**Exploring Sport Management as a Profession: A Critical Review of Occupational Theory**

The discussions surrounding the current state of sport management as an academic discipline have traditionally been the responsibility of key addresses and editorials. In drawing upon the sociological and management literature surrounding professions, this article critically reflects upon the characteristics of the field and the extent to which it can be viewed as a profession. More specifically, Abbott’s (1988) general theory of the profession and Greenwood's (1957) five attributes (systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes, and professional culture) that characterize a professionalized occupation are drawn upon and discussed in relation to the evolution and current state of the field. The findings elucidate the complexities of the professionalization process surrounding occupations and suggest that there are burgeoning signs of a profession emerging, but the field, at best, can be labelled a semi or quasi-profession. The implications of these findings for the future direction of the field are discussed.

Keywords: professionalization, professions, occupation, sport management research

Professions are a dominant feature of social life (Abbott, 1988). According to Carr-Saunders and Wilson's (1933: p. 3) early definition, ‘professions emerge when a number of persons are found to be practicing a definite technique founded upon specialized training’ and are often remunerated for their services. Abbott (1988) defined professions loosely as ‘exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases’ (p. 8). The process of professionalization, then, can be viewed as the social and cultural mechanisms of continuous patterns of work and the trend towards more formal occupational associations and formalized codes of behavior (Vollmer & Mills, 1966). Vollmer and Mills (1966), for example, define a profession as ‘an ideal type of occupation’ (p. 2) and professionalization as a dynamic process whereby ‘many, if not all, occupations may be placed somewhere on a continuum between the ideal type profession at the one end, and the completely unorganized occupational categories or non-professions at the other end’ (ibid). The former ‘ideal’ type professions are often based upon the traditional professions of medicine and law, which arguably still remain the closest to Vollmer and Mill’s (1966) notion of professions today, whereas the latter is collectively referred to herein as occupations. As Greenwood (1957) observed, professional activities are responsible for determining and shaping behavior and as such have increasingly become a dominant social activity. It is for this reason that sociologists have become increasingly interested in the study of professions.

The history of professions is well documented and occupational professionalization has received much attention within the broader sociological (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Montagna, 1968; Ritzer, 1975; Vollmer & Mills, 1966; Wilensky, 1964) and management (Abbott, 1988; 1991; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Hall, 1967, 1968) literature. In contrast, with the exception of key addresses, there has been very little academic discussion of this nature specifically within the sport management domain (for exceptions see Bloyce & Green, 2013; Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014; Whitson & Macintosh, 1990). As Dowling et al. (2014) noted in their review of professionalization, ‘the examination of occupational professionalization remains a relatively untouched area of inquiry within sport management [and the] discipline has yet to be examined in any systematic or meaningful way’ (p. 527). This has been in part due to the imprecise usage of the term professionalization that has been adopted to examine a variety of sport related issues and empirical settings at various levels of analysis (see Dowling et al. 2014 for further elaboration on this point) but also due to scholarly preoccupation in organizational professionalization – namely the examination of business-like professionals into what have traditionally been volunteer-run sport organizations (Dowling et al., 2014). It is apparent, then, that there has been considerable scholarly focus on the professionalization of sport organizations (e.g., Auld & Godbey, 1998; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis et al., 1992; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; O’Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Kikulis, Slack & Hinings, 1992; Thibault et al., 1991) but comparatively limited research that has addressed the broader issues relating to the professionalization of sport management as an academic discipline; or what Dowling et al. (2014) referred to as occupational professionalization i.e., the transformation of occupations into professions. To further clarify the scope of this paper, the terms profession and occupation are adopted interchangeably throughout, however, the usage of the term profession herein generally refers to the generally agreed upon ideal-type professions of medicine and law. The term occupation is used to refer to all other organized activities that have not achieved professional status. Furthermore, by sport management field this article refers to both sport management academics and practitioners, however, given the author’s own background, interests, and the likely readership many of the examples drawn upon refer to the occupation of sport management academia.

The discussion surrounding the occupational professionalization of sport management as a discipline has traditionally been the responsibility of key addresses and editorials (e.g., the North American Society for Sport Management’s Zeigler Award Lecture), special issues (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility and Sport – *Journal of Sport Management (JSM)*; Corruption in Sport – *European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ)*; and Contemporary Qualitative Research Methods in Sport Management – *Sport Management Review(SMR)*) and often key individuals (e.g., Earle Ziegler, Brenda Pitts, Trevor Slack). Collectively, the above mechanisms have led to what can be described as a ‘top-down’ approach to shaping the direction of sport management. Consequently, it can be argued that there has been little scholarly attention or academic debate devoted to what can be regarded as central issues surrounding the development of the field – namely whether sport management can be defined as a profession and what (if anything) needs to be done in order for it to become a recognized profession. In light of this recognition, the purpose of this article is to critically reflect upon the characteristics of sport management as a discipline to produce a scholarly informed account of the extent to which the field can be viewed as a profession. To this end, the paper contributes to the sport management literature by examining further the notion of occupational professionalization (Dowling et al., 2014) by elucidating the complexities of the professionalization process and identifying the characteristics of a profession and the extent to which sport management exhibits these attributes. In doing so, this article seeks to generate further academic debate and discussion surrounding the evolution of the field.

