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‘European-ness’ in social responsibility and sport management research: anchors and avenues

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ABSTRACT

Research question: The contribution frames the special issue ‘Social responsibility and the European sport context’. It investigates and aims to inspire the discussion around what constitutes a European approach in social responsibility and sport management research focussing on how the special historical and persisting features of the European (sport) context impact on knowledge creation and diffusion.

Research methods: The article reflects on the contributions included in the special issue; is based on reviewing relevant management literature; and is guided by the authors’ rich observations derived from their deep involvement in the international space of social responsibility in and through sport, spanning research and practice.

Results and findings: Four anchors are suggested and explored as promising avenues to constitute ‘European-ness’ in social responsibility and sport management research. In short, these are investigations driven by empirical data; a comparative approach; comprehensive literature review; and theoretical/conceptual development. It is argued that the theory anchor is the most critical and challenging, but not fully developed yet.

Implications: The article contributes a critical view on the potential for American/English hegemony in sport management scholarly activity, also impacting on one of its popular and growing sub-fields: social responsibility. Enhanced intellectual fertility and diversity of perspectives will produce more accurate understandings of the role and conceptualisation of social responsibility in European sport, impacting on both theoretical richness and relevance for contextually-embedded sport organisations.

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CSR; social responsibility; sport management; European-ness; contextual sensitivity

Mind the gap

At the origin of this special issue ‘Social responsibility and the European sport context’ stood the enlightened belief in and curiosity about Europe as a distinct geographic, cultural, political and intellectual space impacting on sport management scholarship and, in particular, one of its popular sub-fields: (corporate) social responsibility. This adds to an ongoing discussion within wider (European) management scholarship as summarised in the editorial to a *European Management Journal* virtual series ‘Reflections on Europe: Focusing on why a European approach matters’:

Missing however has been any discussion of what – if anything – constitutes a European approach in management scholarship. It has been noted that European management scholars are less successful in publishing theory papers ... This is surprising given that Europe has been the cradle of many of the generative intellectual traditions. (Siebert & Haenlein, 2015, p. 71)

The number of publications about social responsibility in sport has increased significantly over the years. For example, a systematic review from Walzel, Robertson, and Anagnostopoulous (2018) into professional team sport organisations suggests a growing number of articles in leading sport management journals with a peak in 2016. A more open search in *EBSCO/SPORTDiscus* using the search terms ‘social AND responsibility’ resulted in 1771 hits in peer-reviewed journals related to sports by end of November 2018. In the seven relevant sports management journals according to Shilbury’s (2011) rating, we identified 91 publications of which 74 are full-text articles. At the same time, the distribution of publications shows that only eight of the 74 identified publications (11%) appeared in *European Sport Management Quarterly*.

In our call-for-papers we argued that a large number of publications are inspired by, and derive from, a North American and Anglo-Saxon perspective which is prone to ignore the special features of the European context: different sport structures and cultures; different routes of professionalisation and commercialisation; the importance of amateur, public and not-for-profit sport organisations; the political, civic, policy and cultural environment; and more general, the plurality of Europe with its rich and diverse identities. This leads us to consider larger questions around hegemony in scholarship and science further below. Can reasoning, theorisation and managerial implications be appropriate and ambitious if ‘European-ness’ – or other ‘regional-ness’ for that matter – is overlooked in research either due to lack of awareness, interest or research skill?

Our observation derived from our deep involvement in the international academic space of social responsibility in and through sport, exemplified by hosting five consecutive special workshops at the European Sport Management Conference (2013–2017) and editing the special issue ‘Governance and CSR management in sport’ in *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society* in 2015 (Volume 15, Issue 2). In the review article (Breitbarth, Walzel, Anagnostopoulous, & Eekeren, 2015), we argue for the ‘relevance and impact of regional and cultural context’ as one of six key themes in order to progress understanding of and contribution to CSR and governance in sport, but also as inspirational grounds for management scholarship outside sport. Certainly, we were not blind to the suggestion that there may be pressures leading to convergence and isomorphism across institutional and regional contexts rather than continuing or growing differentiation.

