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## Sport Management Review

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/smr](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/smr)

## A narrative approach: The possibilities for sport management

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 January 2016

Received in revised form 30 September 2016

Accepted 4 October 2016

Available online 14 December 2016

## Keywords:

Narratives

Storytelling

Data re-presentation

Qualitative research

## ABSTRACT

This paper connects with practitioners and scholars in sport management regarding the utility of adopting narrative inquiry, and more specifically stories as a medium to re-present research findings. We map out the broad field of narrative inquiry and also discuss what features are required to constitute stories. Drawing from some sport management research undertaken on behalf of The English Football Association, we offer one story crafted to re-present data generated. We discuss the benefits and challenges of using stories as a means of data re-presentation. The paper concludes by offering our thoughts regarding the contributions stories make to research in sport management.

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## 1. Introduction

In her Earle F. Zeigler Award lecture in 2004, Frisby (2005) noted that sport management research is dominated by positivist approaches. These have undoubtedly proved useful in addressing many key issues within sport management. However, Frisby (2005) provides a compelling argument for drawing upon the critical social sciences to see and think differently about research to extend knowledge and understandings in the field. In the same year, Amis and Silk (2005) continue this debate in a special edition of the *Journal of Sport Management*, “Expanding Horizons: Promoting Critical and Innovative Approaches to the Study of Sport Management.” They argue that “sport management is a field blinkered by its disciplinarity” (Amis & Silk, 2005, p. 360) and note the progressive work in areas like sport sociology to call for innovative thinking and approaches in sport management research. They propose that these developments can contribute to the ways in which sport management research can impact upon and have meaning for the communities it serves.

Yet, one decade later Knoppers (2015), using the work of Love and Andrew (2012) in *Sport Management Review*, highlights how the disciplines of sport management and the sociology of sport remain distinct, infrequently drawing upon each other. Knoppers (2015) asserts that adopting a sociological lens and critically reflexive approach can enable sport management practitioners and scholars to begin to better understand how societal issues are inextricably embedded within the management, governance, marketing, and development of sport. Amis and Silk (2005) concur, adding that it is this kind of critically reflexive outlook that will encourage a questioning of established management practices, structures and taken for granted assumptions and how these contribute to social inequalities. In so doing, the possibilities open up for new ways of organising and managing sport, as well as researching and teaching in the area of sport management (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Knoppers, 2015).

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In calling for an imaginative rethinking in the ways sport management research is approached, [Amis and Silk \(2005\)](#), and more recently [Shaw and Hoeber \(2016\)](#), critique the effectiveness of conventional research methods. For example, like [Bonnett and Carrington \(2000\)](#), we have found that traditional quantitative methods often conflate individual differences and diversity into a few tidy, simplistic, overarching categories that are subsequently reported neatly through numerical sets, pie charts, and graphs. Moreover, such data rarely portray the meanings, reasons, feelings, and emotions behind the findings reported. In recent years, it would appear that the field of sport management has begun to embrace the use of qualitative methods as a legitimate means of generating data ([Shaw & Hoeber, 2016](#)). However as [Shaw and Hoeber \(2016\)](#) highlight, this rarely extends beyond traditional semi-structured interviews, focus groups and case studies. Whilst these maybe viewed as somewhat alternative by some, for other disciplines interviews and focus groups have also been criticised. For example, failing to capture individualised stories that reflect the multiplicity, fragmentation and complexity of lived experience ([Flintoff, Fitzgerald, & Scraton, 2008](#)).

We cohere with [Shaw and Hoeber \(2016\)](#) that there is a need for those engaged in sport management research and practice to push the boundaries of their thinking, and be innovative, reflexive and critical in their methodological considerations. As critical researchers we extend this debate to challenge not only the ways in which data are generated but to also question the conventional ways in which data are re-presented. This resonates with [Frisby's \(2005, p. 5\)](#) concern that "we need to ask whether we know how to communicate our findings beyond traditional academic outlets so our research will have the intended impact." This paper attempts to connect with practitioners and scholars in sport management regarding the utility of adopting a narrative approach when re-presenting research findings. As [Dowling \(2012, p. 37\)](#) articulates, "such an approach can no longer be marginalized within the field when we live in a society permeated by narrative."

