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To cite this article: Cecilia Stenling & Josef Fahlén (2022) Taking stock of sport management research in the new millenia – research contributions, worthwhile knowledge, and the field’s raison d’être, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 22:5, 643-662, DOI: [10.1080/16184742.2022.2063360](https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2022.2063360)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2022.2063360>



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# Taking stock of sport management research in the new millenia – research contributions, worthwhile knowledge, and the field’s raison d’être

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## ABSTRACT

**Research question:** In this paper, we analyse the variety and distribution of ways that authors frame their research contributions in published sport management articles, thereby providing a base from which to reflect on what is considered worthwhile knowledge in the field of sport management.

**Research methods:** Our analysis builds on a reading of the introductions of 128 papers published in *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *Journal of Sport Management*, and *Sport Management Review* between 2001 and 2020. We grounded our approach conceptually in the work of [Sandberg, J., & Alvesson, M. (2011). Ways of constructing research questions: Gap-spotting or problematization? *Organization*, 18(1), 23–44. 10.1177/1350508410372151] but identified field-specific variations using an inductive process.

**Results and findings:** Most contribution-framings entail spotting gaps in the literature, in which the value of a piece of research is based on the idea that existing research is lacking in some way. Very few papers adopt a more disruptive contribution-framing mode that questions the assumptions underpinning existing knowledge in the field.

**Implications:** We raise potential issues of concern and important considerations for the future regarding questions around the development of a distinct body of sport management knowledge, ways to evaluate gaps in the literature, the significance of significance-statements, and the need to discuss an appropriate balance between incremental and assumption-challenging knowledge production.

## ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 12 July 2021  
Accepted 1 April 2022

## KEYWORDS

Contribution; field reflections; gap spotting; problematisation; significance

In any scientific field that seeks to achieve and maintain legitimacy, researchers must engage in field reflections; that is, public conversations about the purpose of the field’s existence; the goals to be accomplished through its activities; and how, why, and to

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2022.2063360>.

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the benefit of whom (e.g. Burawoy, 2005; Reed & Burrell, 2019). Conversely, failure to engage in field reflections might be indicative of intellectual stalemate and could threaten the field's legitimate scientific standing in the eyes of actors within and outside academia. In addition to being intrinsic to what it means to be a scientific field and crucial to ongoing scientific and societal legitimation, conversations about a field's *raison d'être* carry field-internal instrumental values. Reflections and debates engender the formulation of implicit and/or explicit yardsticks against which to assess a field's performance, as well as the development of signposts to govern its future development.

Field reflections come in various forms, and although Gammelsæter (2021) lamented our field's dearth of self-reflection, previous debates have revealed ambiguities and contentions around fundamental questions concerning the field's mission, whom and what sport management scholarship should seek to serve, as well as how and why. Two debate themes, in particular, stand out as pertinent for our concern with such fundamental questions.

First, sport management scholars have repeatedly argued that the field needs to develop a distinct body of knowledge to demonstrate its position and value as an independent area of scholarship (e.g. Chalip, 2006; Cunningham, 2013; Gammelsæter, 2021). On this matter, Chalip (2006) forcefully stated that lest we take seriously the possibility that there are distinct aspects to the management of sport and focus on creating sport-specific theory, there is considerably less justification for sport management to 'exist as a separately identified field of study' (p. 3). Similarly, Gammelsæter (2021) argued that sport management research must approach sport as a distinct social and cultural activity with specific structures, content, and innate meanings for its participants and that we need to 'bring sport back to the study of sport management' (p. 263).

Second, there have been discussion on the proper scope, character, and orientation of sport management research. Slack (1996), for example, argued that the domain of sport management needs to be moved 'from the locker room to the board room' (p. 97). However, debaters later suggested this call might have been overachieved, meaning researchers have focused almost exclusively on corporate sport (Ciomaga, 2013). Worse still, critics argue sport management research has come to be carried out to satisfy market interests, with market logic underpinning research questions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches (e.g. Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Newman, 2014; Ziegler, 2007).

Field reflections and debates, such as those referenced above, are not symptoms of 'academic malaise; they are an indication of the field's vibrancy and potential' (Costa, 2005, p. 134). However, there have been few 'traditional' empirical studies of the sport management field (for notable examples, see Ciomaga, 2013; Costa, 2005; Love & Andrew, 2012; Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008; Shilbury, 2011; Shilbury & Rentschler, 2007) that may inform these debates, and even fewer that go straight to the core of the field's *raison d'être* (Gammelsæter, 2021).

## Purpose and aim

In this paper, we offer a research-based foundation from which to debate, reflect on, and construct signposts for future development of the field of sport management, particularly as it concerns what is considered worthwhile knowledge in sport management research. We do this by focusing on contribution framings – lines of argumentation intended to

persuade readers of a research piece's value (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). Specifically, building on and extending a typology by Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), we analyse the variety and distribution of contribution-framings located in the introductions of empirical papers published in three leading sport-management research outlets: *European Sport Management Quarterly* (ESMQ), *Journal of Sport Management* (JSM) and *Sport Management Review* (SMR). Sport management is a knowledge-producing community, and peer-reviewed journal articles are crucial vehicles through which a field constitutes itself (e.g. Dittrich et al., 2014; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). By investigating the ways in which contributions are framed in sport management papers, we are able to identify how researchers must present their work for it to pass as legitimate and valuable. In doing so, we offer one lens, among several possible, through which prevailing norms pertaining to worthwhile knowledge in the field can be exposed and understood. This is because, in their roles as authors, reviewers, and editors, field actors carry ideas about the field's mission, meaning, and evaluative standards that shape journal discourse and judgements around what 'counts' as a contribution in the field (e.g. Corley & Schinoff, 2017; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Tsang, 2021).

