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Ethical considerations in researching sport and social entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to discuss ethical dilemmas that occur in doing research on social entrepreneurial sport ventures. Three cases that highlight ethical dilemmas in research on social entrepreneurship and sport are presented and ethically reflected upon. The data comprise interviews with representatives, field notes from observations and analyses of documents concerning the ventures. Three things make research in this area extra problematic: first, ‘social good’ in social entrepreneurship and sport implies a normative perspective. It is permeated by ideology and ethics. Second, what is considered as ‘social good’ may differ between sectors of society as the entrepreneur crosses boundaries. What is valid as a resource and capital in one sector might not be so in another one, and what is legal within one sector may be illegal in another. Third, social entrepreneurs may have their own intentions with regard to participating in research, which may challenge our credibility as researchers. Therefore, we need, as professionals, to take a step back and be both critical of our work and make this criticism visible, which is to some extent what we are doing by writing this article.

KEYWORDS
Research ethics; ethical dilemma; sport research; qualitative research; entrepreneurship

Introduction
Conducting research requires following well-established ethical guidelines, principles and codes of conduct which are set by the research community (e.g. American Psychological Association (APA), 2017; British Sociological Association (BSA), 2017; Swedish Research Council, 2017). In these guidelines, important ethical approaches are established (e.g. causing no harm, informed consent and confidentiality) that researchers need to embrace before, during and after collecting their data (Tracy, 2010). For some, research ethics is solely a means in the research process, but according to Tracy (op.cit.), it can entail much more. She claims that research ethics ‘rather constitute a universal end goal of qualitative quality [about research] itself,'
Despite paradigm (Tracy, 2010, 846). Regardless of whether research ethics are considered as a means (as in the guidelines) or as a goal, ethical dilemmas arise on an everyday basis when conducting research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

While doing research on sport and social entrepreneurship, we have encountered some ethical dilemmas that challenged both our ethical awareness and existing ethical guidelines (e.g. APA, 2017; BSA, 2017; European Commission, 2013; Iphofen, 2015; Swedish Research Council, 2017) as well as previous research (e.g. Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Tracy, 2010). These dilemmas have emerged as a result of being close to our research subjects and our field of interest being sport and social entrepreneurship. In this field, sport in combination with business ideas is used as a means to do something that can be seen as normatively good (Peterson & Schenker, 2018). It is not uncommon for the entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurial organizations responsible for the enterprise to use unconventional entrepreneurial methods with storytelling, branding and persuasion as central ingredients in the effort to find financial resources to support the venture (McNamara, Pazzaglia, & Sonpar, 2018). Most literature on research ethics focuses on how researchers deal with their research subjects. What is central to all guidelines is that research subjects should be protected against any harm or negative consequences from taking part in research. Considering this, we have experienced in the course of conducting research into these social entrepreneurial sport ventures, those ethical concerns have become more complex, since we, the researchers, have also been used in various ways by our research subjects in their own quest for fulfilling various goals, including that of acquiring resources. However, discussions of this kind are relatively absent in existing ethical guidelines (e.g. APA, 2017; BSA, 2017; Swedish Research Council, 2017) as well as in the literature on research ethics in (sport) research (e.g. Kara & Pickering, 2017; Tracy, 2010).

In short, this article will, on the basis of three deliberately chosen cases, present and discuss ethical dilemmas that occur in doing research on social entrepreneurial sport ventures. In contrast to cases which are theoretically constructed or of an abstract character (Jeanes, 2017), these ethical dilemmas are drawn from our own research. We will especially focus on dilemmas that deal with situations when, as researchers, we have in various ways experienced being used by representatives of our research projects. By doing this, we illustrate the complex and intricate relationship that exists between researchers and representatives of the research projects, and how this relationship is to a large extent characterized by a mutual dependency. The article will thus contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion on ethical considerations involved in doing empirical (sport) research.

We will start by briefly presenting both the context (Sweden) and the field of research (sport and social entrepreneurship) within which we have experienced these dilemmas. This is followed by a presentation of some perspectives on research ethics. Thereafter, we will introduce the ethical dilemmas we have experienced in our research practice and finally reflect upon and discuss those from a research ethical perspective.

**Sport and social entrepreneurship**

Sport is an essential part of the Nordic welfare system (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010). The Nordic welfare regime has its roots in various movements (e.g. the labour and
social democratic movement), including that of sport, and is characterized by universal social services and social security systems provided by the state (Gawell, 2015). These systems are made possible by taxation of different kinds (e.g. income and consumption taxes) and by different reallocation systems which, according to state policy, should facilitate equality among their citizens (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gawell, 2015).

