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GLOBAL CHALLENGES PROGRAM 2021:

Ethnography and Crisis Response: how could qualitative and quantitative methodologies have enhanced decision-making during the COVID-19 Pandemic within the sports sector.

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Ethnography and Crisis Response: how could qualitative and quantitative methodologies have enhanced decision-making during the COVID-19 Pandemic within the sports sector

James Scott asks an important question in 'Seeing Like a State': why have so many well-intended schemes to improve the human condition gone so tragically awry (Scott, 1998, p. 4)? Whilst not his intention, this sentiment applies accurately to crisis and our current situation. Many attempts to curtail the spread of COVID-19 have gone 'tragically awry', with the damaging impact on mental health being just one example. This is not to mention the deficiencies within the response and its implementation. Herein we will outline a unique approach which hopes to tackle this issue and answer the question posed. We hold that to build better policy responses, which are timely and more appropriate, we must stop relying on evidence. Specifically, we must stop being reliant on a single form of evidence in the form of statistics and figures. We must embrace a paradigm with more flexibility and move away from dogmatic adherence to positivist methodologies. We outline a hybrid approach, which helps to contextualise the quantitative with qualitative data, aiming to improve policy response. Our solution makes use of a sector which has the pre-existing and necessary infrastructure to enable this: sport.

Whilst the sport sector is often frowned upon and undermined within political and academic spheres, it is a powerful force within society (Delaney & Madigan, 2015). It is arguably the "most significant and influential social institution" (Ibid, pg 8). Sport itself predates modern concepts such as statecraft or diplomacy, and often served as a training ground for both (Strenk, 1979).

The Ancient World paid close attention to sport and used it as a measure for society, whether to assess military strength or to monitor the happiness of citizens. Sport was an important tool for political mobilisation and policy implementation in the ancient world (Wolińska, 2011). However, the modern insistence that sport and politics is separate, despite being innately interlinked, has meant that sport is now underutilised by decision makers. To show the huge potential the sport sector has for developing policy, we interviewed several people from the sector, drawing from their professional experience to show how we can utilise sport as a tool to tackle crisis. We propose that coaches engage in performative ethnography and generate qualitative data. The quote above from Lee Boucher at Scottish Rowing perfectly illustrates the power of sport, and its importance within society.

“Sport in its most general terms is about finding a community... about enabling hopes and dreams, being best you can be and having a positive experience”

- Lee Boucher at Scottish Rowing

No single state, government or person covets crisis. Regardless of this, crisis are an omnipresent feature of the international system. Some would go as far to say that they are becoming a more frequent feature. Scott highlights how many of the recent crisis "have flown the banner of progress, emancipation, and reform" (Scott, 1998, p. 343) and hence modernity breeds crisis – necessitating the overturning of an established order in favour of a new one. Increasingly, progress, modernity and development are associated with rationalism. There is an obsession with science and its ability to yield progress and Scott accurately depicts a world obsessed with improvement. In 2010, Globalizations dedicated a special issue to the "wider set of multiple crises" (Gills, 2010, p. 3) which all have their origins in the increasing economic and social integration of the international system. It is thought that with the integration of the international system we have created a more sensitive system prone to crisis (Frei, 1978 & Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). This would seemingly explain the proliferation of crisis and increased focus on subject matters such as crisis response or crisis management. The key takeaway is that the "crisis of modernity" and the associated rationalisms is partly to blame (Lebow, 2018).

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We seemingly live in an 'age of crisis' and yet there are no clear criteria for what constitutes a crisis? Without a clear understanding of what we mean, we cannot effectively respond. Crisis has been used to refer to variety of catastrophic phenomena such as climate change, economic recession, and regional conflict. It has simultaneously become a popular term within public relations, referring to anything from celebrity scandal to organisational failures. Both old and new media has helped contribute to the proliferation of crisis and thus the term is increasingly used with imprecision to refer to any form of conflict, unrest, or problem encountered within modern society (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). Overall, it seems to encapsulate an emotion and experience rather than a phenomenon hence defies rationalisation.

To aid understanding it is worth considering the origins of the actual word itself. The term crisis originates from the Greek meaning "to decide" and was first and foremost associated with politics and law. It later became important to theology with the development of Christianity. It entered the lexicon more commonly after the French Revolution and the terms began to expand to include social, cultural, and economic phenomena beyond these realms (Ibid); it was still associated primarily with decisions and decision-making. As a result, crisis will herein be defined as an "occasion for decisions" (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997, p. 278). However, this definition is still incomplete as there are many occasions for decisions. Not all decisions are comparable, and thus the decisions we are referring to have a very particular context which illicit a particular emotional response. Therefore, to completely understand this definition, one must also understand the context of the decision.