Below, we first provide a background to our study by reviewing previous empirical, reflective, and normative work on the concept of contribution. We thereafter explain our research approach to the study of contribution-framings. Then we provide a depiction of the various types of contribution-framings employed in sport management papers. We end the paper with a discussion of the implications of our main findings in terms of issues that we suggest we as a community ought to take under consideration as we discuss the field's future.

## Approaching the study of contribution-framings

Describing and justifying the value of one's work is necessary for authors of scientific texts, and not being able to make the case for a sufficient contribution is a common base for rejection of journal articles (e.g. Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Lange & Pfarrer, 2017; Leidner, 2020; Selwyn, 2014). However, what is regarded as a contribution is neither fixed nor pregiven, but instead is the result of a process of social construction and development of intersubjective agreement in a field concerning which evaluative standards should apply (Gendron, 2013; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). Because journal publishing, in particular, has this collective and interactive character, what ultimately is understood as a contribution reflects both individual authors' intentions and field-level norms and values as expressed through the evaluation of the 'gatekeepers' (i.e. reviewers and editors) of the publishing process.

In attempting to demonstrate a piece of work's value, authors advance contribution-framings – intentionally and carefully crafted persuasive lines of argumentation that describe and justify the value of their work, all the while taking into account the standards and evaluative criteria used by reviewers and editors (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). Contribution-framings are thus micro-level "situated" processes of language use' (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997, p. 1023) that simultaneously reflect paradigmatic stances on what constitutes good science and proper scientific conduct (Gendron, 2013). As such, it is unsurprising that judgements around acceptable contributions vary between and within fields and that discussions around what ought to count as a

worthwhile contribution may be marked by tension or outright conflict (see, e.g. Barley, 2016; Bartunek et al., 2006; Davis, 2015; Reed & Burrell, 2019; Tsang, 2021, for outspoken positions on this topic).

The 'make or break' character of contributions in publication processes and the inextricable link between what counts as a contribution and scientific norms have prompted researchers to turn empirical and theoretical attention to the ways contributions are framed in published journal articles (e.g. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Hällgren, 2012; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Nicholson et al., 2018; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). An important insight from this literature is that a key rhetorical strategy is justifying a work's value on the grounds of its novelty and uniqueness vis-à-vis the existing literature. Constructing a contribution in a journal article thus appears to involve the process of first establishing a common assumptive ground and relevance for the topic by reviewing the outstanding literature. By engaging in such 'consensus creation' (Davis, 1971, p. 332), authors establish a base that resonates with readers in terms of how they understand current knowledge. Thereafter, manuscripts tend to 'turn on themselves' (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997, p. 1029) and subvert this agreement by identifying deficiencies in the received knowledge, thereby opening up for a positioning of their work as constituting a contribution.

As demonstrated by Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997), authors present and critique earlier work in multiple ways, in turn creating different paths to contribution-framings. Critique may take the form of specifying a gap, thus positing the literature as incomplete, which opens up the opportunity for the framing of incremental contributions that consist of 'filling in the details' (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997, p. 1047). Paving the way for progressively more transformative contributions are lines of critique that portray current knowledge as lacking a certain perspective or framework or as simply being wrong in some sense.

The literature on contribution-framings has demonstrated the dominance of a 'gap-spotting' (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 247) mode, not least in younger and more applied fields (Hällgren, 2012). In that sense, contribution-as-novelty is commonly translated into framings of contributions that reinforce rather than question prevailing assumptive worlds, theories, and methodologies. Presumably to counteract this development, editorials in management journals and elsewhere have been dedicated to explaining what, from the editorial team's perspective, is considered a worthwhile contribution and to lamenting what is viewed as researchers' tendency to 'ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine significance' (Tourish, 2015, p. 137). Indeed, Chatterjee and Davison (2020) stated, 'While librarians might care about gaps on the shelf and dentists may be troubled by gaps in your teeth, we suggest that researchers should tread warily where gaps are concerned' (p. 1). Instead, editors and discussion pieces ask for research that interrogate prevailing assumptions and research traditions, thus availing contributions that are genuinely original and interesting (e.g. Bartunek et al., 2006; Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Lange & Pfarrer, 2017; Reed & Burrell, 2019; Tourish, 2015).

