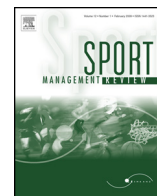




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Review

Unclipping our wings: Ways forward in qualitative research in sport management

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ABSTRACT

In this review article, we aim to explore and promote dialogue regarding the use of contemporary qualitative research methods being used in sport management. The first section is a snapshot of qualitative research from 2011 to 2013 in the three main sport management journals: Sport Management Review (SMR), the Journal of Sport Management (JSM), and European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ). Secondly, we comment on this snapshot, outlining not only how far we have come in qualitative research in sport management but also drawing attention to some of the constraints to its current use. Thirdly, we illustrate what might help us to reflect on our use of qualitative research methods. This leads us to our final section, in which we utilise that reflection to outline some ways forward; how can we contribute to sport management by using qualitative research methods in imaginative and innovative ways?

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1. Sally

I've always wanted my research to make a difference. It came as a huge shock to me when I did my PhD that the people in the organisations that I was conducting my research with didn't embrace it. One or two people 'got it', but for others it was dismissed as 'biased' and 'anecdotal'. I was astonished! How could my carefully constructed research be rejected in such a cavalier manner? Perhaps my reaction to this criticism was so sharp because I was invested in that research: I wanted to make a difference to sport organisations. This investment is a feature of all of my research; whether to help organisations work out how to govern better, enter into more productive partnerships, or become places where people want to go to work regardless of their gender or sexuality. Qualitative research provides opportunities to do this, using participants' experiences to understand a topic and then possibly frame alternatives, whether those alternatives are radical or incremental change (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). These alternatives can be explicit, for example policy driven, or implicit such as providing alternative ways to create an organisation. Even the status quo might be the outcome, as long as it is considered after critical organizational engagement. Qualitative research also provides the opportunity to 'write ourselves into' the research, that is to recognise our personal interest in research but also remember that we are researchers and so have to have some distance from our work.

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In short, I think that qualitative research has great potential to help improve sport management and, in order to harness this potential, we need to use it to its fullest. My experience as a reviewer for *Sport Management Review*, *Journal of Sport Management* and occasionally for *European Sport Management Quarterly* is that we shy away from such efforts in our qualitative research. We don't push qualitative research or ourselves hard enough to articulate those potential changes. In part, this may be because we are afraid to push the boundaries in a competitive educational system that rewards the status quo. It may also be that we don't know what else to do, so we stick with the tried and true semi-structured interviews and case studies. Larena and I have talked about this on many occasions. What follows is an attempt to put our stake in the ground regarding the role of qualitative research in sport management and to articulate a way through which researchers might use the strengths of qualitative research to their fullest to promote social change?.

2. Larena

Numerous times I have heard a faculty member, who traditionally uses quantitative methods, ask a graduate student using qualitative methods 'How did you address your biases?' This question is almost never asked to those using quantitative methods. I say almost never because I am usually the one who will ask this to students using quantitative approaches. Maybe I should not do that as it is not fair to a student who is not trained or expected to address one's subjectivities. But equally so, for a student who is trained to accept, acknowledge, and address their preconceived ideas, prior experiences, and assumptions (i.e., researcher reflexivity) it is not fair to claim they are biased. I cringe when I hear that word (bias), because biases are viewed as something to be excluded or removed from research in order to achieve objectivity. I have wondered 'How do I forget what I already know when I collect and analyze the data? Do we want to completely remove our emotions, hunches, intuitions, and experiences from our research? Can I critically evaluate the data without acknowledging my own expectations and knowledge?' While we need to be careful with our biases as they can lead us to unjustified conclusions, it is unrealistic to suggest that we can or want to keep them in check.

At the same time, I am happy to see that it is more common for studies based on qualitative methods to be presented at conferences and published in journals in our field. Sport management research has evolved since [Olafson \(1990\)](#) observed that the most common data collection methods in our field were questionnaires (55%) and archival methods (20%). Very few studies at that time used qualitative research methods, such as interviews (7%) or observations (0%). Now, there is recognition of the value of qualitative research to further our knowledge of sport management phenomena (see [Nite & Singer, 2013](#)). However, I go back to [Olafson's \(1990, p. 116\)](#) paper where he critiqued the sport management field for its over-reliance on questionnaires and argued that "given the wide range of data collection procedures available, SM [sport management] researchers must begin to explore other data gathering methods." While we are using a wider range of qualitative and quantitative methods, I must admit, I do not often review an article or an abstract and think 'This is a new and exciting approach. I'd like to learn more about it.' Instead, many qualitative researchers in sport management (including myself) use safe, traditional designs, data collection methods, and data analysis approaches. Maybe this is happening because the disbelievers are just starting to accept qualitative research, and thus we do not want to risk acceptance in the field by discussing or using less conventional data collection and analysis methods or ways of disseminating research. Or perhaps there is a lack of awareness of different, creative and innovative qualitative approaches that are being used in other fields like nursing, education, sociology and organisation studies. For example, [Buchanan and Bryman's \(2009\)](#) edited book on organisational research methods includes chapters on innovative approaches such as narrative-based methods, discourse analysis, visual methods, organizational auto/ethnography, and using film as data. [Denzin and Lincoln's \(2011\)](#) regularly updated handbook on qualitative research methods provides overviews of traditional (e.g., case study, observations, focus groups) and contemporary research methods (e.g., participatory action research, narrative inquiry, arts-based inquiry, online ethnography).

Like Sally, I agree that qualitative research methods have the potential to push our research in sport management. While researchers commonly use them to explore relatively new concepts and phenomena, such as organisational readiness ([Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2012](#)) and sense of community ([Fairley & Tyler, 2012](#); [Warner & Dixon, 2011](#)), qualitative research methods can add new insight to concepts that have been the focus of study for some time like volunteerism (e.g., [Byers, 2013](#)) or organisational change (e.g., [Nite & Singer, 2012](#); [Skille, 2011](#)). For example, one could come to the conclusion based on the existing literature on sport fandom that there is a shared and stable understanding of what it means to be a sport fan. I am more apt to believe that there are some common experiences, but that women, as one distinct group, face challenges that men do not as fans. Qualitative approaches can help us to learn about and uncover what it means to be female and a sport fan, or a visible minority who is a new supporter of a local team, or a male non-fan. Traditional research methods based on an objectivist epistemology (i.e., "meaning [of things] exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness"; [Crotty, 2011, p. 8](#)) and a (post-) positivist approach (i.e., the researcher follows the scientific method to uncover the true meaning of objects) would be inappropriate in capturing personal and unique experiences of a range of sport fans as it would assume there is one true and shared understanding of fandom. In contrast, qualitative methods based on constructionist (i.e., people construct meanings of things) or interpretivist (i.e., meanings are contextually and historically situated; [Crotty, 2011](#)) viewpoints would acknowledge that interpretations and experiences of phenomena, like fandom, are not shared but rather are varied and subjective.

In this review article, we aim to explore and promote dialogue regarding the use of contemporary qualitative research methods. This is not to replace traditional qualitative methods but rather to add to the plurality ([Amis & Silk, 2008](#)) of those being used in sport management. For the purpose of this paper, we use [Buchanan and Bryman's \(2009\)](#) conceptualization of methods as "procedures for data collection", which includes a discussion of designs and data collection methods in addition

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