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Contemporary qualitative research methods in sport management

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 10 years, qualitative research methods have become more commonplace in sport management scholarship. In the main, they are largely defined by a formulaic approach in which case studies, semi-structured interviews, and coding are often used. Alternative qualitative approaches, which may open up research to new audiences and research participants, and challenge assumptions about 'good research,' appear to be largely absent. This special issue on contemporary qualitative research methods in sport management includes conceptual advances in community-based research approaches, Indigenous methodologies, participatory action research, autoethnographies, and narratives. In addition, we present empirical papers that illustrate the use of autoethnography, narrative, digital ethnography, and phenomenology in the field. These articles provide examples for use in classes on qualitative research methods, and can serve to inspire others to use contemporary methods. We encourage sport management researchers to learn about and use contemporary qualitative data collection and analysis, and alternative means of disseminating their work to further enhance the field and challenge ways of knowing and doing research.
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1. Introduction

Although qualitative research methods are more common in sport management compared to 20–30 years ago (see Inglis, 1992; Olafson, 1990; Paton, 1987), and despite calls for more inventive and critical approaches to research in the field (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Skinner & Edwards, 2005), we argue that there is still a lack of variety in the types of qualitative approaches used (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). In sport management, qualitative research is often conducted as a case study or case studies design, using semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data collection and some form of coding as the approach for data analysis (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). There is nothing inherently wrong with case studies, semi-structured interviews, or coding. However, without some variety in the approaches used to conduct research, researchers might assume that these approaches are without faults or cannot be improved, and are appropriate for answering most qualitative-based research questions.

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There is an absence of qualitative methodologies in sport management that differ from the norm for structuring research projects, collecting data, interacting with participants, analysing data, or presenting findings. These approaches take into consideration other values and ideologies that help to broaden and deepen research. They challenge traditional ways of thinking about how qualitative research should be done and what is 'good research'. They enable scholars to use a broad range of critical theories and to reflect those theories through their methodological choices. They may, in this way, engender positive change where traditional approaches have not.

We are not arguing that typical qualitative approaches are inappropriate or that contemporary ones are better. Rather, we observe that in other related fields there appears to be more use of contemporary qualitative research methods. Smith and Sparkes (2016) recently published a handbook of qualitative research methods in sport and exercise. This edited book draws upon work conducted by researchers in sport sociology, sport psychology, disability studies, exercise science, physical activity studies, leisure studies, and sport coaching. Interestingly, few contributions are from sport management researchers. Perhaps this is an indication that, as a field, there is a need to be more innovative and creative with chosen methodologies. While there are likely many explanations for this situation, perhaps one reason is that there is a lack of awareness of these approaches, their value, and application (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). This special issue is an opportunity to share and showcase the potential of contemporary qualitative research methods in the field of sport management.

2. Papers in this issue

Approaches such as participatory action research (PAR), Indigenous methodologies, and community-based research with marginalised groups acknowledge and challenge the knowledge, experience, and power of researchers in the research process. These approaches require researchers to reflect on and address their positionality in the work (see for example Frisby, 2006). This special issue includes three theoretical advances that discuss the roles of qualitative researchers within different participant communities. Rich and Misener (2017) reflect on the use of first-person action inquiry during a participatory action research project in Northern Ontario. They consider the implications of using multi-faceted research practices and how, they argue, this approach enhanced their research and relationships both with participants and between research student and supervisor. Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, and Richardson (2017) address the challenges of planning and doing research in an environment where the culture is different to one's own. They outline the talanoa process of conducting research in the Pacific region or working with Pacific people. Stewart-Withers et al. advocate for approaches, such as talanoa, to de-centre conventional, western approaches to qualitative research. Sherry, Schulenkorf, Seal, Nicholson, and Hoye (2017) reflect on their experiences as researchers in low- and middle-income countries and specifically discuss the combination of traditional research methods and innovative approaches to qualitative inquiry. They highlight and advocate flexible, innovative, and locally relevant research design, and inclusive, reflexive, and participatory research approaches during the monitoring and evaluation processes.

We present one theoretical advancement paper and two empirical papers based on self-studies in this special issue. Self-studies, including personal narratives, self-ethnographies, and autoethnographies, legitimise the lived experiences of researchers (Sparkes, 2000). Since many sport management researchers are also consumers (e.g., fans and spectators) and producers of sport (e.g., administrators, coaches, officials, volunteers), it is reasonable to assume that, as insiders to these worlds, they have valuable insight to share with the field. Cooper, Grenier, & Macauley (2017) utilise critical theory to highlight the potential for autoethnography as a qualitative methodology in sport management. As critical theory focuses on empowering marginalised groups, its combination with autoethnography offers opportunity to ensure that scholars continue to hear and respect the opinions and perspectives of under-represented groups in sport management. Schaeperkoetter (2017) uses autoethnography to reflect upon and analyse her experiences as a female basketball official. As officiating in sport continues to be dominated by men, her experiences offer a unique insight to this role. Thus, one benefit of autoethnographies is that it provides the opportunity for individuals from overlooked or marginalised groups to have their voices and experiences shared and legitimised in a research setting. Baker, Zhou, Pizzo, Du, and Funk (2017) explore the utility of collaborative self-study, whereby all members of the research team wore fitness watches and recorded their individual experiences with it in journals. The focus of their paper is on the ethics, benefits, and challenges of undertaking a team approach to self-ethnography.

Narrative-based research recognises that we live in a world of stories and often recount our experiences as stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narrative-based research can serve as the overall design (e.g., narrative inquiry), a means for collecting data (e.g., asking participants to share stories), or a platform for disseminating the findings (e.g., presenting the findings as narratives). Stride, Fitzgerald, and Allison (2017) argue for the use of narratives as means of disseminating findings to key sport stakeholders. Storytelling is an engaging communication tool and makes it easier to connect and share research with different audiences. In their paper, they share one non-fictional story that was developed from research conducted with the English Football Association. Wright (2017) combines two contemporary qualitative methods in his work. He uses a personal narrative to comment on the legacy of his autoethnography of a sport tourist. While narratives are often shared by participants, Smith and Humphries (2017) state that material objects have meanings and thus contribute to the development of narratives in sport organisations. They propose a conceptual framework for studying object narratives in sport.

Ethnographies involve systematic and in-depth observations of culture within a particular context in order to understand how groups of people interact and behave (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Given the cultural importance that sport plays in

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