However, arguments that speak to the potential pitfalls of using counterintuitiveness and interestingness as evaluative criteria have been advanced with similar force. For example, Davis (2015), suggested that the prevailing norm of contribution-as-original and interesting means that counterintuitive knowledge is rewarded at the expense of truth and cumulative knowledge and settled science and that researchers are acclaimed

‘for being interesting rather than getting it right’ (p. 181). Tsang (2021) similarly noted, ‘For those who want to read something novel, they should read a novel, not a research paper. Management scholars are not paid to entertain themselves or their audience through producing interesting, counterintuitive or novel theories, theoretical propositions or empirical findings’. (p. 11)

Regardless of ones’ position in the debate concerning what ought to count as a contribution (e.g. incremental puzzle-solving versus assumption-challenging originality and interestingness), these arguments and counterarguments demonstrate the debate’s epistemological and contested nature (e.g. Burawoy, 2005; Gendron, 2013; Reed & Burrell, 2019). In that sense, whenever a journal article is accepted on the grounds of making a contribution, or rejected for failing to do so, these larger issues and debates concerning what ought to count as worthwhile knowledge are implicitly at play.

## Research approach

To provide the empirical and analytical focus for our study, we build on a typology over ways of justifying contributions that was developed by Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), and which has gained traction in both empirical studies (e.g. Hällgren, 2012; Nicholson et al., 2018) and editorials (e.g. Chatterjee & Davison, 2020; Tourish, 2015). The typology is grounded in a social constructionist view of the publication process and of the crafting of a piece of research’s value as a rhetorical endeavour that involves authors’ positioning vis-à-vis current knowledge and evaluative standards in a field. From this perspective, what counts as valuable knowledge in a field is shaped through scholars’ socialisation into the field and through the negotiation that takes place when authors’ claims confront reviewers and editors’ evaluative standards (e.g. Gendron, 2013; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997).

Sandberg and Alvesson’s (2011) typology was constructed from an analysis of the introductions of 52 papers published in four leading U.S. and European management journals. The typology portrays a continuum, with incremental and assumption-challenging contribution framings as the respective poles. In that sense, it reflects ongoing debates concerning whether knowledge production ought to be about confirming and further specifying an established body of knowledge, or fundamentally questioning the assumptions underpinning it.

Three basic modes of justifying the value of one’s work constitute the core of Sandberg and Alvesson’s (2011) typology: track-bound modes, disruptive modes, and combined track-bound and disruptive modes. Papers that use a ‘track-bound mode’ identify some sort of gap in an established body of work and position the contribution of the paper as filling this gap. This way of framing a contribution is thus incrementalistic and located within an institutionalised line of reasoning. The authors further identified three variants and a number of subvariants of this overarching mode. First, ‘confusion-spotting’ involves pointing to earlier work as inconsistent, contradictory, or conflicting, thereby framing the contribution as being clarifying. Second, ‘neglect-spotting’ suggests that extant literature has completely overlooked a certain aspect, an established topic has not been explored to the extent that is warranted, or the empirical validity of a widespread theory or concept has not been properly assessed, thus positioning the contribution as one of contributing to robustness and settled science in a field. Third,

‘application-spotting’ implies suggesting that current knowledge on a topic can be extended or complemented by the addition of a new theory or perspective, framing the contribution as adding a fuller or more nuanced understanding by the introduction of a particular theory/perspective.

At the other end of the incrementalism – assumption-challenging continuum in Sandberg and Alvesson’s (2011) typology is a ‘disruptive mode’ termed ‘problematism’. Authors who apply this strategy argue that their contribution lays in the challenging or upheaval of institutionalised lines of reasoning. In that sense, rather than seeking to add a piece to an already existing puzzle, problematisation-driven contribution-framings seek to create an entirely new puzzle with a different frame and differently shaped puzzle pieces. The application of a problematising mode thus implies breaking out from well-trodden paths and creating insights of a more radical character.

According to Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), problematisation should not be confused with research orientations that view it as an end in itself (e.g. critical theory). Rather, the strategy involves the identification and challenging of prevailing theoretical assumptions with the goal of creating contributions that are more novel and interesting. To illustrate, following Washington and Patterson’s (2011) review on sport research underpinned by institutional theory, several papers have referred to their identification of a need for more research on institutional change as a motivation for the added value of their research (e.g. Fahlén & Stenling, 2019). Whereas this has changed the trajectory of sport-related institutional research, it has simultaneously confirmed the theory’s strong position. A problematising approach would instead have involved an altogether questioning of the institutional perspective as an explanatory model for what shapes organising and organisations.

As the label implies, Sandberg and Alvesson’s (2011) third basic mode (i.e. combined track-bound and disruptive modes) holds a middle position between the two aforementioned modes. As such, contribution-framings that apply variants of this basic mode come some way toward problematisation but retain elements of a track-bound mode. Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) detailed three such variants: ‘critical confrontation,’ involving the unpacking and critique of assumptions underpinning theoretical explanations or the interpretation of concepts; ‘new idea,’ which includes bypassing existing literature in a presentation of a new theoretical or conceptual idea that constitutes the contribution; and ‘quasiproblematism,’ a contribution-framing strategy that builds on the appropriation of another scholar’s full problematisation.

## Methods

Our analysis is based on the introductions of 128 articles published in ESMQ, JSM, and SMR in the beginning, middle, and end of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Epistemologically, the account is doubly interpretive. First, it focuses on the outcome of interpretive meaning-making processes in the context of published papers, specifically descriptions and justifications of contributions that have been negotiated at the nexus of the ‘supply’ (i.e. authors) and ‘demand’ (i.e. editors and reviewers) sides of publishing, and which therefore have been determined to ‘count’ as legitimate contribution-framings (e.g. Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). Second, our analysis is by necessity interpretations of the second order (Schütz, 1953) – our interpreting of rhetoric that is in



itself interpretive in its character. It, therefore, produces an account with a heuristic and pragmatic value (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990; Larsson, 2009), meaning that it allows us to see, think, and speak about the object of study in a new way, informing discussions around what is and ought to be viewed a contribution in our field.