Within this welfare system, sport can be regarded as a people’s movement which forms an important part of the democratic system (Peterson, 2008). Within this system, the sport movement is intimately affiliated with the voluntary sector (Wijkström & Lundström, 2002), for example, the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC), which has over 3.1 million individual memberships in over 23,000 sports clubs (The Swedish Sports Confederation, 2015). However, parallel to the voluntary sector are the public, the commercial and the informal sectors (Figure 1). These sectors contain different social orders (Norberg, 2004) which may be viewed as systems of institutions with their specific patterns of communication that continuously reproduce the terms of their own existence (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). The various sectors are governed by different legislations, which means that activities that are allowed in one sector may be prohibited in another (Pestoff, 1998).

In recent years, however, the Swedish welfare regime has been dismantled as a result of political and economic changes characterized by neo-liberal thoughts (Peterson, 2012). During this transformation, the focus has shifted to economic growth, competitiveness and commercialization (Gawell, 2015). This increased liberal governance has redefined the role of the state and that of society at large. It has, for instance, meant that organizations, especially those within the voluntary sector, have been encouraged to compete for a diminishing governmental budget and at the same time to operate in a more market-driven manner (Huybrechts & Nicholls, 2012). The general result of this societal change has been that there are certain challenges in today’s society (e.g. mass migration and poverty) that neither the state nor the market has found affordable or profitable to address. There are, however, entrepreneurs who prioritize and strive to achieve social change when and where other institutions fail (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006; Santos, 2012). They are the so-called social entrepreneurs.

Figure 1. The welfare triangle (Ottesen & Ibsen 1999).
As the primary aim of social entrepreneurs has been that of doing social good rather than striving for financial profit (capital), they are forced to move between various sectors of society in their quest for financial resources (Dees & Anderson, 2003). This navigating between sectors is hampered by the variety among the sectors in the existing set of social orders, leading social entrepreneurial activities to cross boundaries that are not naturally or easily crossed (Peterson & Schenker, 2018).

In this context, we define the ‘social’ part of the concept as related to reasons why the Swedish state provides funding for the sports movement. This means that the social values that are regarded as being socially good include, for example, public health, democracy development, gender equitable outcomes, and integration. These values are thus comparable with, and also initially based on, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (SOU, 2008). In addition to defining what is ‘social’, it is essential to emphasize the sporting context. For example, if a sport venture is to be classified as a social entrepreneurial venture, it should use sport as a means to achieve social good and not as a goal in itself (Peterson & Schenker, 2018).

However, research into sport and social entrepreneurship is rather limited and is currently in its infancy (Bjärsholm, 2017). Bjärsholm (2017) found that most articles dealing with sport and social entrepreneurship were focusing on the social entrepreneurial organization’s goals, activities and finances. Furthermore, sport played a subordinated role in most articles. Some researchers (e.g. Ratten & Gawell) had published several articles with a similar reasoning. Bjärsholm (2017) concludes, as Misener and Misener (2017) do, by stating that more qualitative empirical studies are needed. In addition to contributing to the literature within research ethics in sport, we contribute to the progressing field of sport and social entrepreneurship. First, none of the identified articles have had an ethical focus and, second, by using qualitative data, our contribution comprises empirical cases on social entrepreneurial sport ventures.

**Ethical perspectives on research in sport and social entrepreneurship**

The main issue here is research ethics. How research is conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines is a concern for all researchers, since these guidelines are normative. Thus, they should always be complied with (cf. Scott, 2008). This also applies if the guidelines were originally produced and developed in the fields of medicine or psychology, which is often the case due to these fields’ sensitive character regarding people’s health and well-being. Still, research on sport and social entrepreneurship may also result in facing ethical dilemmas occurring in the entrepreneurial practice that is studied. Entrepreneurial practice means challenging existing boundaries and equilibriums in various ways. The way the researcher handles problems that may contradict established norms and rules is another side of the coin. In the following section, we will discuss these two sides with research ethics as the point of departure.

