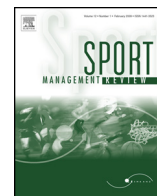




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Review

Autoethnography as a critical approach in sport management: Current applications and directions for future research

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the value of autoethnography as a qualitative methodology, document the current literature using autoethnographic approaches, and explore the possibilities for future research in the field of sport management. Using a critical lens to counter dominant ideologies that marginalize certain groups of people through the sustainment of existing power structures and inequities, we sought to address the following inquiries: What is autoethnography and how can it be applied to the critical study of sport management? In doing so, we will explore the benefits of the methodology to the field of sport management as well as the challenges and opportunities created in this form of reflexive study. We also offer suggestions for how to apply autoethnography to a variety of research purposes germane to the field of sport management.

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1. Introduction

Autoethnography is an analytic approach, research genre, and form of writing that explicitly connects a researcher's lived experiences and perspectives to the social and cultural world in which they exist (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Extending beyond more common autobiographies and memoirs, autoethnographies fall within reflexive ethnography with rich narratives that evoke emotion from the reader, while also requiring the researcher to critically examine the recursive relationship between themselves and historical events, social structures, and cultural practices (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000). More specifically, autoethnographies involve a level of critical self-reflexivity that heightens one's awareness or consciousness of broader social inequities in society, which can ultimately lead to positive reform efforts to increase equity for all (Sparkes, 2002b). Moreover, this methodology inherently challenges the "normally held divisions of self/other, inner/outer, public/private, individual/society, and immediacy/memory" (Sparkes, 2002a, p. 216), and thus enables the researcher to articulate the complexities of a lived experience in a way that only a true emic perspective can offer. In other words, autoethnographies possess the potential to fulfill the promise of sociological inquiry as

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purported by C. Wright Mills (1959) whereby the connection between personal troubles and public issues can be explored and better understood.

Both evocative autoethnographies, that focus more on presenting alternative narratives and stimulating emotion (Denzin, 1997; Ellis, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000), and analytic autoethnographies, that aim to build on theoretical understandings of a phenomena (Anderson, 2006), are useful methodologies for enhancing more generally our collective understanding of the social worlds around us as well as specifically informing our shared experiences of and meaning making from involvement with sport. Related to evocative autoethnographies, Ellis (1999) described the ethnographic setting and how she engaged in this type of research:

Well, I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life... (p. 691)

With evocative autoethnographies, the autoethnographer's life and critical reflexivity of these lived experiences serves as context for exploration – particularly the affective aspects. These evocative ethnographies can be written as “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layer writing, and social science prose” (Ellis & Bochner (2000) as cited in Ellis, 1999, p. 673). In terms of analytic autoethnographies, Anderson (2006) outlined five key components: “(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialog with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis” (p. 378). In analytic autoethnographies, researchers occupy both first- and second-order narratives when describing settings where the researcher is physically located and/or abstractly connected (i.e., identifying with individuals who experience a similar condition or emotion, but not located in the same physical space). According to Anderson (2006), analytic autoethnographies present detailed narratives of lived experiences and connect them with social science theories with the aim of providing “a more accurate and meaningful framework for understanding” phenomena (p. 379). Anderson (2006) also surmised that analytic autoethnographies are consistent with “traditional symbolic interactionist autoethnography” whereas evocative autoethnographies are often described as “a radically non-traditional, poststructuralist form of research” based on its data collection methods and modes of representation (p. 391). Both evocative and analytic autoethnographies link the personal with the social. However, evocative autoethnographers do not necessarily possess clear analytic goals prior to engaging in research inquiry (i.e., retrospective reflection on one's lived experiences with emotional appeal) whereas analytic autoethnographers begin their research with clear analytic goals and focus on expanding existing theoretical understandings (i.e., research initiated to better understanding social phenomena) (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 1999).

In addition to understanding the dynamic relationship between self and culture, these autoethnographic approaches also provide a means to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies and structures (McDonald & Birrell, 1999). Each society possesses dominant ideologies that have been shaped over time and influence structural arrangements, social norms, and individual experiences. Within the United States (U.S.), the dominant ideologies are patriarchy/sexism/hegemonic masculinity (gender), White supremacy/racism (race), classism (socioeconomic status), ableism (ability), ageism (age), and heterosexism and homophobia (sexuality) (Coakley, 2015; Cunningham & Singer, 2012; Earp, 2010); all of which are embedded in social institutions including sport.

Despite the positive emotions and outcomes associated with sport (e.g., collective hubris, communalism, health benefits, economic gains for individuals, communities, and nations, etc.), it has often been referred to as a microcosm of society meaning that it can serve as a site for the reinforcement and reproduction of dominant ideologies (Coakley, 2015). For example, renowned sport sociologist Michael Messner (1992, 2007) has problematized the nature of how sport structures and practices are designed to perpetuate hegemonic masculinity and heterosexist norms. According to Messner (2007), gender norms are socially constructed and reproduced on three levels: (1) meaning (culture), (2) performance (interaction), and (3) organization (structure). Using autoethnographic methods, Messner (2007) illustrated how the complex nature of power is exerted and reproduced in society to privilege certain groups (i.e., heterosexual males) and to disadvantage others deemed outside the “norm” (i.e., homosexual males). Even though there is potential for autoethnography to illuminate and challenge the culture of sport and deconstruct hegemonic forces and other invisible norms, it is still underutilized and often questioned as a form of inquiry that lacks rigor, validity, and “objectivity” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2002a, 2002b).

As such, some scholars may struggle with the lack of researcher detachment from the participants or experience seeing it as somehow violating the integrity of the study, and question the ability of autoethnographers to write in ways that are both public and ethical (Delamont, 2007). Others criticize the methodology for not being “real” research, but just stories that lack rigor, theory, and analytical methods (Ellis, 1999). As a step in addressing this problem we sought to explore how scholars and practitioners can engage in autoethnographic processes. More specifically, our aim is to present how, given the popular appeal and visibility of sport, autoethnographic approaches in sport management research can lead to social breakthroughs in terms of awareness/consciousness raising, empathy, reconciliation, acceptance, and equity for all (Coakley, 2015; Cunningham & Singer, 2012; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2012).

1.1. Process and approach to autoethnography

Like other qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory, autoethnography is guided by a specific intention and methods of data collection, analysis, and representation. Specifically, autoethnographies

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