### **Sampling**

Given our purpose, we found it important to draw data from journals that are dedicated solely to sport management research, self-identify as such, take official responsibility for the field's development, and are recognised in the sport management community as the field's top publishing outlets. We, therefore, selected the official publication outlets of the three most established sport management associations: the European Association for Sport Management, the North American Society for Sport Management, and the Sport Management Association of Australia & New Zealand. Because the selected journals are within these associations' mandate, their scope and orientation, as evidenced in, for example, mission statements, are the result of collective and field-specific efforts by the associations and their members.

We selected only original empirical articles for analysis (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Thus, editorials, book reviews, conference reports, and similar texts were excluded. In terms of sampling among the total population of articles, we wanted a sampling period that contained all three journals and that included recent developments in the field. Considering these two aspects, we defined our sampling time-frame as from 2001 (the first year of ESMQ) to 2020 (the most recent full year) divided into three cohorts: 2001–2003, 2009–2011, and 2018–2020. The papers in the first issue of each volume and journal were subjected to analysis, but if the first issue was a special issue or was irregular in other ways (i.e. if empirical papers were outnumbered by debate pieces, field notes, or off-the-press and similar material), we used the second issue. Table 1 illustrates our sample.

### **Analytical procedure**

We wanted to ground our analysis conceptually, yet still allow inductive and potentially field-specific variations to be captured and brought to light. Therefore, we applied

**Table 1.** Sampling of articles.

	Total number of articles	Articles eligible for analysis	Articles selected for analysis	Sample size (%)
Cohort 1 (2001–2003)				
ESMQ	65	37	8	18.9
JSM	75	43	10	23.3
SMR	26	19	10	52.6
Cohort 2 (2009–2011)				
ESMQ	88	67	13	19.4
JSM	124	95	16	16.8
SMR	108	63	12	19.0
Cohort 3 (2018–2020)				
ESMQ	103	89	21	23.6
JSM	146	109	16	14.7
SMR	189	150	22	14.7
Total	924	672	128	19.0



Sandberg and Alvesson's (2011) typology as an *à priori* analytical framework, but we expanded the framework to include inductively emerging ways of framing contributions for which it could not fully account (Hällgren, 2012). Because arguments pertaining to contributions are normally developed in a paper's introduction (e.g. Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Nicholson et al., 2018; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011), we focused our analysis on this section. As a preparatory step for our analysis, we thus extracted the text beginning at the first line after the abstract and ending at the start of the next heading, regardless of that heading's name.

On a practical level, we thereafter proceeded to apply and develop Sandberg and Alvesson's (2011) typology through what Miles and Huberman (1994) term 'an accounting-scheme guided' (p. 61) approach. This implies departing from an *à priori* determined framework but remaining open to data-driven variation within and beyond predetermined categories. We approached each sampled paper with the typology as a framework and posed the analytical question, 'How is this article's contribution framed in the introductory section of the text?' Drawing on the strengths of joint analysis in terms of enhancing trustworthiness (Phoenix et al., 2016), we (first and second author) conducted the entire analysis collectively. This meant that in using the typology and our analytical question, we first assessed each paper individually, taking note of whether it fell under one of the predetermined categories, whether it represented a new and analytically meaningful subvariant of a predetermined category, or whether it displayed a variation that was not captured by the typology in its original form. Then, we took turns presenting arguments for our individual assessment. To illustrate, one of us would say, 'This is an example of a neglect spotting: underresearched framing strategy because . . .' (representing a sorting of a paper under a predetermined category), 'This is a contribution-framing that falls under a neglect-spotting strategy, but it is not captured by either of the predetermined variants of that overall strategy and thus constitutes a new variant that is characterised by . . .' (referring to the inductive creation of a new and analytically meaningful subvariant of a predetermined category), or 'This is a contribution-framing that is not at all captured by the typology, because it displays the following elements. . .' (referring to the inductive creation of a new main category).

In an ensuing discussion, we acted as devil's advocates for each other to delineate the reasons for and boundaries of our categorisations further (e.g. 'You suggest that this is an example of a neglect spotting: underresearched framing strategy, but can you further specify the distinction between this paper's justification and the one applied in paper X . . .?'). We thus 'enacted' the compare and contrast tactic (Charmaz, 2014) to facilitate an intersubjective understanding of the meaning of Sandberg and Alvesson's (2011) typology in the context of our data material as well as to ensure that our operationalisation and inductive expansion of the typology resulted in mutually exclusive categories and subcategories (Guba, 1978). Notably, following our understanding of contribution-framings as socially constructed and intersubjectively validated rhetoric (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997), we were not interested in assessing the 'truthfulness' of claims (e.g. whether a proposed research gap can, in fact, be considered as such) or the cumulative knowledge contribution on particular research topics (as would have been the case in a literature review study). Rather, our interest was in the varying lines of argumentation concerning the paper's value, a focus that allowed us to conduct a study that could speak to the field in its entirety, rather than to groups of researchers