Historically there are multiple ways to interpret crisis based on the context of the decision made. This relates to the areas where the term was initially used most: law, theology, and politics. The decision can be interpreted as a culmination of events which requires a final decision. This was the case when considering the decision of a legal case. It can also refer to a unique circumstance with a final decision – such as when it refers to judgement in theology. Yet the most relevant context is that of politics, referring to a timely decision in reaction to events with momentous consequences or during a transitional period (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). It is the reactive and transitional nature which are key, which are all connected to emotionality.

With this understanding of the term crisis, it becomes evident that the recent pandemic is a prime example and case study. Consequently, we will focus our analysis on the failings of the response to the pandemic. The pandemic has been an "occasion for decision" and certainly required timely decisions by decision makers, who have been forced to react to an evolving series of events. These decisions have carried momentous consequences and represent a transitional period. Typical models of decision-making assume rationality, but this is often not possible under crisis and neglects the role of emotions. This is true throughout the pandemic. The decision-making process was bounded, with Governments across the world unable to operate with full information. In the presence of heavy time constraints and limited information it is clear rationality was undermined. Human psychology suggests that in such cases, decisionmakers will then use their own emotions and experience to make up for this shortcoming in information (Bechara, et al., 2000). Therefore, decision-making during a crisis is often dictated by the emotional context of decision makers. As a result, the decisions only account for the experience of a few. During the coronavirus the UK Government were heavily criticised for its handling, which was exasperated by pre-existing social inequality and social tensions. It is also true that their response has worsened this social inequality (Griffin, 2020 & Dyer, 2020). Generally, crisis response seeks to conserve the status quo thus preserve pre-existing social structures. This is also true in the case of the Coronavirus response (Cairney, 2021 & Kermani, 2020).

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The majority of people surveyed by the Reuters Institute thought the UK Government's response was worst than most developed countries (Fletcher, et al., 2020). Similarly, the UK emphasised a rationalist and positivist approach informed by evidence more than most other developed countries. This resulted in a slow and inefficient response. The UK Government was heavily criticised for its lack of compassion and sensitivity, as well as a lack of awareness of the implications for social issues (Cairney, 2021). This is often a by-product of quantitative research methodologies, which threaten and undermine a "social-justice orientated approach". Through a reliance on these rather limited methodologies, we fail to account for the power structures which organise society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 33).

“not get distracted by divisive elements within our society...sport transcends this and treats everyone the same as it becomes a safe space”

- Lee Boucher at Scottish Rowing

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, evidence of this can be seen within the sport sector. The Government response to sport was often a focus of media criticism and received undue attention, whilst other sectors such as the arts were largely ignored. Sports that were enjoyed by decision-makers such as golf or tennis were some of the first to return, as were sports with considerable political power such as men's football. It was these

politically powerful sports that received much of the media attention, in part due to their popularity. It is unclear whether their political power derives from their popularity, their vast financial resources, or the commercial organisations themselves. It is undeniable however that they help a great deal of lobbying power and influence over Government policy (BBC, 2020). The return of sport illustrates the pre-existing social structures and inequalities, exemplified in a statement made by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Secretary Oliver Dowden. In the statement "football, tennis, horse racing, Formula One, cricket, golf, rugby, snooker" were all named and made a priority. It was also acknowledged that football "has a special place in our national life" – an allusion to the power of the Football Association. Meanwhile other marginalised sports continued to face harsher restrictions and less support. Nowhere is this more evident than women's football, who returned later than their male counterpart. This was acknowledged as Dowden admitted "not all events will be back on" and he did not want to lose "any of that progress" within women's sport (Dowden, 2020).

Nevertheless, amongst everyone interviewed, the meritocratic nature of sport was emphasised. All the coaches felt sport had the power to unite and bring people together, overcoming inequality. Lee describes this best, with sport helping to "keep everyone focused on the task at hand" and "not get distracted by divisive elements within our society". We believe there is a way to learn from sports ability to unite people and how the sector can capture a diverse range of communities, backgrounds, and interests at the grassroots level. Often this comes down to personality and emotional responses binding people together. Yet equally, sports ability for political mobilisation cannot be ignored, nor neglected. More people are demanding greater involvement from sports, particularly around issues of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. When asked about this all the interview participants agreed more should be done. All thought sports needed to be a vehicle for change, from the top down. Ross Whittaker of Saints Sport discussed the importance of transparency, of communication and gaining "an understanding of the topics" which he has been able to do thanks to the "open environment of

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sport". This point was echoed by Scott Testier of Saints Sport, who felt that "people involved in sport are creating a community where people are open and willing to be vulnerable" going onto to suggest that sport is uniquely placed to do this and facilitate conversations that otherwise wouldn't happen.