Yet, the obliviousness of the special features of the European context (sport and beyond) is a missed opportunity because work on institutional framework conditions like Whitley’s (1992) investigation into European business systems, especially in combination with corporate social responsibility strongly suggests that dimensions such as socio-politics, finance, stakeholder systems, education and culture impact on organisational practices (Breitbarth, 2011; Fifka, Kühn, & Stiglbauer, 2018; Matten & Moon, 2008; Roome, 2005). Such practices, especially if easily mimicked across different contexts, resonate differently with consumers in certain countries as comparative research into consumer reactions towards sport club CSR activities across three European countries and the

US has shown (Mogridge, Breitbarth, & Walzel, 2014). Most critical is the notion that knowledge and scholarship are social phenomena (Meyer & Boxenbaum, 2010), which challenges some of the ways sport management approaches, designs and disseminates research, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, drives knowledge development and theorisation.

First, we revisit the main intentions and important scientific pressure points underlying the special issue proposition by drawing on ways to find and anchor ‘European-ness’ in our research. Second, we provide a short summary of the papers included in this special issue. Afterwards, third, we provide conclusions and point towards relevant, yet still undiscovered or barely touched research spaces. Last but certainly not least, we acknowledge all colleagues who significantly contributed to deliver this informative and inspirational special issue to the ESMQ readership.

Anchoring ‘European-ness’ in research

In the call-for-papers for this special issue, we sought contributions explicitly concerned with a European perspective – meaning that they needed a European ‘anchor’. Mainly, we suggested the following four promising avenues:

On a contextual and empirical level, research places sport-specific or directly sport-related institutions/actors/issues in the centre that originate from or mainly operate out of Europe.

One rationale behind this suggested ‘anchor’ is that especially empirical work reported to local or national sports and policy organisations is generally less likely to enter publications in English language considering that the European Union alone acknowledges 24 ‘official and working’ languages for its 28 member countries. The preference of English as language for scientific publications is obvious, especially high-quality papers (King, 2004), and the scientific publishing industry has grown accordingly. Native English speakers are privileged by this system both in terms of precision and speed of knowledge dissemination, and effects on meaning may cause disruption for non-native speakers in the process of translating research results and intellectual reasoning (Meneghini & Packer, 2007; Stiftel & Mukhopadhyay, 2007). Also, language comes with cultural and historical baggage: For example, translations of the English word ‘social’ in ‘social responsibility’ resonate differently in a variety of European languages.

Therefore, it may be of little surprise that management researchers bemoan the lack of culturally embedded CSR research and also industry-specific CSR studies (Beschoner & Hajduk, 2017). In their afore-mentioned review Walzel et al. (2018) find many world regions under- or non-represented, e.g. Scandinavian and Eastern European countries. This is unfortunate, at the least. In addition, the scientific publication tally appears to diverge from industry dynamics: an analysis of 499 CSR initiatives proposed by corporate actors within a large and long-standing European business network where 8% each came from Scandinavian and Eastern European countries (20% British Isles, 22% Mediterranean, 42% central continental Europe; Maon, Swaen, & Lindgreen, 2017). In the same research, the authors find significant differences between regions as to what CSR initiatives are concerned with, for example Scandinavian CSR approaches are generally more comprehensive and environmental aspects are more prevalent in Northern and continental European organisations.

Comparative research is also strongly encouraged, i.e. where theoretical lenses or contextual/empirical matters are systematically compared either within Europe or where institutions/issues from within Europe are compared to institutions/relevant matters from outside Europe.

There are different CSR traditions and agendas in most world regions – some of which we do not fully understand, for example, due to the limited number of publications in the English language from such non-Anglo environments. In particular, in the U.S. CSR is rather seen in the tradition of corporate philanthropy (Kelly, 2005). Also, from a political science perspective, the role of corporations in North America can be framed by corporate political activism (CPA) in contrast to the European corporate (or: political) social responsibility, including increasing involvement in multi-actor governance processes (Rasche, 2015). A more nuanced approach challenges many sport management studies which, for instance, frivolously use Carroll's (1999) popular 'CSR pyramid' as a frame or yardstick: on the one hand, his very widely-cited review article 'Corporate social responsibility: evolution of a definitional construct' (Carroll, 1999) is a fine review article; but, on the other hand, constructs an evolutionary perspective entirely on US-American authors and journals, a basis that needs to be carefully and critically judged for relevance and meaning elsewhere in the world.