Research ethics could be described as ‘the application of moral rules and professional codes of conduct to the collection, analysis, reporting, and publication of information about research subjects, in particular active acceptance of subjects’ right to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent’ (A Dictionary of Sociology, 1998, 645). Research ethics applied in our studies of entrepreneurial ventures, where sports is used as a means for reaching social goals, show close similarities with research ethics.
related to ethnographic studies. Research is then guided by certain ethical codes or
generic principles stating what is desirable professional research conduct (BSA, 2017;
Robson, 1993; Swedish Research Council, 2017). The quality of the research result is,
however, based on the interaction and trust that can be built between researchers,
social entrepreneurs and participants in the actions (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Commissioned by the European Commission, Iphofen (2015) developed a document
presenting guidelines to research ethics in ethnography and anthropology. The core of
the guiding principles is that the researcher is dependent on establishing a trust rela-
tion with members of a community or a culture and on the authenticity of the infor-
mation extracted. Accuracy is dependent on access and on a trustworthy relation
between researchers and participating subjects. Authenticity is a general problem in
research, but here we will focus specifically on vulnerability, which is usually stressed
in order to protect participating informants.

In the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2013), ethical prin-
ciples are established for medical research involving human subjects, including
research on identifiable human material and data and the responsibility towards particip-
ating subjects. It is stated that ‘every precaution must be taken to protect the priv-
acy of the research subjects and the confidentiality of their personal information and
to minimize the impact of the study on their physical, mental and social integrity’
(Article 23). So, if the information gathered could be considered harmful to participat-
ing subjects, the general codex expresses that the benefit of research should be bal-
canced in relation to the possible harm it may cause participants. This is also in line
with what is stated in the EU document concerning ethnographical and anthropology
research. The researcher should act in a way which entails ‘…not doing harm and
protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants’
(Iphofen, 2015, 1).

However, in some circumstances, other interests are given priority. In Sweden, it is
declared that if a researcher extracts information that according to law falls under the
notification obligation (e.g. child abuse and paedophilia crime), no promises made to
subjects concerning anonymity or professional secrecy should be kept (Swedish
Research Council, 2017). If the information gathered does not explicitly fall under the
notification obligation or is of a more disputable character, the declaration needs to
be judiciously interpreted with regard to the type of information the research gener-
ates and the possible consequences of making it public (Ferdinand, Pearson, Rowe, &
Worthington, 2007).

Iphofen (2015) also discusses problems that arise due to possible conflicts with
stakeholders who are funding research. Still, more relevant for our own research are
problems emanating from the potential action-oriented aims of the representatives of
our research projects. These aims may turn out to conflict with the aims of the
researcher. From the subjects’ perspective, giving access to research may also mean
creating a possibility to strengthen the brand and its public relations. The researcher
may become a means for the subject’s interests. This could make researchers vulner-
able in that their credibility may be questioned (cf. Le Reux, 2015), especially if the
research is angled in a way that is perceived as advantageous from the entrepreneur’s
perspective.
In entrepreneurial research, the relation between researchers and subjects may, as previously indicated, take another direction. Entrepreneurial projects could, on the one hand, be hard to anonymize due to their unique character. On the other hand, maintaining the anonymity may not be in the interest of the entrepreneur (cf. Le Reux, 2015). There are no general principles to consult when possible social or financial interests from the subjects compete with the theoretical or methodological interests of the researchers. Since research is built on trust, deliberation is called for. Gonzalez (as cited in Tracy, 2010) argues that researchers should always respect others, ‘which includes allowing participants to assist in defining the rules of the research and helping the researcher to practically understand the ramifications for violating traditional ways of doing things’ (847). Researchers may then need to compromise between the original research aims and what is possible to attain considering situated problems. In such cases, researchers need to develop an ethical awareness and an ability to make judicious judgements (Ferdinand et al., 2007). One way of doing this is through highlighting actual situations or problems that occur in research and reflecting on these (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

We now turn to ethics from the perspective of the social entrepreneur, for whom the consequences of social aims may not always be predictable. Generally, ethical theories are not prominent within the field of economic theories on entrepreneurship (Harris, Sapienza, & Bowie, 2009; Sarasvathy, 2002). Social entrepreneurship could be defined by economic theories and, alternatively, by other theoretical positions that enable us to understand the different concepts of social good (Mair & Martí, 2006; Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum, & Shulman, 2009).