At this juncture it is worth noting that narrative inquiry is not marginalised in some academic disciplines but well established ([Clandinin, 2007, 2013](#)). The field boasts a number of journals such as *Narrative Inquiry*, *Storyworlds*, *Narrative Culture* and *Narrative*. In terms of disciplinary areas, Black feminism has long recognised the value of utilising poetry, song and storytelling to recount diverse social realities ([Smith, 2000](#)). Similarly, researchers within the field of education have used critical race methodologies that embrace counter narratives, biographies and family histories as a resource for articulating lived experiences ([Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995](#); [Solorzano & Yosso, 2002](#)). Interestingly, scholars in the fields of sport sociology, physical activity and Physical Education have also embraced the narrative turn. For example, a special edition of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* in 2000 focused on narratives and sport research; and more recently a special edition of *Sport, Education and Society* (2016) explored the current tensions in narrative inquiry. [Sparkes' \(2002\)](#) monograph, *Telling Tales in Sport and Physical Activity*, the edited collection by [Dowling, Fitzgerald, and Flintoff \(2012\)](#), and the recent text *Life Story Research in Sport* (2015) by [Douglas and Carless \(2015\)](#), all discuss narrative as a method of inquiry.

Whilst the broader field of sport research is embracing the narrative turn and grappling with the methodological and theoretical debates this brings, sport management is conspicuously absent from these discussions. However, the work of [Cohen and Peachey \(2015\)](#), [Smith and Weed \(2007\)](#), and [Thompson, Potrac, and Jones \(2015\)](#) goes some way in beginning to address this gap. As [Smith and Sparkes \(2012, p. 80\)](#) eloquently articulate, we "swim in sea of sporting stories and tales that we hear or read or listen to or see. As such, there is much to be gained in engaging in the debate that surrounds the narrative turn in other disciplines." This positional paper offers practitioners and scholars working in sport management the opportunity to begin to engage in these methodological debates. In tandem, we draw upon some sport management research we recently completed on behalf of The English Football Association (The FA) to better illustrate the points being made. As part of this research, non-fictional stories were used as one means of re-presenting the key findings. The paper begins by considering the notion of narrative inquiry, focusing specifically on narrative as stories. The paper then contextualises the research undertaken for The FA, the rationale for the research, and the multiple methods used to generate data. This is followed by an example of one story crafted from these data, that of 'The FA Tutor'. With reference to this story and The FA research, the paper concludes by offering our thoughts on the benefits and challenges stories bring to research and practice within sport management. We hope this paper challenges practitioners and scholars in the field to consider the value of adopting a storied approach to data dissemination.

## 2. Narrative inquiry

### 2.1. What is narrative inquiry?

Whilst there is much debate about what narrative inquiry is, [Clandinin \(2013\)](#) describes it as an overarching term that encompasses the activities involved in generating, analysing and re-presenting stories of life experiences. Narrative inquiry then can be considered as a methodology that informs the collection of data (methods), analysis (of texts) and dissemination (re-presentation). Similarly, [Connelly and Clandinin \(2006\)](#) distinguish between narrative inquiry as 'living', 'telling', 'retelling' and 'reliving'. In relation to living and telling, as researchers we ask people to share their experiences of life. To aid in this process, a range of methods can be drawn upon including ethnography, autoethnography, interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, photographs, artefacts, blogs and field notes. These methods provide a means of generating 'texts'; that is, interpretations of an individual's social worlds and their life experiences. Through analysis these texts become 'retold' or re-presented in a variety of ways including ethnodrama, poetic representation, autoethnography, fictional or non-fictional

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