The aim was to inspire and attract work that might possibly lead to clear carvings of distinct European features on whatever (meta-)level against framings, developments and practices elsewhere. Efforts to analyse CSR European-wide have been made in general management literature, exemplified by recent publications 'Public policies on CSR in Europe: themes, instruments, and regional differences' (Steurer, Martinuzzi, & Margula, 2012), 'One vision, different paths: an investigation of corporate social responsibility initiatives in Europe' (Maon et al., 2017), 'The future of CSR: selected findings from a Europe-wide Delphi study' (Kudlak, Szocs, Krumay, & Martinuzzi, 2018), and 'The critical state of corporate social responsibility in Europe' (Tench, Jones, & Sun, 2018).

Building on such work, we should be able to better understand 'European-ness' and learn more about discussions – if differences were found at all after thoughtful and systematic comparison. Intercontinental comparison of different CSR contexts in sport management remains rare in general, despite the fact that one of the most-cited articles on CSR and sport (i.e. Breitbarth & Harris, 2008), which was published at the very dawn of the topic entering sport management, embraces such a scope.

Recently conducted research into social responsibility – as part of good governance – among 70 national sport federations in eight European countries (Geraert, 2018) is another example that yields fascinating similarities and differences, which are partly explained by the specific national system in which the sports federations operate. The rich diversity of frameworks and identities in Europe, which accounts for about one quarter of sovereign countries worldwide, is a distinctive feature of our densely populated continent. Yet, the question raised by other management scholars remains: do perception and vision of a largely integrated Europe, for example due to institutional arrangements like the European Union and the same cultural heritage across many countries, lead us to overestimate differences to other continents and world regions against differences within Europe itself (Lammers, 1990; Wasti, Poell, & Cakar, 2008)? Obviously, scholars interested in comparative and contextual studies may or should pick-up this gauntlet thrown down to them.

Review papers focusing on or mainly including European aspects and current issues are welcomed as well as work that is somehow concerned with how the European (C)SR debate has been ‘exported’ through/within sport or impacted on developments elsewhere.

The socio-political consequences of Thatcher’s belief in the primacy of competition and a free market in the 1980s can be seen as the origin of modern CSR. With the Lisbon Agenda in 2000, the European Union (EU) sought to increase the competitiveness of its internal market through a strategy of sustainable development. Arguably, the EU was the most vibrant region to progress CSR as a policy vehicle (Diamantopoulou, 2005) driven by a stakeholder-oriented definition of the concept; to increase the sense of solidarity and cohesion (European Commission, 2006); and to shape an attractive ‘business case’ for CSR within an otherwise voluntary frame (Breitbarth, Schaltegger, & Mahon, 2018). However, CSR regulation in Europe is starting to move from a voluntary paradigm aiming at self-regulation and management tools towards mandatory measures as manifested in the EU directive on mandatory disclosure of non-financial and diversity information by large companies: ‘The path chosen is unique and differs substantially from the dominant CSR models of countries such as the UK ... Australia ... and the USA’ (Gatti, Vishwanath, Seele, & Cottier, 2018, n.p.n.).

Against such a rich backdrop one should be curious to trace the adaption and impact of the European understanding of (corporate) social responsibility by sport organisations and policies, including its outwards translation into other world regions, for example as part of internationalisation activities of professional European sport teams or following the fact that many powerful international federations reside in Europe.

Taking professional team sport organisations as an example, research into social responsibility is very much limited to Europe (46% of papers found) and North America (38%) (Walzel et al., 2018), thereby creating a two-fold problem: is the current state of knowledge mainly based on a few ‘Western societies’ useful or a barrier for reaching into new extended territory? And, drawing on Foucauldian thinking (1980), are journals and ‘experts’ as the main means of legitimating knowledge within the academic community (‘legitimation’ and power) willing and capable of appreciating ‘blue sky’ work? Adding to this thought, it might be worth reflecting on the fact that editorial boards in our discipline are very Anglo-dominated with more than 90% of editorial board members (including editor and associate editors) at the *Journal of Sport Management*; more than 80% at *Sport Management Review*; and more than 50% of the European Sport Management Quarterly editorial board (percentage would be higher if taking into account non-anglophone members’ alma mater) originating from four, arguably, culturally-similar countries: UK, USA, Canada, Australia.