The paper is organized as follows: The first half of the paper discusses Abbott’s (1988) general theory of professions and how it may help elucidate the complexities of the ongoing process of professionalization (i.e. the process of becoming a profession) surrounding the field of sport management. The latter half of the paper then turns to the characteristics of occupational professionalization and examines the extent to which sport management is a professionalized occupation. The paper concludes by addressing the implications of these findings for the sport management literature and the future direction of the field.

**Systems of professions**

The notion of a profession originates from its Latin entomological roots of *profiteri* meaning to declare publically. In this sense, professions, much like professors, can be viewed as literally professing their skill and expertize in a particular trade or activity. The development of new professions has enabled society to enhance its capacity for work and has occurred in response to a change in societal needs (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933). One of the most influential accounts of how and why professions evolve is Andrew Abbott’s (1988) general theory of professions. Abbott’s (1988) account built upon and complemented previous theorizing of the professions by emphasising the importance of control of knowledge, skills and work tasks. For Abbott (1988), professions exist in order to solve human problems through expert service and emerge from competing jurisdictional claims over which organized groups vie for domination in order to solve human problems. In contrast to earlier occupational sociologists (e.g., Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Vollmer & Mills, 1966) who assumed that professions are stable and enduring entities, Abbott argued that professions are dynamic, competitive, and constantly evolving systems that are interrelated with other professions. This ecological perspective of the professions emphasizes the importance of understanding occupations in relation to other organized groups and their broader environment. Hence, in order to understand the nature of professions, ‘we must examine the tasks of professions, the groups that carry them out, and the changing links that bind one to the other’ (Abbott, 1988, p. 35).

Central to Abbott’s (1988) theory is the notion of jurisdictional claims – defined as the ‘the link between a profession and its work’ (Abbott, 1988, p. 20). According to Abbott, professions develop and change as a result of jurisdiction contests surrounding societal problems. These contests over work often take place over a long time and at different levels (workplace, public opinion and legal). For a claim to be successful, an organized group must be able to classify a problem (diagnosis); reason about it (inference); and to take action on it (treatment) (Abbott, 1988). Even once these types of work have been carried out, organized groups still need to demonstrate measureable success in alleviating the problem in order to be legitimated by the public within that specific area of work. According to Abbott (1988), all professions are vulnerable to other professions claiming jurisdiction over problems, even those considered core to a professions’ work. The ultimate intention for occupations is to create a legally enforced monopoly over a domain of work (e.g., doctors and the 1858 Medical Act) which makes competing claims over a specific area of work from other organized groups much more difficult and therefore less vulnerable to future jurisdictional claims.

In considering Abbott’s (1988) general theory of professions in relation to sport management, if ‘the tasks of professions are human problems amendable to expert service’ (p. 35) and professions exist by taking over each others tasks, then it is appropriate to reflect upon what societal problem(s) does the professional expert service that sport management seek to alleviate and what tasks has sport management taken and from whom that has led to the growth of the profession over the past 50 years? A partial answer to this question may be found in introductory sport management textbooks (e.g., Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011; Beech & Chadwick, 2013; Pedersen & Thibault, 2014; Hylton, 2013; Hoye, Smith, Nicolson, & Stewart, 2015) and selected journal articles (e.g., Costa, 2005; Stewart & Smith, 1999; 2010) that often serve to outline the historical foundations of sport management and sketch the jurisdictional boundaries (or contours) of sport management as a discipline. Stewart and Smith (2010), for example, identify a number of unique distinct features of sport compared to other business enterprises including: intense emotional relationship between clients (fans) and product (sport), on going tensions between on-field success and profitability, importance of balanced competition, differences in ensuring quality, the frequent need for collaboration between competitors, the desire of members and fans to publically display their affiliations, and the difficulty in meeting sharp demand. In Abbott’s (1988) terms, these statements by sport management scholars can be viewed as jurisdictional claims over sport-specific managerial tasks through an academic knowledge base (discussed further below).

A common thread across the introductory remarks of sport management textbooks is the claim that the field has emerged, in part, due to the growing complexities of co-ordinating and managing sport. In this regard, the establishment of sport management as an occupation can be viewed as a natural evolution of the nineteenth century scientific age of enlightenment and a product of an increasingly rationalized society that has necessitated an increasingly specialized (i.e. managerial) workforce (Weber, 1968; see also Ritzer, 1977). This notion of an increasingly rationalized and specialized workforce has also been a common theme throughout a number of discussions within the sport management literature. Consider, for example, the commonalities between Lisa Kikulis, Trevor Slack and Bob Hining’s (1992) typology of change within sport organizations from the kitchen table to the executive office or Mick Green and Barrie Houlihan’s (2005) documentation of the development of elite sport systems from what they described as unsystematic, ad hoc cottage industries to state driven medal factories that adopt highly sophisticated and systematic approaches to producing international sporting success[[1]](#footnote-1). In both cases, these scholars have recognized broader societal changes within sport as a result of increasingly rationalized western societies (Weber, 1968) that, in turn, have led to the increasing occupational professionalization of sport management-related activities.