**Table 2.** A typology of contribution-framings in sport management research and their distribution.

Basic modes	Versions of basic modes	Variations	Subcategories
1. Unframed (6)			
2. Practice driven (20)			
3. Track-bound modes (94)	3.1. Confusion spotting (4)		
	3.2. Neglect spotting (67)	3.2.1. Neglect spotting: Overlooked (31)	3.2.1.1. Neglect spotting: Overlooked empirically (8) 3.2.1.2. Neglect spotting: Overlooked theoretically (23)
		3.2.2. Neglect spotting: Underresearched (16)	
		3.2.3. Neglect spotting: Lacks empirical support (15)	
		3.2.4. Neglect spotting: New practice (5)	
	3.3. Application spotting (23)	3.3.1. Within-field application (22)	
		3.3.2. Disciplinary contributions (1)	
4. Combined track-bound and disruptive modes (8)	4.1. Critical confrontation (4)		
	4.2. New idea (3)		
	4.3. Quasiproblematisation (1)		

with specific topical, theoretical, or methodological proclivities. Unsurprisingly, authors at times advanced multiple lines of argumentation, and in those cases, we focused on what we considered their main contribution-framing.

The analysis proceeded in two overall steps. In the first, we analysed the selected papers in the 2018–2020 cohort through the process described above. The resulting expanded framework is depicted in Table 2, with the inductively generated contribution-framings italicised. Second, having established the framework, we reanalysed the selected papers in the 2018–2020 cohort and worked our way backwards through the 2009–2011 and 2001–2003 cohorts. Table 2 shows the distribution of papers over the various contribution-framing types, and Table A1 (Supplemental File) displays a list of the articles sorted under each category.

## Findings

Table 2 shows the number of articles we sorted under each of the categories and subcategories in our expanded framework. A notable portion of the papers applies a track-bound mode. These papers rely heavily on gap spotting, meaning the authors frame their contribution in relation to a claimed gap in the literature (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011; see also Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). It is also notable that very few papers utilised a type of contribution-framing that falls under a combined track-bound and disruptive mode, and we categorised none as using a disruptive mode. This is certainly not unique for the sport management field (e.g. Hällgren, 2012; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011), but it nonetheless bears significance for our later discussion. In the following, we use selected papers to illustrate the application of contribution-framings in the

context of sport management, and we take care to note when an inductively created contribution-framing is described.

### ***Unframed***

Six of the papers lacked an explicit contribution-framing, so we created the ‘unframed’ category. Some of these papers contained implicit arguments about why a topic is important, but they were all unclear to a degree regarding what the article was really about and how it added value. Although developments overtime should not be exaggerated, it is interesting to note that five of the six papers in this category appeared in the issues of the first cohort (2001–2003), whereas one appeared in the second (2009–2011), and none in the third (2018–2020).

### ***Practice driven***

This inductively created type of framing bypasses existing academic literature. No gap spotting or conceptual considerations take place, and it does not involve claims of theoretical contributions. However, it may point to circumstances in practice as a basis for context similarity generalisations. Kyle et al.’s (2003) introductory paragraph is illustrative of this type of framing, stating that in response to stagnating government funding,

many public service providers have introduced user fees. They have not, however, evaluated consumers’ reaction to these fees. With this in mind, the purpose of this investigation was to examine methods of manipulating consumers’ price expectations for a 10 K road race offered by a public sport and leisure service provider. (p. 142)

This contribution-framing strategy is somewhat rare, representing 20 out of the 128 included articles, but it is common enough to be noted as potentially specific for a study-object-defined field in which practitioner organisations might have an interest in commissioning evaluations from researchers.

### ***Track-bound modes***

Of the selected papers, 94 apply a track-bound contribution-framing strategy. Although distinctions exist between the variants, as described below, they share a ‘puzzle-solving’ nature that takes its point of departure in an identified gap in existing literature (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011).

### ***Confusion spotting***

Recall that papers that apply a confusion-spotting strategy frame their contribution by claiming that previous research findings are inconsistent, contradictory, or conflicting (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) and that the purported contribution of the paper, therefore, is to add clarification concerning a particular topic. For example, Kokolakikis et al. (2019), in their paper on the sport participatory effects of Olympic Games, stated, ‘Until now, the evidence about the sports participation legacy of the Olympic Games is ambiguous’ (p. 277), further adding that ‘the jury is still out’ (p. 277) concerning the effects of Olympic Games on participation behaviour. As shown in Table 2, this

appears to be a rather rare form of contribution framing in sport management research, with only four of the included papers applying this strategy.

### ***Neglect spotting***

This variant of a track-bound way of framing a contribution builds on the identification of some form of neglect in the existing literature. Notably, a majority (67 out of 128) of our included papers applied some version of this strategy.

***Neglect spotting: overlooked.*** We inductively identified two distinct variants of this framing strategy, the first of which we termed ‘neglect spotting: overlooked empirically’. Contribution-framings of this type position their line of argumentation within an established research theme but claim that a context or sampling group (e.g. a particular age group, gender, or geographical area) has been overlooked in research on that topic. For example, Sant and Mason (2019) justified the value of their research on arena processes in small cities by stating that ‘much of the research on the public financing of sport and entertainment facilities has focused on major league venues in larger North American cities’ (p. 161).