Entrepreneurship is about change in that entrepreneurs may change their position in relation to the surrounding community (e.g. to gain more power), but it may also concern changing the surroundings (e.g. to empower others). In both cases, entrepreneurship is used as a means. By adopting an ethical perspective, we are able to highlight the goals of the entrepreneurship (i.e. the social aspect) and the means (i.e. the capital and the sport) used to achieve the goals. Embedded in the social goal is a wish for change. To achieve the change, resources need to be allocated (Kaiser, 1990), which means that someone may receive advantages at someone else’s expense. This quest for resources is a natural never-ending process for entrepreneurs (Gartner, 1989). However, to be able to allocate resources, some form of branding is usually needed; otherwise, as the saying goes, ‘out of sight, out of mind’. One way, however, in which the entrepreneur can obtain legitimacy, which is essential for obtaining resources, is by providing narratives about the undertaking. In these narratives, the entrepreneur mediates the social values through the use of storytelling (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011), which connects the brand with its target group. By doing this, the entrepreneur can acquire consumer attention and trust (Bréda, Delattre, & Ocler, 2008). To use narratives as part of the branding process is one way to cultivate and strengthen the brand equity to make people willing to provide the venture with extra resources. Hence, a good brand is financially positive for the ventures (Keller, 2008). It makes more undertakings possible, which is in line with the social goal. However, in some social ventures, the relation between maximizing profits and gaining the maximum social effect is dubious. Unintended consequences sometimes occur and, besides, the research literature contains some ‘bad’ examples of social entrepreneurship, for instance, when
criminal gangs work with social issues. These undertakings are sometimes described as the ‘dark side’ of social entrepreneurship (Williams & K'now, 2012).

**Methods**

During our work with research and development projects commissioned by the SSC, we have identified a number of social entrepreneurial sport ventures. The ventures are all related to the Swedish sport context and have emerged within the Swedish sports movement. They originated from governmental initiatives with a view to challenging sport organizations to develop new ways of providing activities. The aim was either to attract new categories of children or young people who do not normally participate in sports or to retain them longer as active members. These ventures were expected to offer activities that promote health and development on equal terms (SOU, 2008). About 450 million euros has been allocated for this purpose by the government via SSC to sport clubs and, as usual, when such large reforms are initiated and implemented by the state, they need to be evaluated.

In general, evaluations have indicated that most of the funded sport ventures and projects did not fulfil the intentions of the reforms (Gerrevall, Fahlström, Hedberg, & Linnér, 2012; Hedenborg, Jonasson, Peterson, Schenker, & Tolvved, 2012). Instead, the funding has largely been used by the sport clubs to make ‘more of the same’ or to carry on doing ‘business as usual’. However, we have discovered a number of cases that could be regarded as deviant (see George & Bennett, 2005) in relation to the main evaluation findings. These cases have excelled by developing new kinds of activities and by succeeding in establishing social change through sport. The projects in question have occurred in what might be described as an organizational grey zone between the state, the market and civil society. These cases can be defined as social entrepreneurship in sport (Peterson & Schenker, 2018).

However, while collecting data for our research on sport and social entrepreneurship, we have also encountered some ethical dilemmas. Among the variety of cases, we have deliberately selected three in order to illustrate and discuss dilemmas of a kind that can be faced when doing research on social entrepreneurship in sports. These three cases have been purposefully sampled with regard to their heterogeneity (Patton, 2015). At first glance, they may seem to overlap, but they do vary in terms of geographic location, organization and size, and they illustrate various types of dilemmas that can be experienced, such as how researchers deal with anonymity and confidentiality in a trust relationship, and how to deal with problems that may arise through the entrepreneurs’ navigation between different sectors of society. Such navigation may even include legally questionable actions. The overlap indicates a certain degree of generalizability in that the experienced dilemmas to some extent keep reappearing.

The procedures by which data has been collected were inspired by ethnography (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Walford, 2009). Our ethnographic approach has enabled us to use different data sources in order to create and contribute to a richer understanding of the various settings, activities and organizations of our cases (George & Bennett, 2005; Lee, Collier, & Cullen, 2007; Perry, 2011). A possible reason behind the emergence of dilemmas, which further unites the three cases, is related to the close
relation that has developed between researchers and social entrepreneurs. Closeness often arises through ethnographic work where the quality of data often depends on a trustful relation established between the various actors.

The data are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives, field notes from participant observations, and analyses of documents (e.g. annual reports, newspaper articles and media presentations) concerning the ventures. The interviewees were mainly selected on the basis of their role in the organization in question. Most interviews were conducted with key persons in each organization, such as managers, or with others occupying strategic positions on various levels, but also with representatives of the community. Of specific interest are the interviews conducted with informants who have a personal interest in or responsibility for the social and financial outcome of a project. The social entrepreneur as such can be a single person or (a part of) an organization.

Each case is unique, and neither the dilemma nor the solution to them could without further consideration be subject to any generalizability (Yin, 2014). The dilemmas presented may or may not arise when conducting (similar) research, but we argue that the mere fact of their existence makes them worth discussing. This has resulted in our ambition to further the ongoing scholarly discussion on research ethics by using our experiences from conducting research in the field of sport and social entrepreneurship.