Identifying which group (or groups) are responsible for carrying out sport management related activities is a much more difficult task. This is largely due to the lack of definitional agreement amongst academics and practitioners regarding what constitutes sport management. Pitts (2001), for example, argues that there is no agreement amongst sport management scholars regarding how sport management is defined and how such a definition is applied. Pitts (2001) also identifies the changing nature of the definition of sport management, which by the turn of the century had expanded and grown beyond athletics administration. The distinction between sport management and sport development is also reflective of fundamental differences in viewpoints regarding the nature and purpose of sport management/development practitioners (Hoye et al., 2014; Houlihan, 2013; Hylton, 2013; Pitts, 2001). Although the terms sport management and sport development are often used interchangeably, they seem to refer to slightly different activities and outcomes. According to Hylton’s (2013) process-orientated definition, any group that engages in sport development-type work – defined as ‘processes, policies and practices that form an integral feature of the work involved in providing sporting opportunities’ (p. 1) can be viewed as doing sport management/development. This viewpoint is problematic as it would suggest that all manner of sport-related groups: sport development officers, physical education teachers, coaches, facility managers, youth workers, health specialists, personal trainers, and ‘many more professionals in other sectors who could legitimately lay claim to development activity’ (Hylton, 2013, p. 3) are therefore sport managers. Houlihan (2013) elaborates further on this viewpoint by arguing that sport management/development is highly contested in terms of objectives (e.g., sport for all to sport for sport sake), practices (e.g., deliberate practice to recreation and fun) and practitioners (coaches to missionaries) (see also Collins, 2009). Many scholars have also indicated the key role that government plays in defining and shaping sport management/development objectives (Bloyce & Green, 2009; Collins, 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2013). Sport Development Officers often accept the legitimacy of political involvement and do not view themselves as professionals despite claiming specific knowledge and expertise (Bloyce & Green, 2009).

Two interrelated themes can be drawn from scholars’ recent attempts to define sport management/development within the literature – or in Abbott’s (1988) terms, from scholar’s attempts to theorize and distinguish sport management work from other organized groups. First, many sport scholars have pointed towards the importance of the task or work as a key defining feature of the field; lending further support for Abbott’s (1988) emphasis on societal tasks as important and defining features of occupations. Apparent from the blurred and contested distinctions between sport management and development, there are fundamental differences in how sport management/development academics and practitioners understand their own practice and the nature of their own work. Second, the boundaries surrounding the task of sport managers and the occupational field of sport management remain blurred, undefined, and contested. In Abbott’s (1988) terms, this may suggest that sport management to date has not been entirely successful in its attempts at jurisdictional claim over the business and management of sport. To explore these general themes in more detail it is worth considering the characteristics that define a profession. It is to these characteristics and how they can be applied to better understand the evolution and current state of sport management that we now turn.

**The characteristics of sport management: a profession?**

In drawing upon Abbotts (1988) broader theory of professions as interdependent and competitive system of jurisdictional claims, it is now possible to begin to discuss more precisely the characteristics of sport management as an occupation. This section is primarily informed by Abbotts (1988) general theory of the professions and structuralist (or trait) accounts of professionalization (e.g., Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Greenwood, 1966; Goode, 1957; Vollmer & Mills, 1966) which has attempted to identify common attributes or characteristics associated with the development of occupations. The characteristics of a profession identified within the structuralist literature include: exclusivity (Freidson, 1970; Greenwood, 1957; Larson, 1977), code of ethics (Vollmer & Mills, 1966), specialized training (i.e., education) and skills (Abbott, 1988, 1991; Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Denzin & Mettlin, 1968), complexity (Abbott, 1991), gaining specific credentials (Taylor & Garratt, 2010), and establishing professional client-relationships (Abbott, 1988, 1991). The discussion below primarily draws upon Abbott’s (1988) general theory of professions as a useful conception and Greenwood’s (1957) five attributes or features (systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes, and a professional culture) as a structuring device in order to begin to assess the extent to which sport management is a professionalized occupation. It is important and necessary at this conjuncture to acknowledge that although much of this literature is relatively dated, many of these ideas remain relevant to understanding contemporary developments within the field of sport management. Furthermore, although Greenwood’s (1957) five attributes are evidently not exhaustive, they provide a useful starting point in which to discuss the characteristics of professions. Finally, it is also worth noting that the ordering of the attributes below is by no means reflective of their relative importance, but rather they are organized in a logical sequence for structuring purposes.