We termed the second variant ‘neglect spotting: overlooked theoretically’. As with the first variant, papers adopting this type of framing position their work within an established research theme but argue that a certain conceptual or theoretical aspect has been overlooked in research. For instance, Jang et al. (2018) claimed that happiness is an overlooked concept in research on fans’ responses to the game process

There is a lack of scholarly effort in examining the impact of game process (e.g. exciting versus boring) on fans’ happiness. However, ample evidence suggests that the positivity of the game process has a significant impact on various types of fans’ responses, including emotion (Knobloch-Westerwick, David, Eastin, Tamborini, & Greenwood, 2009) and behavioral intentions (e.g. future intention, word of mouth recommendations; Sumino & Harada, 2004; Yoshida & James, 2010). (p. 64)

Some, but certainly not all, papers categorised under these two variants provide arguments regarding why existing knowledge is not applicable to the sampling group or context in question (for the first variant) or why the neglected conceptual aspect is of theoretical or practical importance (for the second variant).

***Neglect spotting: underresearched.*** Whereas papers that adopt a neglect-spotting: overlooked framing strategy claim ‘virgin territory – a white spot on the knowledge map’ (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, p. 30) within the scope of a particular research theme, this strategy implies acknowledging that an established topic has been given at least some research attention while asserting that it has not been explored fully. For example, Riehl et al. (2019) argued that within the organisational change literature, preservation strategies have been given some research attention, thus indicating that their study will add to an existing – but limited – body of knowledge.

***Neglect spotting: lacks empirical support.*** Papers that adopt this third variant of the neglect-spotting strategy claim either that an established theory, model, framework, or perceived ‘truth’ is completely unassessed empirically or that it is unclear whether it is

applicable and has explanatory value in a particular context. To illustrate the former, after reviewing work on utilising the Sport Value Framework, Gerke et al. (2020) stated, 'None of these studies challenge all of the foundational premises of the Sport Value Framework using empirical data. The real value of the Sport Value Framework to sport management research and sport business remains undetermined' (p. 201).

***Neglect spotting: new practice.*** This inductively generated variant builds on the suggestion that recent developments in sport management policy and practice have not received scholarly attention and that there is subsequently a lack of knowledge concerning whether an applied practice actually works. Research, in that sense, has not kept up with 'real-world' changes and assumptions underpinning policy and practice. De Bosscher et al.'s (2019) positioning of their paper represents this type of contribution-framing. After reviewing governments' increasing use of performance targeting in elite-sport funding, the authors stated that to date, 'The extent to which targeted funding for only a few sports (i.e. prioritisation) is more effective (i.e. in terms of success) than broader funding approaches (i.e. diversification) is untested empirically' (p. 222).

### ***Application spotting***

This third track-bound contribution-framing strategy 'searches mainly for a shortage of a particular theory or perspective in a specific area of research. The research task is to provide an alternative perspective to further our understanding of the particular subject matter in question' (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, pp. 30–31). We inductively identified two variants of this strategy in the sport management papers subjected to analysis. This is a somewhat rare but clearly recognisable strategy: Approximately one-fifth (23 out of 128) of the selected papers applied one of the two variants. However, all but one of these applied to the first variant, which we term 'within-field application'.

***Within-field application.*** Papers that adopt this type of contribution-framing claim that an established research theme or topic in sport management research would benefit from the application of a new theoretical perspective or methodological approach. The former might entail 'importing' concepts from parent disciplines or shifting the general analytical viewpoint on a particular issue. For example, concerning experiences of sexism, Hindman and Walker (2020) argued that 'recent work has not examined the overall experience of sexism by women in the industry, focusing instead on specific types of discrimination and bias' (p. 64) and that 'the need for a fuller understanding of its impact in sport is crucial' (p. 64).

***Disciplinary contributions.*** Papers that apply this type of contribution-framing initially build on the application of a purportedly important perspective from a parent discipline or a research field other than sport management. However, it goes on to claim a theoretical contribution to that discipline or field by way of exploring the context of sport.

### ***Combined track-bound and disruptive modes***

Three contribution-framing strategies fall under what Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) suggested contains elements of a problematisation, but which maintain elements of a track-bound mode. Five of the analysed papers applied a critical confrontation, new idea, or quasiproblematisation approach to assert their value.

#### ***Critical confrontation***

This type of contribution-framing involves a critique of assumptions underpinning theoretical explanations or the use of particular concepts. In that sense, it differs from, for example, neglect spotting: lacks empirical support in that its focus is prevailing understandings or the use of theories or concepts, rather than their empirical validity. This strategy was very rare in our material: Only four papers demonstrated this way of positioning a contribution. One of them was Skille and Fahlén (2020), who critiqued the conventional use of the concept of community, stating, ‘The concept is used interchangeably, without much consideration, as both input- and output, as both the independent and dependent variable simultaneously’ (pp. 239–240), a theoretical deficiency they sought to address with their paper.