"people involved in sport...are creating a community where people are open and willing to be vulnerable"

- Scott Teister at Saints Sport

Through a hybrid method which combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies one would be able to create a more appropriate and timely response to global crisis which avoid some of the pitfalls discussed above, capitalising on sports unique ability to facilitate conversation. This approach recognises the role of emotions within decision making, and in doing so enable Government to account for a diverse range of views. It also allows them to acknowledge and control for their own biases, which is shown to improve group decision making (Grecucci, et al., 2020). Meanwhile, it also offers a more information which helps inform decision making. To adopt this hybrid approach, some pre-requisites are required. There must be appropriately trained professionals who are able to engage in performative ethnography. This is a skill set that is necessary to gain useful qualitative insights. What is more, these people must also be embedded in a pre-existing infrastructure which interacts with a diverse range of communities. This infrastructure must also have an in-built reporting mechanism, as well as people trained in evaluating and moderating this data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This may sound fanciful and ambitious, but such infrastructure already exists within sports. What is lacking is the training and skill set to properly export qualitative data.

"coaches are a councillor, parent, older brother and sister"

- Ross Whittaker at Saints Sport

We propose using sports clubs as microcosms of society, within which we can analyse people's behaviour and from that understand it. Our idea is to develop a skill based coaching course, which will be taught alongside current coaching qualifications, teaching ethnographic skills, and recording methods to coaches. We

also would get coaches to report back to their organising bodies. Current training in child protection, safeguarding and wellbeing is comparable as coaches are taught to observe and be mindful of what Scott describes as "stress signals". Lee also describes the system for "communication and escalation" which is already in place. However, it is Ross who demonstrates the potential of the coach to generate unique insights as he sees the role of the coach as "councillor, parent, older brother and sister" thus able to understand the athlete's behaviour. Sport clubs are often seen as extended families and thus once again can provide important insights.

"coaches need to have their finger on the pulse of the community"

- Scott Lawson at Saints Sport

By creating an additional element within coaching courses, providing them ethnographic skills, we can use coaches to record some of the more nuanced aspects of different communities that may not be obvious at first glance. Coaches exist at the

heart of communities and are core to the social networks that exist it within them. In the words of Scott Lawson, former Scottish Rugby international and current Director of Rugby at Saints Sport, coaches need to have their "finger on the pulse" of the community to effectively complete their role. By providing the necessary training not only do we improve the ability of coaches to perform their own role we enable ourselves to produce qualitative data, that helps us understand the social dynamics of communities within Britain.

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Crisis responders must understand that a one-pronged approach is not going to work when we are as diverse as we are. It is important when we consider the diversity of the nation instead of using a blanket scientific approach that appeals to the rationale of policymakers. Regardless, just because we want to use qualitative data does not mean it has to be undertaken in a non-strategic approach. Introductions of ethnographic training programmes, such as the one proposed here will help provide the structure needed to obtain qualitative data that is essential to crisis response but is presently lacking. Frustratingly, much of this data is already being collected in an intuitive but haphazard form, then possessed by a sport's national governing body. Lee discusses how within his role he is in constant communication with coaches and monitoring the health of local clubs within Scotland, as well as the communities in which they operate. Lee describes how this information "flows" up the pathway from the grassroots level. We must capitalise on it by standardising the approach and creating robust mechanisms by which it can be processed. Our program aims to provide not only a greater diversity of information, but also a greater quantity. Sports constant and consistent nature, as well as the rate in which this information is generated, means that it is constantly available. As such, our program will enable faster and more effective crisis response.

“adapt routines to their circumstances...respond to their needs”

- Ross Whittaker at Saints Sport

local level. There are structures like the England and Wales Cricket Board, the FA and English Rugby Union which provide the perfect starting structure for our project. These organisations provide a bridge between grassroot sport and Government. The framework already exists. Coaches currently need to undergo a level of managed training thus it would be a case of expansion rather the creation. This means that our project does not have create a new national and local network to mobilise ethnographic methods. As mentioned, we can also build upon the training provided in online coaching courses and qualification, which have proven successful in managing wellbeing and safeguarding. Ross discusses his attendance at training sessions, provided by Student Services, in active listening. This has enabled him to understand his athletes and their needs better. He used this to “adapt routines to their circumstances” and “respond to their emotional needs” at the grassroots level. There is no reason the Government could not do the same.