1. **Systematic theory (body of knowledge)**

According to Greenwood (1957), the first characteristic of a profession is the establishment of a systematic body of knowledge. This body of theory ‘is a system of abstract propositions that describe in general terms the classes of phenomena comprising the profession’s focus of interest’ (Greenwood, 1957, p. 11) and should not be confused with skill. Greenwood (1957) suggests that to focus on skill as a distinguishing feature of non-professions and profession is misleading as some non-professions require a higher order degree of skills than professions; consider, for example, the substantial skill and craftsmanship of a mason or a carpenter. The important distinction between professions and non-professions, for Greenwood (1957), is where such skills are drawn from and established. Professions generate their skill from an internally consistent knowledge base or a body of theory.

Like most occupations, sport management’s systematic body of knowledge has primarily emerged from its academic underpinning that has attempted to establish a theoretical knowledge base to inform sport management practice. Sport management has a burgeoning knowledge base that has expanded considerably over the past 30 years. The number of journals that directly and indirectly service sport management has increased considerably (Shilbury & Rentschler, 2007). The first sport management journal (*Journal of Sport Management*) was established in 1987. As of 2015, The North American Association for Sport Management (NASSM) formally recognized 97 journals that serve the community of sport management scholarship (NASSM, 2015). Of particular note has been the growth of specialist sport management related journals in recent years*: Sport Management Education Journal* (est. 2007), *Journal of Applied Sport Management* (est. 2009), *Case Studies in Sport Management* (est. 2012), *Journal of Global Sport Management* (est. 2016). These journals have served as an important mechanism for establishing a sport management knowledge base more generally but have also enabled its members to further delineate the jurisdictional boundaries of the field, develop stronger links between academics and practitioners, and establish field-specific pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. These points are often explicitly acknowledged within the aims of the journals themselves. For example, the Sport Management Education Journal (SMEJ) ‘promotes advancement of the *body of knowledge* in pedagogy as it relates to sport management education and disseminates knowledge about sport management courses, curricula, and teaching’ (SMEJ, n.d: emphasis added). Similarly, the Journal of Applied Sport Management (JASM) ‘aims to be the premier written communication *bridge between scholars and practitioners* in respect to applied sport management research’ (JASM, n.d.: emphasis added).

The continued proliferation of sport management’s knowledge base has also filtered down to the manner in which undergraduate degree programmes are designed and structured. Greenwood (1957) distinguishes professions from occupations through the orientation of members through educational and academic settings. He contrasts professional schools (typically universities) to trade schools, whereby the former requires more theoretical rather than operational knowledge (e.g., internal combustion (engineer) vs. repairing a car (mechanic). Although the distinction between academic and vocational delivery has blurred considerably since Greenwood’s time, the need for theoretical knowledge still lends itself to formal academic settings whereas operational knowledge is primarily delivered through vocational settings. For Greenwood (1957), then, formalized education with associated programmes and faculty who construct theory through systemic research are the hallmark of a profession.

The expansion of sport management’s knowledge based has been partly facilitated by the increasing number of sport management undergraduate university degree programmes, which may indicate an occupation on the move towards becoming a profession. Sport management degrees have historically emerged from Physical Education programmes which in turn split from their educational foundations to become an area of inquiry in its own right (Macintosh & Whitson, 1989) – see section on professional authority below for further elaboration on this point. The number of undergraduate sports management programs within the United States has grown from just three in 1980 to 300 by 2010 (Forbes, 2014; see also Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008).

What can be drawn from the above discussion is that the growth of sport management-type journal outlets and academic programmes has in turn facilitated the growth of the body of knowledge surrounding sport management, however, sport management still remains an emergent field in terms of establishing an *internally consistent* knowledge base. In support of this statement and to qualify the above discussion regarding the growth of sport management in recent years; first, although the field has an emerging knowledge base, much of it still relies heavily upon applying theory from broader disciplines in order to examine sport related phenomenon. It is for this reason that sport management is often viewed as the ‘poor relation’ to the broader, more established academic disciplines such as management and medicine (Chelladurai, 1992; Mahony, 2008; Zeigler, 2007). This is, in part, due to the already established legitimacy and credibility of these broader disciplines compared to the fledgling – or *yearling* as Pitts (2001) phrased it – sport management discipline, but also due to the broader disciplines’ primary interest in theoretical and conceptual development rather than the research context per se. Sport management, in contrast, has emerged from an applied tradition, more interested in explaining the research/empirical context (i.e. sport) with theoretical development often considered a secondary concern. In other words, theory is often the dependent variable and research context the independent variable for broader managerial disciplines whereas research context of sport is often the dependent variable and theory the independent variable for sport scholars. It is for this reason that many leading scholars have continued to call for a more subject specific theory to underpin sport management (e.g., Chelladurai, 1992; Pitts, 2001; Mahony, 2008; Zeigler, 2007). As Greenwood (1957) notes, ‘the importance of theory precipitates a form of activity not normally encountered in a nonprofessional occupation, viz., theory construction via systematic research. The systematic development of sport-specific theory is therefore an important precursor for sport management to become an established profession.