On a theoretical and conceptual level, research embraces theories, models or ways of thinking specific to/originating from European perspectives/philosophies/movements (e.g. Scandinavian Institutionalism; social market economic thinking; critical management research, etc.)

Arguably, this last ‘anchor’ is the most important intellectual desire and challenge – that is manuscripts embracing theories, models or ways of thinking specific to or originating from European perspectives, philosophies and movements. Meyer and Boxenbaum (2010) took the 30th birthday of ‘Organization Studies’ as an occasion ‘to reflect on what ‘European-ness’ in organisation research means at times of globalisation where territory and geographic boundaries increasingly lose their relevance for scholarly identity’

(p. 737). They confirm the ‘great Atlantic divide’ and ‘that research building on ‘grand’ thinkers represents a central feature of European organizational scholarship and Organization Studies in particular’ (p. 737) as it focuses on ‘verstehen’ and meaning. On the other side of the shore, they find a strong emphasis on multi-theoretical approaches, quantification and empirical testing of causal theory. As argued above, comparative studies investigating different contexts in depth can be promising platforms to generate valuable insights into and spark inspiring discussions about what constitutes ‘European-ness’ in our very sub-field of sport management – and, possibly, even beyond.

Another argument to focus on ‘European’ theories and concept derives from the notion that sport management scholars do reflect on knowledge diffusion, including the importance and impact of social systems thereby (Funk, 2019), or assess literature through ‘in-depth analysis of what exists, what topics or areas are being studied, and, perhaps more importantly, what does not exist and what topics or areas are not being studied’ (Pitts, Danylchuk, & Quarterman, 2014, p. 47), in order to provide useful overviews and categories, on the one hand. On the other hand, however, they stop short and do not leap towards addressing ‘how’ and ‘why’ dimensions of the evolution of bodies of knowledge. This corresponds with the conclusion of Coakley and Pike (2014) that a lot of sports sociological research is carried out from a functionalist perspective, based on a social order, consensus and shared values. However, a more critical perspective on sports management and CSR (from conflict theory and critical theory) or research from the interactionist theory, which focuses on how meaning is given in interactions, can be very valuable.

Actually, the general disinterest of critical management research in empirical work and its aim to

disrupt ongoing social reality for the sake of providing impulses to the liberation from or resistance to what dominates and leads to constraints in human decision making ... (and putting) a particular object of study in a wider cultural, economic and political context, relating a focused phenomenon to sources of broader asymmetrical relations in society (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 1)

may well allow a traditionally European-led scientific lens to inspire new knowledge especially in an area such as sport and social responsibility. Levermore (2013; Levermore & Moore, 2015) has made notable efforts to this end.

Yet, a critical management studies angle overlaps with another European scientific tradition, namely to use coherent bodies of work from ‘great thinkers’ as a basis of the analysis, such as Habermas (communication and the public sphere), Foucault (power and discourses) or Bourdieu (power and social order). Arguably, relating back and further developing theory is crucial since, first, top management journals place an increasingly strong focus on theoretical contributions (Anker, 2017) and, second, ‘The generalizability of a study’s findings usually comes from the theory, not the data’ (Haenlein, 2015, p. 159).

Also, we should be well-aware of the risk of trapping ourselves through inwards reasoning. That is if we analyse an apparent body of knowledge (which under the current international competitive regime in science means: publications in English language) with – obviously – English search terms and then make conclusions about the body’s shape and either areas that need focus or if one was to build theory on it: there is a risk that

it may well be of myopic scope, especially in the case a social science that is predominantly driven by empirical studies such as (sport) management and much of CSR research.