One might then question what incentive exists for these governing bodies to implement these sorts of reforms. It seems to have no direct benefit to them but incur significant costs. The answer lies in the role of the coaches themselves. In our interviews we came across a common theme which revolves around the role of the coach beyond the responsibilities of teaching sport itself. The professionals we spoke to unanimously identified the role of the coach in caring and maintaining player well-being, with most agreeing the coach has a duty to the community. A project like this would not just benefit policy makers in helping craft crisis response but also be marketed as a way in which improve the emotional responsiveness and awareness of the coaches for sensitive social issues that arise within sporting communities. This is a vital area of development within sport,

“coaching course are very centred around methodologies and focus on results...the psychological element is neglected”

- Scott Teister at Saints Sport

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as Scott Teister highlighted that coaching courses currently focus highly on “methodology” which prioritises performance outcomes over the athlete, neglecting the “psychological element” and emotions. This makes our project mutually beneficial both for organising sports bodies and policymakers.

Additionally, we'd like to address the fact that we've situated a lot of our argument in the failings of the COVID-19 response. Nevertheless, the pandemic has brought about a new feature of sporting organisation which makes this the perfect time to implement a new policy like this: the emergence of video call technology. This has provided a potential avenue to coordinate observations from different communities at a macrolevel. Already the sector is enjoying conferences and networking opportunities which are more accessible than before. Several of the coaches interviewed stated that these technologies have helped them improve the organisation of their clubs and it's something that will still be using post-pandemic. This means that the communication required to feedback the information observed doesn't necessarily have to come in the form of an actual in person meeting but can be done and managed through video conferences. Now is the perfect time to reform and add to coaching training because we can do it in tandem with the evolution of the management of sport itself. Despite the failings of the handling of the current crisis to acknowledge people and the emotionality of crisis itself we can use the experiences and the consequences to benefit us in the future.

“the club should reflect the identity of the town”

- *Scott Lawson at Saints Sport*

A key concern that we have when proposing this idea is the lack of obvious connection between sport and crisis response. We feel that comes from a lack of acknowledgement of the role of sport in communities and in the day-to-day life of people in general. This is in part due to continued diminution of

sport and its role in society. All research amongst sporting professionals and coaches has shown a reluctance of people outside of sport to acknowledge its significance. The coaches we spoke to thought there was a lack of acknowledgement of the benefits sport has to people regarding mental wellbeing and physical fitness. Furthermore, sports has powerful benefits which extend beyond the individual and reach into wider society. The social benefit includes the creation of inter-personal relationships and networks via socialisation, facilitated in a more managed environment than would be possible in a typical home setting. Almost every coach spoke about the “support network” or “family” which sports creates. This builds upon our point, that sport is an extended family and household thus able to generate unique insights into behaviours and emotions. Beyond the individual, the clubs themselves operate at the heart of local communities through communal activity. Ross highlighted that multiple clubs often collaborate on outreach programs and schemes to benefit the wider community and society, whilst Scott Teister highlighted how charities and sports organisations have worked with the police and social care in the past to tackle social issues. To quote Scott Lawson, a club should reflect “the identity of the town”. These local sports clubs are more than just a pastime but are intrinsically interlinked with the fabric of these communities. The lack of attention paid to the role and significance of these clubs has been detrimental to their very existence and their functionality – suffering from chronic underfunding. Sports clubs have become more culturally important than the government is willing to admit, with sports role in the pandemic underestimated due to the reliance on quantitative data. Many coaches highlighted how sport was one of the only sources of consistency throughout the pandemic. Therefore, we believe sports clubs provide the perfect opportunity to understand the social nature of communities within the UK.