Second, it is also important to consider the relative size of sport management in relation to other academic fields. In terms of developing an internally consistent body of knowledge at least, size does matter. One indicator of relative size of fields are impact factors which measure journal citation frequencies. The top sport management have only recently obtained recognized impact factors and are modest (ESMQ – 1.8, JSM – 1.2; SMR – 2.1; InCites, 2017) when compared to larger disciplines such as management and health. It should be acknowledged, however, that recent data indicates many of the journals that serve sport management are on the rise; suggesting that although the field is small, it is growing (InCites, 2017). Chelladurai (1992) and Mahony (2008), amongst others, attribute size as a barrier to developing an internal, consistent body of knowledge. In discussing the expansion of the field, Chelladurai (1992) argues, ‘we have our tentacles everywhere…we do not have the workforce to specialize in the subareas of our field…we spread ourselves too thin to be able to specialize in any one aspect and create a unique body of knowledge in that specialization’ (p. 216). Mahony (2008) put this a little more succinctly, ‘there simply are not enough of us’ (p. 4). He goes on to discuss the necessity to develop clear research agendas, recruit more researchers, and develop collaborative links in order to overcome this capacity issue.

Third, and despite the growth of sport management programmes, the number of faculty and post-graduate opportunities still remain limited. Many scholars have noted the issues of faculty member shortages (Mahony, 2008, Pitts, 2001). This again, can be explained, in part, due to the internal struggles of justifying sport management with human sciences in general but also due to the limited number of faculty positions available within the field. Many of the scholars that do comprise the sport management field operate from other faculties and teach on other related-degree programmes (e.g., physical education and coaching). Furthermore, there still remains a limited number of post-graduate opportunities for those interested in pursuing Ph.D’s or post-docs in sport management research. In 2010, despite there being over 300 undergraduate sport management degrees in the US, only 25 to 35 (1 in 10) had graduate programs (Forbes, 2014). Quite whether this is a supply or demand issue remains open to debate. Pitt’s (2008) argues the former, ‘frankly, as a profession, we have done a poor job of encouraging our best and brightest undergraduate and graduate students to pursuit doctoral degrees’ (p. 3), but it could equally be explained by a lack of opportunities for those who wish to continue into research or most likely a combination of the two. Post-docs are still uncommon opportunities within the field and there is little to no expectation to completed one as a pre-requisite before obtaining an academic post. Research institutes also remain rare commodities within the field and if they do exist they are often short-lived and/or built around one or two world-leading scholars. It can be collectively argued, then, from the above discussion that sport management still has not achieved the critical mass necessary in terms of its workforce in order to develop an internally consistent body of knowledge.

1. **Professional authority**

According to Greenwood (1957), it is the extensive education that distinguishes the professional from the lay mans ignorance and forms the basis of their professional authority. For Greenwood (1957), the difference between a non-profession and a profession is that the former (non-professions) refers to customers who are able to appropriately appraise the professional service they use whereas professions often refer to clients we it is assumed that the professional based on their specialist subject domain knowledge, knows what is best for the client as they have the necessary theoretical knowledge. Unlike customers, clients are unlikely to question to calibre of the information/service provided (Greenwood, 1957). It is for this reason that people provide feedback on their hospitality or restaurant service but often do not feel so forthcoming to comment on the efficacy of a doctor or an architect for example. It is this assumption of authority based upon extensive specialized training that derives professional authority. It is also from this assumed authority that a client derives a sense of security (‘trust me i’m a doctor’).

Specialized training typically at universities therefore serves a dual role of establishing an internally consistent body of knowledge to further the profession but also acts as conduits for the establishing professional authority externally. Despite the growth in sport management undergraduates and graduate degrees, being employed within the sport management occupation does not require pre-requisite training to understand the theory of the profession. In other words, it is still not a requirement to study at a university in order to operate as a sport management (or related) practitioner. As Houlihan (2013) notes, ‘almost all countries entry to the occupations associated with sports development, such as a sport development officer and coach, is very open. Where licensing does exist it tends to be organized and enforced by the state rather than a professional body (Houlihan, 2013, p. 2). It is interesting to speculate as to why sport management continues to remain open in terms of its membership. Perhaps this due to a lack of internally consistent body of knowledge which has meant that specialized training and a grasp of basic sport management knowledge is not a prerequisite for employment within the field. It could equally be explained by the absence of a single-unified professional association (see below) or the lack of human and financial resourcing and the continued reliance upon volunteers that has limited the ability of sport organizations to require formal qualifications. A fourth explanation, could be that much of sport management’s workforce has been traditionally (and arguably still is) to a greater or lesser extent subsumed within physical education, business, public services (e.g., civil and youth services), and charities. Macintosh and Whitson’s (1989) account of how the specialized professions of sport management and sport science have evolved from physical education is instructive here. The authors argue that universities adopted the discourses of science and management in order to legitimize the occupation internally (as a distinct faculty from education) and externally (government and funding agencies). The consequence of this shift, according to Macintosh and Whitson, has been an increasing emphasis on athletic performance and technocratic over traditional humanistic outcomes often associated with physical education. What can be drawn from Macintosh and Whitson’s discussion is the importance of language in defining professions – specifically the role of the profession and the nature of its expertise. The establishment of the label sport management, then, is a linguistic construction used to delineate the job of professionals (i.e. what they know) and the nature of sport management graduate expertise (i.e. what is expected of them). Macintosh and Whitson (1989) also highlight the role and importance of the governments in legitimizing the direction of the field internally and shaping public interest surrounding the management and administration of sport externally. In sum, although sport management has yet to derive exclusive profession authority, it is evident from Macintosh and Whitson’s accounts, that the field has evolved considerably in terms of its overall mission in order to stay relevant to the general public.