While at times questions are raised as to why and how sport organisations embrace and implement CSR, and what could be (negative) consequences, certainly it impacts on the organisation to a more or less extent earlier or later. An influential European stream of strategic management literature has added significant understanding of organisational change processes by including political, cultural and rhetorical perspectives (e.g. Pettigrew, 1990, 1992; Pettigrew, Thomas, & Whittington, 2002; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). For example, by analysing periods of change in professional German football organisations, the 3S-Model (Breitbarth & Rieth, 2012) describes and exemplifies transitional elements and evolutionary steps of integrating CSR: from strategic intent to strategic alignment; from detached stakeholder orientation to seeking stakeholder support; and from offering structural capacities to developing sustainable structural implementation.

Albeit not a change theory as such, Scandinavian Institutionalism as a branch of institutional theory seeks to reconcile change and stability within this popular theoretical lens – which is the dominant approach in organisational studies, arguably, and also used by authors in this special issue. While the institutional perspective is persuasive in demonstrating social embeddedness of organisations (Granovetter, 1985) and organisational isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), it fails to include important political and dramaturgical aspects. Here, Scandinavian Institutionalism as with its notion of ‘translation’ helps to understand how management ideas such as CSR ‘travel’ between and within organisations – in particular, this is if they are regarded as superior, and as being worthwhile to imitate and adopt (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), especially if they are interpreted in accordance with the core values of the Western world: progress and justice (Meyer, 1996). For example, it could be intriguing to learn how social responsibility becomes objectified in sport and in sport organisations, respectively, especially by turning it into linguistic artefacts such as metaphors, platitudes, or labels. We should not forget that management research and practice is based on (management) ideas that shape corporate behaviour (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002).

Another reason for inviting authors to include European theories and concepts in their papers stems from the observation that most European sports organisations cannot be regarded as purely private organizations. Although associations, federations and professional clubs are private in the strict sense of the law, many sports organizations in European sports practice are better described as being ‘hybrids’: ‘Hybridity appears when organizations cannot (or can no longer) be described as completely belonging to the civil communities, private sector, or state sector and become an organization containing a mix of sectorial, structural, and/or mission related elements’ (Lucassen & de Bakker, 2016, p. 75). The dominant European sports model was inherently built on non-profit organisations and, therefore, most are expected to consider trade-offs and to serve not only their members or financiers, but also create values for various other stakeholders in their immediate environment, such as local authorities and fans, and in their wider environment, such as the media and the general public.

This means that they must create not only sporting values but also cultural values (linked to the identity of the club and its environment), business values and public values (for example, aimed at participation, health and inclusion) (Van Eekeren, 2016). As a consequence, other theories and concepts related to sports management and CSR

come into the picture. In other industries, the concepts of hybridity (e.g. Wang, Tong, Takeuchi, & George, 2016; York, Hargrave, & Pacheco, 2016) and value creation (e.g. Moore, 1995; Vargo, Maglio, & Archpru Akaka, 2008) have received recent attention. In sport management Bjärsholm (2017) touches this research avenue from the social entrepreneurship perspective and provides insights into how sport organisations can act as entrepreneurs with a positive impact on the society.

Line-up of special issue papers

The collection of papers is arranged around a number of organisation and management questions that concern CSR: (1) What are CSR expressions in European sports organisations? (2) What are consequences of CSR implementation within European sports organisations? and (3) What is the meaning of CSR implementation in relation to stakeholders? These questions are answered in clusters of papers from various theoretical perspectives, different types of organisations, and a variety of sports and in diverse European contexts.

The special issue starts with an examination of CSR expressions. *François, Bayle and Gond* make a double comparison: between professional rugby clubs and professional football clubs in both France and the UK. In addition to identifying similarities and differences between CSR practices in the two countries, their analysis extends and adapts the implicit-explicit CSR framework by Matten and Moon to the field of sport. The authors identify the influence of interactions between sectorial/field-level factors and national/macro-level factors on CSR practices, and by distinguishing between CSR communication and CSR implementation. The authors use a mixed methods approach to analyse qualitative and quantitative data on the CSR strategies of 66 professional rugby union (Top 14, Aviva Premiership Rugby) and football (Ligue 1, Premier League) clubs over the season 2017/18.

