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Talanoa: A contemporary qualitative methodology for sport management



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ABSTRACT

In an interconnected world, and with cultural diversity ever present, there is growing recognition in sport management for the need to understand such diversity alongside the desire for more inclusive organisations and processes. Research which informs these understandings is thus fundamental. Planning and doing research in an environment where the culture is different can, however, add a level of complexity to the research. No matter the project phase - conception, design, data collection or analysis - cultural consideration must be given (Johnston, 2014). Those undertaking research in differing cultural settings often look to find a research approach which marries with the cultural context. In the Pacific region, or for those working with Pacific people, a popular choice is talanoa. Drawing on empirical work with Pacific rugby athletes, the authors outline the talanoa process – an “embodied expression of the vanua concept” (Farrelly & Nabobo Baba, 2012, p. 1). Ethical issues, challenges, and opportunities in using this approach are reflected on, and the value of talanoa to sport management research and in particular the sub-field of sport-for-development is considered. The authors argue the importance of talanoa as a culturally-appropriate contemporary qualitative research approach when working with Pasifika people or Pasifika issues. Approaches such as talanoa are valuable for challenging sport management researchers to further examine their own roles in the process of producing sport-specific knowledge; for decentring current approaches to sport management research and for shifting the discipline towards politicization; as well as contributing to broader conversations regarding decolonising indigenous research (Shaw & Hoerber, 2016; Skinner & Edwards, 2010; Skinner et al., 2014).

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1. Introduction: The need for decentring current approaches to sport management research and practice

In their recent article, Shaw and Hoerber (2016) recount the various challenges they both faced when using qualitative research methodologies. Noting at times that this research, as an end product, was criticised heavily and labelled as biased, anecdotal, untrustworthy and, at worse, un-useful, due to the inability to generalise to wider populations, they state clearly the importance of why the discipline of sport management needs to move forward in relation to qualitative enquiry. As they

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explain in detail, quantitative approaches and positivist viewpoints are dominant in the area of sport management research, and because of this, “the ways that some sport management scholars (including ourselves) undertake qualitative research has become too comfortable and does not challenge us enough” (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016, p. 256). Thus, to move qualitative research forward in sport management, Shaw and Hoeber (2016) “seek a field-wide reflection on the use and potential for alternative qualitative models” to consider the range of research approaches that could work to address research questions (p. 264).

As a qualitative researcher who explores critically sport as a vehicle for achieving social and economic goals in developing countries, the criticisms faced by Shaw and Hoeber (2016) as qualitative researchers in the field are not unfamiliar. Although, I¹ am comfortable with behaving reflexively, acknowledging positionality, recognising subjectivities and being appreciative of multiple truths, these epistemologies, and in qualitative inquiry, are not always appreciated in sport management research. Indeed, to write ones-self into the research where and when appropriate, and to have reciprocal relationships with participants which are underpinned by trust and respect, are cherished and not to be reduced for fear of bias and/or compromising objectivity.² This is especially true for qualitative approaches to research which value difference, give voice to those at the margins, and seek to challenge hegemonic systems and structures which create and maintain inequity and marginalisation.

For a number of years now various sport management scholars (Amis & Silk, 2005a; Frisby, 2005; Olafson, 1990, 1995; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016; Shaw, Wolfe & Frisby, 2011; Zakus, Malloy & Edwards, 2007) have rightly argued for the politicisation of the discipline (see also Special Issues “Expanding Horizons: Promoting Critical and Innovative Approaches to the Study of Sport Management” (Amis & Silk, 2005b); *Diversity and Inclusion in Sport Organizations* (Cunningham, 2015); “Diversity Issues in Sport and Leisure” (Cunningham & Fink, 2006); “Sport Management Cultures” (Girginov, 2014); “Managing Ethnocultural and ‘Racial’ Diversity in Sport” (Adair, Taylor, & Darcy, 2010) and also “The New Sport Management Reader” (Nauright & Pope, 2009)).

Sport management does not exist in a vacuum isolated from the historical, or socio-political-economic or cultural dimensions. If we are to gain a more nuanced understanding of all dimensions, we will need to engage critically and conduct research from a multitude of paradigms, from differing ontological and epistemological viewpoints. Without application of a critical lens and means of unpacking, for example, marketing, fan behaviour, gender dynamics, or ethnic and race relations, “the sheer messiness, the ambiguity and the politicised and fragmented nature of sport management” will be missed (Pope, 2014, p. 118; see also Shaw et al., 2011). As Girginov (2010, p. 399) argues, we need to move away from “positivistic research grounded in a Western epistemology which has dominated and continues to dominate the field.” One such way of rejecting this positivistic Western epistemology which dominates sport management research is through the use of indigenous approaches such as *talanoa*.

In this paper we have several key arguments: that indigenous approaches to research, such as *talanoa*, are valuable for challenging sport management researchers and practitioners to further examine their own roles in the process of producing sport-specific knowledge. We argue the importance of decentring current approaches to sport management research and practice, and for the politicisation of sport management, just as some before us have (see Darnell & Hayhurst, 2014, 2011), drawing on a post-colonial feminist framework to argue the importance of decolonising the politics and practice of sport-for-development (SFD). Further, ideas posited in this paper argue the importance of taking a decolonising approach to leading sport organisations.

In Pacific communities, sport is valued enormously and using SFD has gained acceptance at both the policy and practice level; by governments (donors and recipients of overseas development aid), NGOs, and communities. The idea that sport matters to Pacific people is reiterated via the living regional document, the “Pacific Plan” and via the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat Communiqués, and plays out in, for example, the Pacific Sport Partnership Programme. Of importance to this paper is the idea that if programmes are to have greater impact, SFD must also be informed by culturally appropriate approaches such as *talanoa*.

This thinking very much aligns with progress seen in, for example, the area of health where the Health Research Council, HRC (2014) has developed Pacific Health Research Guidelines, and at our own university where Pacific Research Guidelines are currently being developed. Indeed, much of what we argue around doing research that benefits - giving back to communities, and ensuring protocol and process are followed and includes reciprocity - marries with the above-mentioned HRC guidelines.

While there are many methodologies that seek to work in a reciprocal, participatory manner, valuing the voices of participants such as feminist methodologies or action research type approaches, the key difference here is that these types of approaches are underpinned by different worldviews. While participatory action research, for example, can work with indigenous people it is not informed by an indigenous worldview. Epistemologically and ontologically, the approaches are different.

¹ Rochelle: As Chair of a university ethics committee, a teacher of a post-graduate methodology course and with numerous successful PhD and Masters student completions, qualitative approaches to research are normative in my worldview.

² We argue qualitative approaches are neither better nor worse than quantitative approaches to research, they are just different. They help one find different information, for the purpose of answering different questions.

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