1. **Community sanctions**

The third characteristic of a profession is the establishment of community sanctions through professional associations. Every profession attempts to persuade the community to enable it to sanction its authority by conferring upon it the necessary powers to control membership over the right to work and practice within jurisdictional domains (Abbott, 1988; Vollmer & Mills, 1966). This usually occurs through the establishment of professional associations which play and important role overseeing and further defining occupations. As some scholars (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Greenwood, 1957) have suggested, there is a natural tendency when an occupation emerges for its members to attempt to create professional associations and quite often these attempts are challenging and unsuccessful. According to Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933), the creation of professional associations has three major functions: (i) they improve the quality of service, (ii) enforce rules and regulations and behavioral conduct, and (iii) raise the status and prestige of the occupation. Improvements in quality of service are usually achieved through the establishment of entry qualifications needed to become a member of the profession (e.g., the bar examination) and further enhancement of the specialized body of knowledge (as discussed above). The professional association also primarily acts as an enforcer of rules and regulations through the sanctioning of its membership. In medicine and law, for example, professional associations have the right to revoke licenses and disbar individuals from practicing should malpractice occur. Professional associations, by definition, are exclusionary entities. They ‘can be said to be exclusive only in the sense that they exclude the unqualified’ (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933, p. 5). The primary role of a professional association is therefore to act as important gatekeeper in defining who is in and out of the profession. As a by-product of improving quality and regulating membership, professional associations are help raise the status and prestige of a profession; in particular they promote the activities of and provide a unified voice for its membership.

The sport management field is characterized by its plurality of professional associations (e.g., the North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM), the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand (SMAANZ), and the World Association for Sport Management (WASM)) and professional accreditation bodies (e.g., the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) and the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA)). NASSM, for example, held its first conference in December 1985 with the aim ‘to promote, stimulate, and encourage study, research, scholarly writing, and professional development in the area of sport management’ (NASSM, n.d.). The North American sport management community is also served by the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA), that provides discipline-specific professional accreditation. Officially launched in 2008, COSMA was a joint initiative between the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and the North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM) and currently accredits 48 programmes within the US.

Yet despite the establishment of these professional associations and accreditation bodies, there still remains much disagreement and debate amongst sport management professionals and academics about the role, function and even value of these entities within field. Furthermore, although these associations are often membership based, their membership is not exclusive. The plurality of professional associations, in part, reflects the separation of sport management work based upon geographical region (i.e. North America, Europe, Oceania), but also their embodiment of different understandings of what constitutes sport management and therefore the type of work and activities that define the occupation. What is clear is that there are very different traditions of sport management scholarship and practice that have emerged in different cultural contexts. As an anecdotal example, North American conferences (and therefore associations) tend to view collegiate and professional sport as the domain of sport management as whereas European sport management conferences tend to adopt a much broader definition of sport management. In discussing the development of profession associations within occupations, Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933: 5) argue that there is a tendency

…towards the dominance of a single professional association in each profession. The tendency for single associations with a monopoly, much in the same manner in which international and national governing organizations have a monopoly over the jurisdiction of specific sports, enables the establishment of a unified set of rules and regulations that oversee a profession. Some professions have never been troubled by the rivalry of associations. Where rivalry formerly existed, it is generally found either that one association has grown to overshadow all the others, or that amalgamation has taken place.