**Ethical considerations**

We will not explicitly mention the names of the cases or their geographical location, as this is of no importance to our discussion. However, they might still be traceable, because the studied ventures are more or less well-known locally in Sweden. The people involved have consented to research being done on their activities and organizations. Actually, some of them have also expressed a wish that we conduct research in order to put words on what they are doing, thus helping them to become more visible (cf. Jeanes, 2017). This also constitutes one part of the problem, which we will return to later. In the interviews, the entrepreneurs had the chance to express themselves freely, and as researchers we have not taken sides to their narratives and to what they describe as social good. When we have taken part in their activities, the focus of our interest has been on the content, i.e. what the undertaking contains and how it has been conducted. The data do not contain any sensitive personal information.

**The cases and the experienced dilemmas**

We will now present the three cases that highlight the ethical dilemmas we have experienced when conducting research on social entrepreneurship. The descriptions begin with an illustration of the ventures, especially with regard to their goals and means and their defined target groups. This is followed by a presentation of our role as researchers and an introduction to the experienced dilemmas.

**The venture for school children in the city centre (VSCCC)**

The first case can be described as a VSCCC. It is an organization within the voluntary sector that offers physical and mental training as well as education in school settings.
The children that the organization targets are between 10 and 12 years old. VSCCC works with these classes at least one hour per week for an entire school year. Every lesson includes basic knowledge about, for instance, food and health, sleep and training, as well as good behaviour. It is, however, neither a traditional sports club, because the organization is not affiliated to the SSC, nor a part of the school institution. However, some school principals find VSCCC and its activities so valuable that they have extended the mandatory school week by one hour.

VSCCC primarily defines its social aim by describing some problems in society. The organization is critical of what it considers to be the far too extensive competitive, and thus exclusionary, activities within most Swedish sports clubs. It also argues that adults (often parents) do not support children the right way. Children have a huge need of being confirmed on their own terms, not with a view to satisfying the adult world.

A great many of the activities contain physical activities that incorporate humanitarian and social values. VSCCC wants to empower all the participants, despite social class, gender or ethnicity. In fact, one of the leaders expresses that ‘the main idea is thus that they should be able to take care of themselves. How they act will influence them, in one way or another’. During the activity hours, the venture also addresses the children’s willingness to be part of the group and their capability of showing solidarity and attention to both the group and the leaders/pedagogues.

The schools, which are primarily funded by taxes, are supposed to provide all the children with a maximum of equal opportunities in their lives. Even though VSCCC is not part of the school institution, its pedagogy rests on a philosophy deeply rooted in the Nordic welfare system, in which the individual has to support the group and vice versa. This means that the group needs to embrace an inclusive but at the same time a fostering and uniting logic. Thus, sport is a means for the children towards both empowerment and becoming part of the school day.

Entrepreneurship is primarily a means for VSCCC to allocate financial resources, but also to function as a way of creating an arena for educating and empowering the children. However, VSCCC has had problems with financing their activities due to the strained economy of the schools which constitute the ‘market’ in which VSCC operates. At the same time, the sports movement has referred the organization to the municipality, and the municipality has passed VSCCC around from one administrative unit to another. VSCCC thus needs to be legitimized by the authorities to receive funding.

As researchers, we were invited by the self-governed region to evaluate VSCCC. We accepted the invitation and also wrote a book about VSCCC and its role as a social entrepreneur. The organization was mentioned in a government report shortly after the evaluation (SOU, 2016). The evaluation and the book helped VSCCC to ‘put words’ on what the organization was doing, and as a result the venture obtained more legitimacy and also secured some financial support.

The fact that VSCCC partly initiated the evaluation on its own implies that it did not want to be anonymous. The evaluation and our research were incorporated in the venture’s own narrative. The research became a means of legitimizing the venture, which potentially led to improving the financial status. Additionally, when ‘putting words’ on the venture, we, as researchers, received an interpretative prerogative. When describing the organization and its work we might also have affected the direction of the venture. After the evaluation, VSCCC received extra funding from the self-governed
region for its ‘good’ work. Since then, we have also been approached as researchers and asked if we could assist the organization in writing grant applications to various funding sources.

An equestrian venture

During our research, we have come across a number of equestrian ventures. These often include both a riding school and various ownership rights (e.g. land and stables). In addition, equestrian ventures are seldom able to exist without also including a (small) commercial business. This means that a large number of the equestrian ventures are situated partly in the commercial and partly in the voluntary sector. In such ventures in Sweden, many working hours are spent voluntarily by young girls in exchange for being with the horses. Without this voluntary labour, several stables and riding schools would face financial difficulties, which would mean fewer opportunities for these girls to nurture their hobby and their identities. For example, some of the equestrian ventures we have come across have organized social ventures for those who would not otherwise get in contact with horses, such as children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and migrants newly arrived in Sweden.

