

Routledge Interviews

Transcript of an interview with Professor John Evans, Editor of *Sport, Education and Society*

This interview took place at the publisher's headquarters in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK in September 2008.

Q: What issues does *Sport, Education and Society* deal with and who is your core audience?

A: Well, in reality, I think *Sport, Education and Society* really addresses the interests of three audiences. There are researchers in the field who clearly are working to enhance the knowledge base of their subject communities whether they're physical educationalists, health workers, leisure (people working in the leisure industry) so clearly the research community is extremely important to the journal. But, it also, I think, addresses a wider academic base. It feeds the knowledge base of subjects like Physical Education, sport, leisure and health, so there are professionals within those fields, teacher educators, health educators, who use the material themselves to keep up-to-date with the latest knowledge in the field to inform their students and so on. And, I think, lastly, there are new students to the field and it's a nice feature of *Sport, Education and Society* that I think the journal reaches quite a large student base internationally. I think that's exciting, that's important, because the next generation need to be well-informed, they need to be good researchers, to be good scholars and I think that's a very positive feature of journal life, that we reach those audiences.

Essentially its focus is on what we might like to call body pedagogies, in that it centres attention on all those attempts made by various agencies or individuals to impact how people think about their bodies, positively or negatively. Now, what that means in reality is that the journal is interested in the activities of professionals in a variety of settings concerned with physical activity, such as Physical Education, sport, leisure, and actually increasingly the way in which messages about the body are transmitted through technologies. Information technology is increasingly important as a means of education about the body. So, I think *Sport, Education and Society* is concerned with all those arenas that we traditionally are interested in as researchers and scholars, like schools and other settings of physical exercise, but I think it extends way beyond that, actually, in terms of where work on the body occurs these days.

I think what endures with the journal is that it always serves two interests. It serves a set of sociological questions around things like equity and equality, racism, sexism, ageism, issues around the body if you like, and it addresses those consistently I think and will continue to do so. But it also serves a variety of professional interests arising from within the professions of Physical Education, sport and leisure, community health and so on, and of course they change over time but they also have to do with how kids learn about themselves, how kids succeed and fail in those settings, how policy impacts on those settings as it relates to body-centred concerns.

Q: As the founding editor of *Sport, Education and Society* along with Colin Hardy, what inspired the creation of the journal and what are your aspirations for the future of the journal?

A: I think essentially we wanted a voice at the time. We wanted a voice for social science in educational-based research around the body. There were very good outlets in professional journals for commentary on Physical Education, sport and health and so on but I think we badly wanted a context where research could at times take a critical and reflective voice on the practices of the professions, whether that's Physical Education or health, and really the journal was set up for that purpose. There was a growing body of research at the time, not just in the UK but in Australia, North America (Australia and the UK in particular) with fine researchers and fortunately some of them are on our editorial and advisory boards now. But there was a body of research growing which I think needed another voice and many people with that voice wanted to call themselves 'critical sociologists', they wanted to take apart conventional orthodoxies and re-think our practices and challenge our practices and generated a debate around what it was that we were doing and I think *Sport, Education and Society*, to its credit and to the credit of the publishers, the research community has flourished since and we've got this journal amongst others now which are top class and are really feeding the research base of our professions in a very positive way.

At one level I think I'd really like to see it increase its readership. We've already got an international readership but I also want it to be, I think, a youthful journal. I want it to be a progressive journal; it has to deal with contemporary issues and it has to deal with them in ways that connect with new audiences and there are very many bright new young scholars and new old scholars too in the system who are looking for new outlets and of generating a debate and getting their message across in the profession.

Q: What do you look for when considering articles and submissions and what advice would you give those who would like to be published in your journal?

A: We look for papers with insight; that are in some sense progressive papers that are offering either a new take on an old problem or a new take on new issues and contemporary issues. So we're looking for insight, we're looking for something that's got something to say to the professions that are the readership of our journal. Now as well as that of course we look for things like a rigorous methodological base. We're looking for a theoretically informed perspective and those theories are usually drawn from sociology or educational theory. So it's a combination of things but I would say they don't have to be pristine, ready-made, publishable papers; they're often papers that have to be worked on and in the majority of cases, indeed, they are returned for some further work. But, they're a combination. They obviously have to meet the remit of our journal, as stated earlier, but within that I think it's a very accommodating journal. It's willing to encourage, to bring on papers that look to have insight, imagination and something to say to the professions.