The later has occurred within the UK, for example, with the launch of Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) in 2011. CIMSPA is the professional development body for the UK sport and physical activity sector, with a vision ‘*to develop a vibrant, UK wide sport and physical activity sector, led by professionals providing advocacy and leadership and working in partnership with its stakeholders to help ensure the highest standards of service delivery*’ (CIMSPA, n.d.). CIMSPA was an amalgamation of a bewildering array of organizational entities including: The Institute of Leisure and Amenities Management (ILAM), the National Association for Sports Development (NASD), the Institute for Sport, Parks and Leisure (ISPAL) and the Institute of Sport and Recreation Management (ISRM). These organizations differed considerably in terms of overall aims, size and scope, and how they understood and defined the boundaries of the sport and leisure industry. The eventual amalgamation of these organizations was primarily, although not exclusively, driven by governmental pressure to have a single unified body for the sector. CIMSPA was awarded royal charter status by the Privy Council in January 2012 (CIMSPA, n.d.). Generally speaking, the challenge that lies ahead for CIMPSA is to be able to clearly define and meet the needs of its membership, which by definition, requires it to be exclusionary regarding who is in and out of the profession and at the same time continue to stay relevant to its broad and diverse membership based in a dynamic and constantly evolving area of work. Similar challenges have evidently occurred within North America; Pitts (2001), for example, questioned the role of NASSM in serving its members in asking ‘Can NASSM continue to be the ‘everything’ association and conference for all sport management content areas as those specializations develop?’ (p. 5). Many specialized conferences (sport marketing, sport economics, elite sport policy etc.) have emerged since Pitts remarks. These specialized conferences have served an important role and function is developing further the fields’ depth of knowledge base in these specific areas. The field has yet to develop these further into more specific professional associations (e.g., professional association of sport marketing) – although this may be possible in the future. In sum, sport management, then, continues to be characterized by a plurality of professional associations, all of which embody slightly different definitions of sport management. Furthermore, although many of these associations have a discernable membership base, their membership remains loosely and broadly defined and largely unregulated.

1. **Regulative code of ethics**

In addition to the above, one of the key roles of professional associations is to establish an agreed code of ethics which is adhered to by its member with rules and regulations that determine behavior. As Greenwood (1957) notes, ‘professions have a built-in regulative code which compels ethical behavior on the part of its members’ (p. 14). Ethical codes can be formal (written) or informal (accepted practice). The most well-known examples of which is the Hippocratic Oath, an ancient code that new physicians and trainee-doctors must swear upon entering the profession. Although the code has been adapted over time, the central message of ‘do no harm’ still remains central to the oath. As codes are often agreements between members and clients they are often publically known as they enable confidence in the service provided.

Sport management does not have an overarching code of practice or Hippocratic Oath equivalent. It is a rather amusing thought to consider what a sport management Hippocratic Oath might look like. The closest regulative codes within the field would be the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) Olympic Charter which provides a moral and ethical code of conduct for organizations and individuals within the Olympic Movement. The Olympic Charter is unique within sport in the sense that its message often extends beyond the confines of sporting competition and embodies a way of life (Olympism), promoting the values of peace, tolerance, participation, and democracy. Athletes, coaches, and officials also have to swear the Olympic Oath during the opening ceremony of an Olympic Games. There are also more specific, regulatory codes that act as *defacto* codes of practice within the field, such as the UKSport’s ‘A Code for Sports Governance’ (UKSport, 2017) which sets out standards of good governance for publically funded sport organizations within the United Kingdom. It is a professions’ code of practice that usually outlines some higher order purpose and universalism/neutrality whereby people must be treated the same regardless of background (Greenwood, 1957). It is this higher order principle that is adhered to when mass murderers are provided the same medical care and treatment than any other citizen within society. Greenwood (1957) refers to this decoupling or neutrality as ‘disinterestedness’ in that the member must disassociate themselves from the client in order to achieve a higher order purpose. It is this higher order purpose that also means that any advancements in technology, such as a new procedure or technique for example, is immediately shared with colleagues within the field. It is for this reason that client competition is not common place in proto- typical professions. In the field of medicine, for example, there is a complex practice of referral and consultation (thus professional members are often interdependent on each other in contrast to non-professions who often compete for customers). Again, many of these features are notably absent from the sport management profession.

1. **Professional culture**

The fifth and final characteristic of a profession identified by Greenwood (1957) is the establishment of a professional culture. This is the most difficult of Greenwood’s characteristics in terms of quantifying as an occupations membership often constructs and embodies this meaning. Professional cultures operate through a network of formal and informal groups at three levels: (i) professional organizations (where the professional and client meet); (ii) talent – educational training for new members) and (iii) interest groups (professional associations that promote the above) (Greenwood, 1957). To adopt a sporting related analogy to illustrate Greenwood’s remarks, professional culture operates at (i) professional clubs/stadiums (organizations); (ii) training academies (talent/training) (iii) players association (interest groups). It is the interaction of these formal and informal groups that comprises the professional culture. Greenwood argues that professional culture is made up of values, norms and symbols. Values embody the basic fundamental beliefs of members. These are often sacred and unchangeable due to the history of the profession. Norms include role definitions, behaviors for seeking admittance, general conduct and the ‘proper way’ of doing things. Symbols are meaning-laden items, insignia, emblems and distinctive dress, history folklore, heroes and villains, stereotypes.

Sport management, organizations and individuals are therefore responsible for establishing a professional culture. Within sport management academia specifically, conferences and associated awards are important carriers of professional culture i.e. they are both a vehicle for and laden with inherent values, norms and symbols which provide meaning to what it means to be a student of sport management. The establishment of professional culture is also closely linked to the concept of a career. More accurately, the outcome of professional culture is that members often adopt a careerist approach to work. The concept of a career also tends to be employed in professions. It is rare to speak of a career in bricklaying for example. Has the field reached a point whereby we can speak of career in sport management? What does career of a sport manager look like? The adoption of a career is a life calling whereas vocational work is often not viewed as a means to an end for professionals.