The next three papers provide insight into the internal operation and associated tensions within sports organisations when they are involved with implementing CSR. *Pedersen and Rosa* examined 226 Danish football clubs, ranging from very small, community-based clubs to larger organisations with paid staff and players, and their perceptions of organisational tensions related to their CSR activity. The paper adopts a broad perspective by looking at how multiple, oppositional demands individually and in combination are associated with the commitment to CSR among football clubs. The quantitative analysis contributes to the rapidly growing body of research on organisational tensions and related concepts such as paradoxes, contradictions, and dilemmas and represents a first step in developing a generic scale for measuring organisational tensions.

In the third paper, *Schynvink and Willem* argue that increasingly sport managers are using cause-related marketing (CrM) in order to make sure that social engagement contributes to the organisation's bottom line in a sustainable way, but that at the same time research on CrM in sport is mostly focused on conceptualisation rather than on implementation. In their contribution, the authors explore the specific CrM implementation decisions an organisation attempts to make, and to what extent these are in line with the defined strategy. They used a qualitative method in professional basketball clubs in four European countries. They propose a framework that allows (sport) managers to view CrM strategy formulation and implementation simultaneously, rather than separately. The authors claim the framework can assist sport managers to better integrate CrM

projects, align them with strategy, and attain maximal win-win outcomes for both the organisation and society.

The fourth paper also focuses on the implementation of CSR. *Zeimers, Anagnostopoulos, Zintz and Willem* argue that current studies fall short of investigating the role of organisational learning (OL), which is, as they claim, key to grasp how CSR occurs in organisations. In their paper, the authors explore the dynamic interaction between different levels of the learning process through which sport organisations implement CSR by drawing on a 4I Framework from Crossan and colleagues. The paper extends the discussion of CSR implementation by highlighting the critical role of OL. It does so by revealing patterns of learning institutionalisation for CSR in a particular European sport federated setting, i.e. the French Field Hockey Federation in Belgium.

The last two papers are aimed at the stakeholders and the networks that are involved in CSR practices of European sports organisations. *Panton and Walters* use a broad understanding of CSR and focus on building salient community stakeholder coalitions. Within sport management, they argue, there is a lack of empirical research on the reasons why stakeholders mobilise. Their paper draws on a longitudinal, qualitative case study in Tottenham (London) in the context of stadium regeneration. The authors identify four antecedent factors underpinning the formation of the Our Tottenham community network: a network formed by community groups in Tottenham to challenge, inter-alia, the stadium-led regeneration scheme. The paper provides a greater understanding of the antecedent factors as to why community stakeholders mobilise, how they come together and the extent of their influence.

In the last paper *Bjaersholm* aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the significance of networks. The author does not look at traditional sports organisations that carry out CSR practices, but he analyses how networking is manifested in a sport organisation characterised by social entrepreneurship. Based on qualitative data gathered at a Swedish club, the paper contributes to an increased body of knowledge in a field previously identified as lacking. The focus lays on understanding and discussing the various types of networks of which social entrepreneurial sporting organisations can be part of, and how these are utilised in order to overcome the obstacles in creating sustainable businesses.

Unity in diversity

The collection of the papers in this special issue provides valuable insights into the European context of social responsibility and sport, with all of them individually relating to our suggested ‘anchors’. After reflecting on framings and contributions of the joint set of articles, readers may agree with us in saying that there is unity in diversity. Above all, there is empirical evidence that we are not witnessing ‘the end of corporate social responsibility’ in the sport sector as critically suggested elsewhere in regard to other industries (Fleming & Jones, 2013), but shifting foci within European policy that facilitates an approach away from output-orientation towards impact-orientation and institutional change.

The papers show that social responsibility in European sports context is a broad concept: from a fairly classical view of CSR as a management concept to kinds of initiatives aimed at creating social value. Social responsibility debates are by far not limited to professional sports organisations but also involves voluntary sports organisations, civil society

organisations that use sport, and sports-related initiatives such as stadium construction. Also, CSR in European sports context is studied from a wide variety of disciplines. As a result, there is also a wide variety of research methods that academics use. It is striking that many studies have a descriptive character, based on qualitative data. In addition to descriptive research, testing research, with more emphasis on quantitative data, would be welcome in the future, as well as a more critical perspective, including deconstructions inspired and informed by big European thinkers.