In one of the equestrian ventures, we were faced with a dilemma regarding undeclared wages and untaxed work. In our research, we have chosen to protect our informants from any harm associated with their participation. We were confronted as researchers and asked why we did not study the venture’s working conditions and how we could argue that this kind of venture can be understood as something socially good, especially if these conditions may not be acceptable either from a trade union perspective or according to the Working Environment Act. The problem is not unique. A recently produced TV documentary (Swedish Television, 2016) highlights similar working conditions and unregulated apprenticeship systems in equestrian ventures.

The equestrian clubs and their organizational form and structure are examples of what happens when boundaries between different sectors of society are crossed. When researchers explore social ventures with similar organizational structures and labour policies, they may face the aforementioned ethical dilemma. Supposedly, if business and the voluntary equestrian club do cooperate, the work that is performed can be conducted either legally and according to labour policies, or illegally. The work (e.g. clearing out the dung) performed by a young girl within a riding school (voluntary sector) is for example legal, whereas the same act can be regarded as a violation of legislation if performed within the commercial part of the venture. This creates various opportunities for ventures to use the regulations of either sector to favour and strengthen their own business. However, this leads to questions regarding what responsibilities we, as researchers, have to examine/analyse ventures in their entirety, even if our research questions only focus on the ‘social’ aspects of the venture. This is an important question to discuss, in particular when it seems as though our work, in our other cases, has rendered positive confirmation of the social ventures studied.
**A sports club in the countryside**

The third case concerns a voluntary sports club on an island in the Swedish countryside. The sports club has over 400 members, who represent a majority of the island’s inhabitants (approx. 730). The club was founded in the 1930s and has since covered a comprehensive field of activities. The activities offered by the club have depended on the prevailing societal trends and on members’ interests. The ambition is that there should be something for everyone.

Almost all of the offered activities take place on a health and wellness basis, regardless of, for instance, age or skill set. However, the club does not just address its own members, but its events and some of its activities are also open to all the inhabitants of the island, as well as to tourists. Examples of events organized are the midsummer celebration, a running race, and pre-season football camps. These camps are realized through a well-established collaboration with the folk high school and its hotel and conference establishment. Overall, the voluntary sports club is engaged in a great many collaborations that cross the boundaries between the various sectors of society. They include collaboration with the aforementioned folk high school within the voluntary sector and its commercial hotel and conference establishment, a public youth detention centre, as well as the municipality. All the collaborations form ways of ensuring long-term stability, both operationally and financially.

At first glance, it might appear strange that this seemingly self-going organization could create more ethical dilemmas for us researchers than just the difficulties concerned with anonymity, due to its location and its rather unique structure. Its collaboration with the local youth detention centre is, for example, well known and this alone makes the organization somewhat special. However, even if we should try to keep the club anonymous, this would be difficult. This is also due to the fact that the sport club’s representatives are eager to tell their story (in which we as researchers are included) to, for instance, the municipality, various media and other researchers. We can thus be of use to the sports club in the branding process as a way to legitimize the club and its work. The chairperson of the club claims, for example, that ‘when the representatives of the municipality tell their colleagues that you have contacted us and for what reason, then it’s just beneficial for us’. By doing this, the club may obtain some advantages over other ‘potentially’ competing organizations in their communication with others (in this case the municipality).

This seal of approval becomes even further strengthened when we, as researchers, communicate our findings to the surrounding community via articles, media and conferences. In doing so, we become part of a branding and legitimizing process.

**A reflected understanding of the experienced dilemmas**

Ethical dilemmas in doing research on social entrepreneurship primarily concern professional research ethics. In this section, we offer a reflected understanding on the described ethical dilemmas, which represent such as may occur when doing research on social entrepreneurship in relation to sport in a Swedish context. In doing so, we will also deal with dilemmas when the researchers’ professional ethics and ethical dilemmas occurring in social entrepreneurship are interwoven.
The two-sided vulnerability in entrepreneurial research

In research involving human subjects, participants should be protected as far as possible against harm associated with their participation (cf. Swedish Research Council, 2017; WMA, 2013). Therefore, anonymity and confidentiality are prescribed in the interest of avoiding harm to those participating in research. However, as is shown in our cases, it is often not in the interest of entrepreneurs to be anonymous; instead, they want to spread knowledge about all the good work they do. As researchers, we are encouraged to cooperate with the surrounding society. Frequently, people engaged in entrepreneurial ventures want us to write about their enterprise or to guide them in the process. We may then not only become a means of legitimizing their enterprise, but also become a part of the brand, and a means of branding the ventures. Still, we must simultaneously protect them and treat their stories respectfully (cf. Jeanes, 2017).