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Beyond being reflective of a community identity, sport is also part of multiple types of community. Sport occupies a core position in different ethnic groups, different classes, and different ideologies. Within clubs themselves, there is a mixing pot which is reflective of how different groups interact with the wider community. One of the reasons we selected sport as a focus area is because sport is reflective of so many different types of people and different communities. For example, you could easily visit an urban area and observe the behaviours of low-income athletes, high-income athletes' gender non-conforming, or ethnic minority athletes simultaneously in a way that embraces intersectionality. This enables policy makers to more effectively understand the concerns of different groups and respond to their needs, much like their coaches do. It allows research an avenue into different areas and a chance to observe different behaviours and trends. By using a focus area, like sport, which is so innately multicultural and varied in participants, you will receive a greater variety of samples which generate critical information on different communities that was otherwise lacking. For example, it might shed insight on why some communities are more reluctant to receive the COVID-19 vaccination than others instead of just making racially charged or culturally inaccurate assumptions (Benjamin, 2021). Whilst sport may not seem obviously interconnected to crisis response, it is connected through communities, which we must understand better for any response to be effective.

One must appreciate the significance and the ideal location of coaches within communities to reflect the qualitative data that we are trying to obtain if this project is to be successful. Sports are the heart of many communities, with the coach being the pillar that enables sport to function. Ross stated that "sport cannot happen without athletes,

“you can't have sport without the athlete, and you can't have the athlete without the person”

- Ross Whittaker at Saints Sport

and we cannot have athletes without having a person” but in his modesty he fails to recognise the crucial role of the coach. Coaches are the linchpin which tie together the organisational aspect of sport. If we can tap into their unique knowledge and learn from their experience, then we can begin to understand more about how social phenomena and communities interact with structures and rules rather than adopting which more positivist assumptions which fail to reflect reality. If we truly want to create a more timely and appropriate approach to crisis then we must begin to understand reality, thus understand the emotional aspect of person. We must begin to understand how people interact with policy, rather than assuming total obedience and rationality. Coaches are in a privileged position whereby they are both part of the community but also separate from it. As such they can operate as observers and reporters for those who aren't part of it all – which is most decision makers. The issue we face now is that coaches aren't aware of this privileged position. Equally, Government fails to maximise their effectiveness and usefulness. This project aims to provide education in ethnographic methods which will then enable coaches to translate what they see and know into theoretical and qualitative data for crisis responders to use.

This is not to assume we are unaware of any flaws with our project idea. To start, we are overtly aware of a gender bias within our area of focus. We claim to want to explore the inner workings of communities but that's a hard thing to do when we haven't had the opportunity to even interview a female coach. Women in sport is something which has been improving monumentally year on year, but that does not remove the inequality in both participation and leadership. A study found that within women's sports one of the areas of smallest action and improvement was the recruitment of women into leadership positions such as coaching and refereeing (Pike et al. 2018 pg 810). This extends to issues of under-representation with the LGBTQ+ community as well as ethnic minorities. The obvious concern is this will yield narrow results, dominated by cis-gendered white men and thus the data won't accurately reflect all the cultures and concerns within the UK. Some may even accuse our project of perpetuating patriarchal and sexist undertones within the current establishment. It is a valid

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observation, although we'd contend that greater investment and development of volunteer coaches' training will lead us to recruit a greater diversity of volunteers in the future, particularly if we are emphasising representation of the grassroots community. The failings of the sport sector should not completely undermine our goals. It is through being aware of our own limitations that we can accurately use the information which we collect in the first place. The diversity of the sports sector is ever growing and just because now it may not necessarily provide 100% accurately reflective information does not mean it won't in the future. By creating the platform will be able to extend it to include women and eventually other marginalised groups. Additionally, just because we are starting with sport doesn't mean this style of programme can't expand beyond sport into other areas as well. The very nature of our project is reflective and shows that different groups have different motivations. Due to that the fact that we acknowledge that our proposal does not include everyone by virtue of its narrow focus, and we know further work could be done to generate useful insights elsewhere. No area is perfect and will be completely reflective but to find one that is as comprehensive as sport is something we shouldn't completely overlooked just because it will not give us insight into every group.

The idea that a positivist, rational evidenced based approach is the best way to enact policy innately assumes that the decision makers are themselves rational. It assumes that every person is equally as receptive to this style of policy. It assumes that there would be no other emotional factors which have prevented effective response. The pandemic has highlighted the issues with this style of approach - there is so much more to people and communities than numbers and data. If we want to have an effective crisis response, we need to create policies and programmes with which we can gather qualitative data which is reflective of the emotions, the sentiments, the attitudes and ideologies of different communities. Our project locates itself in sport due to the fact that we have identified it as a feasible, suitable and logistical place to start. Sport is itself reflective of identity and emotionality. It has its weaknesses but the potential gains of beginning to understand and attempt to understand emotionality in communities has more benefits than it has concerns. For years now crisis response has been lacking in this type of qualitative data and we believe this style of project is the start of something far bigger. Putting people back in crisis response.

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