#### ***New idea***

In this contribution-framing strategy, the authors do not engage in gap spotting vis-à-vis the existing literature. Instead, an entirely new theoretical or conceptual idea is presented, underpinned by arguments regarding its significance for research and/or practice. As an illustration of this rare form – only three papers in the sample applied it – Sugden et al. (2020) stated that they aimed to introduce a conceptual model, the intergroup relations continuum, which ‘was developed as a means by which to explore identities and relationships’ (p. 272) within ethnic communities and which ‘is intended to be transferable and thus generalisable’ (p. 272). Although theoretical in nature, this framing strategy is distinct from application spotting in that it does not build on theories or concepts from other fields or on reinterpretations or rearrangements of existing theory. As with practice-driven modes, the strategy does not include gap spotting, but unlike practice-driven modes, a theoretical ambition is clearly stated.

#### ***Quasiproblematisation***

As a middle-position, quasiproblematisation contribution-framings often draw upon problematising features of established perspectives, but otherwise apply track-bound lines of argumentation. We identified one paper in the sample that adopted this rhetorical strategy. Building on critical feminist theory, Kane and Maxwell (2011) described their study as calling ‘into question bedrock cultural assumptions and practices about how best to increase fan interest in, and consumption of, women’s sport’ (p. 202).

### **Discussion and concluding remarks**

We have sought to create an account of the variety and distribution of contribution-framings in articles published in three of our field’s core journals, with the ultimate purpose being to facilitate discussions on what is and ought to be considered worthwhile

knowledge in our field. Our own contribution is thus to give grounding to further reflections on a topic that have rarely been addressed empirically (resembling a Neglect Spotting: Under researched framing strategy). Our study of course has limitations, for example, in terms of the representativeness of the sample (at article and journal levels), the potential discrepancy between what in publication processes passes as a satisfactory contribution-framing and what is interpreted as a contribution once a journal article has been published, and the depth of analysis made possible by the design. However, we have demonstrated what via writing, reviewing, and editorial practices comes to be regarded as acceptable claims of worthwhile knowledge in the most reputable journals of our field. In this closing section of our paper, we discuss the implications of our main findings, particularly the issues of concern and important future considerations that we believe arise from them.

### ***Issues of concern***

We begin our discussion with the inductively generated categories of contribution-framings. Aside from potential sample bias, the fact that we identified no unframed papers in the most recent cohort is likely indicative of a general raising of the publishing standards in our field. With close to single-digit acceptance rates in top journals, the eye of the needle is getting narrower and narrower for authors, who are then likely to be compelled to motivate their paper's contribution more clearly (for an interesting elaboration on this by Marvin Washington, see Huml, 2021). Except for neglect spotting: disciplinary contribution, the remaining inductively created contribution-framing strategies are underpinned in varying ways by the idea that sport management is a distinct research and practice field and that contributions can and should be evaluated in relation to this distinctiveness. Whether they concern important developments in sport management practice (neglect spotting: new practice), fruitful import of parent discipline theories and concepts (application spotting: within-field application), or the distinctiveness of a certain group or context (neglect spotting: overlooked empirically), these framing strategies appear guided by the assumption that the contribution is made relative to the field of sport management research and practice.

These framings, therefore, resonate with ongoing discussions concerning the need to develop a distinct body of knowledge that takes into account the unique elements of sport. Certainly, sport management's legitimacy as a separate field depends to a great extent on our ability to describe and explain the features of sport as a distinct social, cultural, and economic sphere (e.g. Chalip, 2006; Cunningham, 2013; Gammelsæter, 2021). At the same time, we must be aware of and mitigate the risk that we carry out this task in ways that lead to insularity, myopia, and policing of the field's boundaries concerning what counts as sport management research. Thus, when we build sport specific theory 'from the ground up', we should aim to capture unique features in theoretical arguments (e.g. Cunningham, 2013). We furthermore must remain up to date on theoretical developments outside the field and take great care in explaining how modifications of borrowed theories do a better job of explaining sport than the original theories do. If we fail to do so, we run the risk of becoming an outdated and somewhat pale copy of parent disciplines, which would certainly not help in the endeavour to legitimize our standing as a separate field of inquiry. As we cultivate theoretical and empirical insights



concerning the uniqueness of our study object, we ought to be aware of the features that transcend sport's boundaries and of the possibility of using sport to validate theories proposed in other fields, or, perhaps more importantly, to use sport to generate theories that are generalisable across empirical contexts. As our analysis shows, the latter ambition is very rare – at least in papers that are published in the journals we sampled.

Second, regarding the overall distribution of analysed papers in the various predetermined and inductive categories, three-quarters of the papers adopted a track-bound way of framing their contribution. For all these papers, a gap of some sort was identified in the existing literature, and the purported contribution was to fill, or begin to fill, this gap. Of course, this is not inherently problematic. Regardless of epistemological proclivities, we believe most researchers subscribe to the view that it is crucial to relate new knowledge to existing knowledge. However, the dominance of the gap-spotting approach along with the distinction between the justifications and purported knowledge contribution that is produced by different track-bound modes of contribution-framings does raise the question of what we consider to be, and how to evaluate, the relative value of different types of gaps.