This two-sided vulnerability is one type of dilemma presented in our cases, where the entrepreneurs in charge use the recognition and legitimacy provided by us as researchers as a means to becoming internally strengthened and gaining external advantages. These advantages may be of a financial character or related to facilities or other conditions necessary for the operations (cf. VSCCC and the countryside sports club). The entrepreneurs can also, like VSCCC, actively seek guidance and cooperation research in writing applications to different funders.

In sum, this means that both we and the studied organization in communication with others can use each other to gain certain advantages. In other words, the relationship between researcher and research subject can be compared to a two-way street (i.e. both parts use each other), rather than the frequently discussed unilateral one-way concern for how the researcher deals with the researched subject (e.g. APA, 2017; BSA, 2017; Swedish Research Council, 2017).

Not being anonymous also means that the research conducted can become part of the entrepreneur’s narrative and thereby also of the brand that social entrepreneurs often need for financing their ventures (Keller, 2008). Becoming part of the brand could of course conflict with the researcher’s critical aim and mission and would as such probably not be included in the researcher’s intent. In the long run, it may thus harm the researcher’s trustworthiness and credibility (cf. Le Reux, 2015). Becoming associated with a certain project is at the same time difficult to avoid if ventures of this nature are going to be researched, especially when taking into account that researchers should comply with the guidelines and suggestions that emphasize a respectful relationship with the research subjects and their right to autonomy (e.g. APA, 2017; Iphofen, 2015; Tracy, 2010). Reasoning like this indicates that researchers should explicitly mention the research subjects by name, if they so choose (Le Reux, 2015). If research from the entrepreneur’s perspective is supposed to be used for branding, it may also affect the selection of what should be published. It is not always the case that any form of publicity is good publicity. Negative results may of course also have a negative influence on the entrepreneur’s enterprise. Therefore, agreements made between researchers and entrepreneurs need to be clear about how research results will be published.

Due to its social values, we often sympathize with the aim of our research subjects’ social work. We do not just randomly select cases, and we do not select cases which
we disapprove of. This does not mean, however, that we can as researchers justify anything that is being done in the name of the venture. As researchers, we always need to pay extra attention to maintaining a critical lens.

**The complexity of ethical dilemmas**

Research ethics and researchers’ professional ethics may be interwoven with the ethics of social entrepreneurship. The way social fostering activities or the sport in itself is conducted might turn out to be questionable, or the entrepreneurship may be performed in a ‘bad manner’. In the Swedish Working Environment Act, different agreements on working hours and age restrictions against child labour in the commercial and public sectors are stated, whereas similar work may be more or less unregulated in the voluntary sector, in which the Swedish sports movement is commonly engaged. In the sports movement, voluntary work is seldom problematized, but instead considered as something worth striving for. Civil servants and journalists might scrutinize the venture, as in the equestrian case. And given that (a) the research is on social entrepreneurship, the studied organization and its location, structure and activities need to be explicitly described, which sometimes makes it difficult to keep the organization anonymous; (b) social entrepreneurs may not want to be anonymous; (c) researchers may actively become part of the brand or the branding process and thereby included in the ventures; (d) research can be used by the social entrepreneurs to legitimize their venture; and, finally, the fact that (e) social entrepreneurs cross boundaries, the researchers also have to navigate between the different sectors of society. Research could then legitimize a venture that, according to legislation in a certain sector, is of a questionable nature. Thus, researchers may run the risk of being accused of becoming accomplices in the venture.

Two things that make research in this area extra problematic are, first, that ‘social good’ implies a normative perspective (Myrdal, 1968). It is permeated by ideology and ethics and forces us to actively choose what ventures we should work with. Second, what is considered as social good may differ from one sector of society to another, as the entrepreneur crosses boundaries. Social orders vary between all sectors and perhaps also within these. What is valid as resources and capital in one sector might not be so in the other, and what is legal within one sector may be illegal in another (Pestoff, 1998). As a result, researchers need to be aware of the consequences of moving between various sectors in society.