**Concluding thoughts – The quasi-profession of sport management**

In drawing upon the broader sociology of professions literature, this article has explored what it means to be professionalized occupation and the extent can sport management can be characterized as a profession. What can be drawn from Abbott’s (1988) theory of the professions generally and Greenwood’s (1957) characteristics of a profession specifically is a greater understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the professionalization process and the dynamic, constantly evolving, interdependent and competitive system of jurisdictional claims in which sport management operates. The above discussion of the characteristics of a profession, suggest – perhaps generously – that there are early signs of a burgeoning profession of sport management that scholars such as Abbott (1988) and Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) might recognize. In the same vain, it is also apparent from the above discussion that much more needs to be done before sport management can be characterized as a profession. In this regard, the above discussion surrounding the current state of sport management concurs with the comments made by Chelladurai’s (1992) nearly 20 years ago that the discipline of sport management does not (yet) contain many of the necessary features of a profession and therefore ‘neither our field nor the allied fields are full professions’ (Chelladurai, 1992, p. 217). It is in this sense that I would refer to sport management as a quasi or incomplete profession (Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985) with progress, in occupational jurisdictional and characteristic terms, being limited.

All is not lost however. As Abbott’s (1988) general theory suggests, all professions are constantly competing for survival attempting claim or maintain jurisdictional claims to work. Hence, all occupations that strive for professional status will always face difficulty in establishing itself as a legitimate occupation. It is apparent from sociological and management literature surrounding professions (and Abbott and Greenwood specifically), then, that the experiences of those within sport management are not unique amongst occupations. As Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) state, ‘every profession in its early days has to fight for a proper recognition of its status. Newcomers among the professions are looked down upon by the established professions’ (p. 7). Nonetheless, the discussion of the structural/trait sociology of professions literature and characteristics of professions provides an insight into what is required to become a profession and thus reveals the difficulties and challenge that lie ahead for the sport management field. More specifically, Abbott's (1988) general theory sensitizes the reader to the dynamic, constantly evolving occupational environment of jurisdictional claims in which sport management operates and the discussion of Greenwood's (1957) characteristics highlights that there is much more work needed (i.e. the production of an internally consistent body of knowledge, the establishment of a single, unified professional association with an exclusive membership base, and an agreed professional code of ethics and culture etc.) before sport management becomes a recognized profession. Linked to the above, another contribution of this research is that it builds upon and develops further the Dowling et al's (2014) notion of occupational professional which currently remains under researched within the sport management domain. More scholarly informed, empirically-driven research is needed to further understand the evolution of sport management as an occupation. For example, more studies are needed investigate further development of graduate and undergraduate sport management programs and to document the evolution and establishment of professional associations and accreditation bodies. More studies are also needed to understand how sport management academics and practitioners understand their own role and responsibilities; this may help in further defining the boundaries of the field.

In regards to study limitations and potential directions for future research, the above discussion has primarily drawn upon structuralist accounts of occupations and professions. More recent occupational sociology has focused on processual, power and institutional approaches to studying professions that may provide further insights into the professionalization of sport management (e.g., Adams, 2015; Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013). Furthermore, there are still many questions relating to the professionalization of sport management that remain unanswered empirically and conceptually, for example: what are the causes and consequences of professionalization as a field? And to what extent should the field of sport management strive to be professionalized? In relation to the former, future research could examine, for example, the forms, causes and consequences of the professionalization of the sport management field – these discussions have started to gain traction in organizational professionalization research (Siegfried, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015) but remain limited in the occupational professionalization.

The discussion of the consequences of professionalization unearths perhaps even more difficult questions regarding the extent to which sport management should strive to be professionalized. The assumption made by structuralist accounts of the profession (and indeed this article) is that all occupations do and should strive for professional status. Issues such as the extent to which occupations should strive to be professionalized and whether all groups aim to be professionalized remain unresolved but central to the broader sociology of professions literature. It is apparent that sport management's origins and genealogy lies within physical education domain which in-turn emerged and from education (Whitson & Macintosh, 1989; Zeigler, 2007). What is clear from Abbott’s (1988) account of professions, at least, is that sport management will continue to fight over its jurisdictional claims. As a result of this continued conflict over work, it is perhaps necessary once again to reflect upon Whitson and Macintosh’s (1990) remarks regarding the Scientization of Physical Education and Earle Zeigler’s (2011) address highlighting the importance of PE and dance to the origins of sport management. These academics have questioned whether the educational and humanistic principles on which sport management has been founded have been marginalized at the expense of the discourse of athletic performance. Revisiting these issues many shed further light on the nature, breath and evolution of sport management as a profession.

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1. The growth of elite sport systems can also be traced back to the increasing success of (drug-fuelled) systems and performance of East European Communist countries and cold war politics generally (Green & Houlihan, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)