and Philosophy for articles in which the terms 'policy' or 'policies' appeared in the title, keywords or abstract.

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