**How to deal with doubtful findings**

When findings indicate that practice is in conflict with existing regulations or laws, the researcher ends up confronting an ethical dilemma. In the interest of society, it is important to publish the findings. At the same time, the researcher has obligations towards the participating subjects that need to be considered. We argue that agreements between researchers and participants made in advance may generally be formulated and that, in terms of publication, consent to what is published is usually included in the agreement, if agreements towards participating actors are to be kept, or if those questionable findings should be published against the will of the
participants. If a practice is of a criminal nature that falls under the notification obli-
gation, the researcher has no choice but to inform responsible authorities (Swedish
Research Council, 2017). Still, how to deal with findings that are not as severe, but
questionable, is not self-evident but a dilemma that calls for judicious judgments by
the researcher (Ferdinand et al., 2007).

Discussion

As researchers, we have met social entrepreneurs who willingly tell ‘legends’ about
their socially good work. As storytelling is often part of the branding process (Dacin
et al., 2011), we have noticed that our research easily becomes part of their stories.
Merely by selecting cases which we initially assess as socially good, a social mission
can be ascribed to us. This reflection of interwovenness becomes even more impor-
tant when considering the Swedish universities’ mission to be a collaborating partner
and driving force in society. Entrepreneurs who cross boundaries without playing by
the rules of legislation or research ethics may cause unintended consequences
(cf. Williams & Knife, 2012). The research might then be associated with the brand,
and the consequences might affect the researcher, who then runs the risk of being
labelled uncritical and unprofessional by different stakeholders.

Another questionable dimension is whether as researchers we should be marketers
of the ventures we study. As professionals, we need to take a step back and be both
critical of our work and make this criticism visible – which is partly what we are doing
by writing this article. This is, for instance, why we find it essential to define what we
mean by ‘social’ and to describe the Nordic welfare system as central in the context,
although this, to some extent, makes us normative.

Our experience is that ethical questions in this research area are particularly import-
ant due to its normative elements (i.e. how ‘socially good’ a social venture is). On an
individual level, it all depends on the entrepreneur’s definition of ‘social’ and on the
identification of target groups and social actions. All these aspects are permeated by
ideology and ethics and are more or less consistent with the predominant values in
the various sectors of society. For example, we may encounter something that can be
described as ‘bad’ social entrepreneurship, but not as ‘bad’ as to make it subject to
the obligation to notify authorities. Will it then be possible for us to continue doing
research on the venture? Should we report whatever bad conditions we face, even if
they do not form part of the research focus?

Still, our answer in this respect is clear. Abiding by research ethics, we have to pro-
tect our informants, even if they do not want to be anonymous, unless their bad man-
ers fall under the notification obligation. In the spirit of being a societal driving force,
we prefer to remain speaking partners, which will hopefully lead to increased insights
– for both parties. Another choice is to abandon the venture and stop researching it.
Additionally, what we consider as social good is determined by us and perhaps differs
depending on which sector and social order the venture is working within. As previ-
ously described, the ‘social good’ in entrepreneurship is not for everyone, and people
in different contexts will often have different opinions on what is good and what
is not.
One could argue that in the research process informants should always be anonymous, which would in a sense be the easiest way out for us as researchers. Still, when entrepreneurs do not want to be anonymous, is it then reasonable for the researchers to persuade them into being that? According to research ethics, no one should be persuaded into being part of a research venture, but with the anonymity the win-win situation for the entrepreneurs is lost. In their view, they do not receive any attention for all the good work they are doing. If entrepreneurs with branding awareness have to be anonymous, they might not want to participate. Researchers must, however, respect the entrepreneurs and their autonomy (Jeanes, 2017; Le Reux, 2015; Tracy, 2010), which is not always easy, because the consequences of giving up anonymity are not always evident for the participants and we, as researchers are, according to the research ethics, required to protect the research subject from any harm (e.g. APA, 2017; BSA, 2017; Iphofen, 2015). Once anonymity has been abandoned, you cannot retrieve it. From a research ethics perspective, one could then discuss whether research involving subjects that are not anonymous should be conducted at all. At the same time, avoiding doing research would in a sense also be unethical, because the chance of improving knowledge about the phenomena would then be restricted.

Conclusions

In this article, we have discussed some ethical dilemmas that have been experienced when doing research on social entrepreneurial sport ventures. The dilemmas concern the research subjects’ anonymity, the researchers’ involvement in the branding and legitimization of the researched ventures, and the differences between the various rules and legislation in the different sectors of society. Within this complex area, we argue for the need of more knowledge, research and discussion. By reflecting on research and on dilemmas, such as those presented here, this paper constitutes a theoretical contribution in that it problematizes existing normative ethical guidelines, as well as describing how the entry of social entrepreneurship into sport science research has raised some methodological and ethical questions. Additionally, the paper makes a practical contribution by illustrating cases of social entrepreneurial sport ventures and by preparing researchers to handle various ethical dilemmas that might arise in doing empirical (sport) research.

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