Another question raised by the dominance of the gap-spotting approach is how to assess the proper 'width' of a gap. Narrower gaps facilitate empirical, analytical, and theoretical focus and incremental knowledge building that leads to a more established and validated body of knowledge. However, gaps that are too narrow risk leading to the development of 'microtribes' (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013) that operate in separate 'silos' (e.g. Doherty, 2013; Mahony, 2008). Such 'micro tribing' and 'silofication', because of their orientations towards 'vertical' within-silo understandings of available knowledge, may obstruct a fuller and more original understanding that a more 'horizontal' reading of the field's body of knowledge could facilitate.

### ***Critical considerations for the future***

Via an analysis of how contributions are framed in sport management articles, we have sought to stimulate reflection and debate concerning what passes and ought to be regarded as worthwhile knowledge in the field of sport management. We close with two critical considerations for the future.

The first relates to what is, in some ways, an implicit finding of our study, but which is nonetheless important for the field's long-term development. In what perhaps is indicative of a certain degree of institutionalisation, the field seems to have reached the point where we no longer need to clarify the significance of a gap used to frame a contribution. Sport management researchers are generally good at contextualising their overall research topic in terms of indicating league yearly revenues, number of organisations or participants, geographical spread of a phenomenon, and so on. However, these aspects do not automatically render research important and therefore take away our responsibility to state the meaningfulness and critical insights of our research for the understanding of sport management, sport management practice, or society in general. As Leidner (2020) and Chatterjee and Davison (2020) noted, neither gap spotting nor assumption-questioning contribution-framings automatically elucidate the significance of a study. Here, the sport management research community has a collective responsibility to encourage clearer writing concerning why contributions are important – beyond

the fact that knowledge is lacking in some sense or would benefit from theoretical originality and renewal. This would also help clarify on whose behalf a study is conducted and, thus, for whom, in what ways, and why its contribution is important. Arguably, whereas the main purpose of contribution-statements is to gain legitimacy with fellow academics by aligning oneself with scientific evaluative standards, significance justifications are related to the external legitimacy of scholarly work and to the fundamental issues of for what and whom research is for (Burawoy, 2005). On this, Burawoy (2005) fruitfully distinguished between professional, policy, public, and critical sociology, each with its own legitimating and accountability base, type of knowledge produced, and pathology. In doing so, he illuminated that multiple legitimate bases exist for answering the so-called ‘so what?’ (Selwyn, 2014, p. 1) question, and highlighted the importance of discussing their respective roles and of clearly communicating the nature of a research problem and the stakeholders of research. We would like to encourage our community to engage with these considerations so that we collectively can better ourselves in providing answers to the so what? question in ways that are fruitful within our field and legitimate and impactful beyond.

Second, concerning the disproportionate relationship between track-bound and disruptive work, we encourage actors in the field to exercise agency in the areas where we have the highest degree of control (e.g. our writing, reviewing, and editorial processes) to discuss what is an appropriate balance between track-bound and disruptive modes of thinking on what constitutes a worthwhile research contribution as well as to work to achieve this balance. Disruptive modes, alongside the current incremental path, hold great promise for our field to build a body of new, significant, and meaningful knowledge that alters the way we understand and explain sport management practice. Importantly, we are not asking for paradigmatic shifts à la Kuhn; rather, we ask that sport management researchers take issue with the underlying assumptions of each other’s work more often. For so long, we have been enrolled in the common project of legitimising the field’s existence, and perhaps this has led us to incrementally build upon, rather than critically confront, each other’s work. As uncomfortable as it may seem for a community that has been advised, and rightfully so, to work together and ‘hustle and lay claim to our domain lest others take over the field by default’ (Chelladurai, 1992, p. 216), we believe that the field can now handle – and indeed needs – research that goes head-to-head with established lines of inquiry and explanations. In their 2011 review of institutional theory in sport research, Washington and Patterson politely stated that they were ‘not sure if the sport literature needs more isomorphism studies’ (p. 9). The field needs this type of within-theory critique and direction-giving, but it also needs contestation of well-established theoretical traditions as such.

In conclusion, we encourage field actors to consider and discuss what constitutes a contribution in our field and how contributions are and ought to be framed and evaluated in peer-review processes as well as (re)shaped in professional socialisation. The field needs both incremental research focused on creating settled science and on specifying and filling in details, as well as assumption-challenging work that creates a transformative ‘movement of the mind’ (Davis, 1971, p. 342) of its readers. Because the latter is by definition norm-breaking, it requires authors to be bold, creative, and ambitious in their research practice and writing, to read ‘horizontally’ to gain a ‘multi-silo’ perspective of the phenomenon of interest, thereby facilitating the creation of knowledge that makes

us think of phenomena in new ways. We also encourage reviewers and editors to maintain a discussion on what makes a contribution worthwhile in our field's journals. Beyond sound scholarship, what should be viewed as adding valuable knowledge? Here, we particularly note sport management journals' absence of editorials that can provide a base for such discussions and direction for reviewers and aspiring authors. In light of the dearth of papers that seek to disrupt prevailing understandings of a phenomenon or call into question basic assumptions underpinning a theory, we furthermore urge reviewers and editors to consider how the papers that seek to disrupt can be encouraged and be ascribed merit on these grounds. In short, we call upon the sport management community to discuss what constitutes – and seek ways to strike a balance between – building an additional solidifying floor of a house and creating new and differently shaped houses that alter our outlook.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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