Analysing the very contributions of this special issue on the basis of the desired four avenues we can conclude that some avenues got more attention than others. Hence, overall some important nuances to the international research portfolio are added by featuring studies with more detailed insights into the French, Danish, Belgian and Swedish sport and social responsibility context. Also, a number of sport-specific contextual issues are raised and discussed across the six contributions since all of them are empirical papers using data from either professional or amateur football, basketball, field hockey, rugby, and a multi-sport organisation. The number of comparative studies is limited, although within-Europe comparative studies (UK-France and UK-France-Belgium-Netherlands), provide important grounds to argue for a little-unified picture within a European frame.

Unfortunately, we did not receive submissions focusing on or mainly including European aspects and current issues concerned with how the European discussions and actions have been ‘exported’ through/within sport or impacted on developments elsewhere, leaving this research space up for development. The ambition in suggesting focusing on theories, concepts and models specific to/originating from European perspectives/philosophies/movements might have been too steep or it came at the wrong time. The explicit use and pronunciation of typical ‘European’ theories or European management scholarship is very limited in the papers that we were able to select for this special issue. However, we hope its time will come. Chia’s (2014, p. 688) enlightened reflection on ‘European-ness’ in management research finishes with an encouraging statement:

Artistic rigour, much more than technical rigour is needed. Openness, empirical sensitivity and the capacity for achieving ‘flying leaps’ of imagination, are to be preferred to procedural adherence in both the research process and in the imaginative reconfiguring of assets, expertise and resources to create new value-adding products/services. The rediscovery of this alternative understanding of academic rigour, one based more on the arts than the sciences, derives from a deeper appreciation of the intellectual richness and diversity of perspectives that is clearly more evident in the British and European intellectual traditions.

While we can observe that the CSR landscape is characterised by fragmentation and differentiation on meso- and micro-levels rather than by integration (Martin, 1992), our view concurs with a conclusion and outlook provided by other CSR researchers concerned with ‘European-ness’ (Maon et al. 2017, p. 418f):

We thus substantiate that CSR actions continue to be characterized by strong differences that distinguish regional clusters, despite some cross-national convergence in policies, norms, and rules ... that create regional and global isomorphic pulls and can trigger some harmonizing effects in corporations’ approaches ... The differences may narrow with time, but our study reemphasizes the need to create awareness about CSR policies and activities in the composite European business environment.

Acknowledging the collegial support and expertise brought to this special issue

As guest editors we could not put together this special issue without the support we received from a good number of people. First and foremost, we would like to thank the past and current ESMQ editors, Tracy Taylor and Paul Downward, respectively, for offering us the platform of this renowned academic outlet to accommodate a selection of quality papers on a current topic. Also, we like to thank Caron Walpole for her editorial assistance throughout.

Of course, our editorial decisions on all submitted abstracts as well as authors of papers included herein much trusted the expertise and assistance of reviewers. By generously volunteering their time, they helped the editors a great deal to shape the special issue at hand. Special thanks go to (in alphabetical order): Christos Anagnostopoulos, Kathy Babiak, Jens Blumrodt, Guillaume Bodet, Harald Dolles, Josef Fahlen, Matthias Fifka, Hallgeir Gammelsæter, Bill Gerrard, Vassil Girginov, Richard Giulianotti, Kirstin Hallmann, Bob Heere, Kathryn Heinze, Mary Hums, Jörg Königstorfer, Dae Kwak, Elisavet Manoli, Heath McDonald, Esben Pedersen, Thomas Persson, Tracy Taylor, Ulrik Wagner, Geoff Walters, Rob Wilson, Arnold Wilts.

We are glad that the EASM European Sport Management Conference 2017 in Bern allowed us to host an ESMQ special issue workshop, which served as a catalyst to attract and discuss work. Finally, we also like to thank those international colleagues who submitted manuscripts that we could not consider for this special issue for one reason or another, but who's engagement with the topic will very likely add to building up further substance in the future.

In closing, the authors hope that this special issue will serve as a stimulus for either becoming or continuing to be inspirational towards actively contributing to the international community of CSR in sport management research. After all, although CSR has now attracted a great deal of interest, still there is much to be done.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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