The most common mistake is not to have looked at the journal, not to have appreciated, I think, what it is about. Essentially, it is a journal which is informed by sociology and educational theory and therefore submitting your work if it's got none of those things, it might be very good, but it just doesn't fit the remit. I think that the journal is very encouraging of different styles of writing, different forms of presentation, but even when those occur they need to be still rigorous and scholarly. It doesn't want to be conservative and I don't think the journal is conservative at all. It's encouraging of different ways of writing, different ways of thinking. But it's a social science based journal and that's what I think I would emphasise in considering whether your paper is for this journal or another.

But I guess the second thing is to persevere. I'm sure there are people much younger than I who look to the journal and see articles that certainly take my breath away, they're fantastic, there's some brilliant writing in the journal and they might think I can't do that but I'd say you are looking at the finished article. It's gone through a process and it wasn't in that pristine condition to begin with. So, perseverance is actually a very important part of publication and it means taking some knock backs. Some of our best scholars who submit to *Sport, Education and Society* have knock backs, I have them and we persevere and hopefully, ultimately, they're published and the papers are usually much better for it and they are of the quality that this journal demands. So it's perseverance and taking advice from those around you. Our editorial team are part of the process so they respond as productively as they can and, you know, we want to see things published rather than want to reject papers for the journal.

Q: You have made keynote speeches about 'Education, Eating Disorders and Obesity' and have investigated the relationship between education and eating disorders. We hear a lot about 'Fat Britain' in the media. Do you think these reports are justified or alarmist and what are the real facts in this issue?

A: Do we need to worry about the health of the nation? Yes. Health is obviously an important policy; it's an important educational matter. Recent reports will tell us that health is profoundly 'classed' in the UK for example. There are huge discrepancies in peoples' ability to be healthy, to do the things that contemporary health policy wants us to do like eat well and exercise more.

But do I think the reports are justified or alarmist? I think they are justified at the level of saying health is an important concern, I think it's alarmist to the extent that it exaggerates an issue and it is potentially dangerous in the way in which it deals with the issue of health. For our own part we've researched the way in which some of these messages around weight have been translated into school practices and ultimately impact the identities of young people, young women in particular, in potentially very damaging ways. So, much of our gripe is actually about the transmission of health knowledge and how what should be important and complicated messages about health are simplified, translated in schools and read by children in ways that damage their bodies and we're really very concerned about that.

To talk of facts in this issue is difficult. I mean, one of the problems is in trading in 'facts' in this issue; what counts as knowledge we can reasonably act on and what is fabrication and exaggeration and we've been interested in recent years in the way in which quite sound knowledge produced in the primary research field gets distorted and recycled and almost takes on the feel of a fabrication. For example, you'll commonly hear that the population is overweight. Now you say that to most people and they will know that they are supposed to think overweight equals really unhealthy. If we do look at the primary research evidence it seems to me that it suggests that overweight populations are actually healthy populations. They have longevity that certainly underweight populations or grossly obese populations would not have, so overweight can be quite a good indication of the health of a population.

The main issue for us is that we do think health needs to be treated more broadly than an issue of weight-management. And the problem with the health debate at the moment, one would ask whether it is a debate because we're simply asked to take on trust that the nation is at risk. But it's a serious matter because health is a serious

matter and if it's reduced just to weight then that's how it tends to get treated in schools; just as a weight issue. And this is really problematic for the lives of young people because it has, in my view, ironically quite a deleterious effect on the business of trying to get young people active because being active is much more important than being thin. So it actually works against the grain of trying to get more children just active and finding pleasure in physical exercise. So I would alter the nature of the debate and certainly move it away from weight-management and that's a problem because government policy is centred on weight-management, you know, from an early age in school now, it's monitoring and reporting childrens' weight and it's creating, or helping create a rather negative culture in which to foster a positive image of the body and that's necessary for physical activity.