



Review

Investing in sport management: The value of good theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on why and how there should (continue to) be an investment in sport management by investing in the application and development of theory. Good theory does not just describe, it explains. Thus, in a fundamentally applied field like sport management it is important that the body of knowledge is derived from theory-based and theory-building research. It is equally important that practice and student learning is founded on good theory that guides explanation, prediction and effective management of the sport enterprise. The paper focuses particularly on how, as scholars, we can invest in theory through research, whether it is borrowing, adapting, and extending theory from other disciplines, or generating new theory within sport management that is intentionally relevant to the field.

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The strength of an academic discipline is its distinct body of knowledge that is not covered by another discipline. That body of knowledge explains various phenomena in a given field, such as sport management; for example, why people continue to (travel to) support a sport franchise after it relocates (Kulczycki & Hyatt, 2005), how women achieve work-life balance in the sport industry (Dixon & Bruening, 2005), and why communities “invest” in hosting mega-sport events (Misener & Mason, 2009). The ability to explain phenomena is based in theory, and so the body of knowledge in sport management must derive from theory-based and theory-building research. This gives sport management credibility “as a distinctive, scientifically rigorous field” (Corley & Gioia, 2011, p. 15), and perhaps most importantly it advances understanding. Teaching and practice must also be based in theory; otherwise these endeavors describe but do not explain. As part of the collection of papers in this issue of *Sport Management Review*, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on the meaning of theory, how theory can and should be and is used in the field of sport management, and why it is important to invest in what Corley and Gioia (2011) call “the currency of our scholarly realm” (p. 12).

The comments and reflections expressed in this paper are a combination of my opinions melded with insights from others within sport management and the broader management field. While my remarks are not necessarily new, the hope is that they will spark some individual reflection and perhaps even broader consideration within the sport management academy, which is always vital to continuing to advance this discipline (Costa, 2005; Inglis, 2007). I also want to disclose that I am not necessarily guiltless in my (non)use of theory, and thus I present this paper as a colleague who may also have much to learn through this reflective process. Further, throughout the paper, I draw on my own experiences with theory in many instances, as that is what I am most familiar with and therefore most comfortable discussing. The examples I give are for illustrative and reflective purposes, and ideally the reader will reflect on theories that she or he is most familiar with or interested in using.

I begin with a consideration of what theory is, and provide a working definition for the purpose of this paper. This is followed by a consideration of why theory should be the foundation of research (it guides research questions), practice

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(it aids explanation, prediction, and control), and teaching (it advances students' learning and understanding, and subsequent research and practice). Following that, I reflect in particular on how, as scholars, we can, should and do invest in theory in sport management research, from borrowing, adapting and extending existing frameworks, to generating new theory from the ground up.

1. What is theory?

Theory, quite simply, explains how things work and why. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as a “system of ideas or statements explaining something,” thus, highlighting that a theory is not just about ‘what’ but also about ‘why’; it does not just describe, it explains. I draw the reader's attention to this seemingly simple point because a basic flaw in research is that, as scholars, we may claim we are using theory, yet we are only describing. The beauty of theory, and why it is a good investment, is because it explains. It may be helpful to consider the fundamental components of theory, to be sure what one has is a theory, and the theory has been adequately represented in one's work.

According to Whetten (1989), the four components of good theory include “what”, “how” and “why”, as well as “who, where, and when.” A theory indicates what factors or variables are included, and how they are related. These two components are represented in descriptive statements, hypotheses, and perhaps diagrams that outline the factors and their (purported) relationships; for example, “role ambiguity [is] negatively associated with effort in voluntary sport organizations” (Sakires, Doherty, & Misener, 2009, p. 623). This hypothesis clearly states the variables of interest and their relationship, but this alone is not theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). Rather, “why” these factors are related is the essence of the theory, as it delineates not just what the factors are and their purported relationship, but why they are related.¹ Thus, as van Knippenberg (2011, p. 4) notes, “good theory explains. It captures causal relationships between concepts with a sufficient level of specificity to provide an explanation with enough detail to be insightful and to offer fertile ground for further theory development as well as practical application.” Sutton and Staw (1995, p. 378) further relate that,

Strong theory [is that which] delves into underlying processes so as to understand the systematic reasons for a particular occurrence or nonoccurrence. It often burrows deeply into microprocesses, laterally into neighboring concepts, or in an upward direction, tying itself to broader social phenomena. It is usually laced with a set of convincing and logically interconnected arguments. . . . As Weick (1995) put it succinctly, a good theory explains, predicts, and delights.

The first three components – what, how, and why – are the essential ingredients of theory; namely, description and explanation (Whetten, 1989). The fourth component – “who, where, and when” – represents contextual and temporal conditions that bound a theory, indicating when or where the relationship(s) is relevant, and to whom (Whetten, 1989). It indicates the range of generalizability of a theory. For example, there is support for the tenets of role ambiguity theory (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000) across a variety of organization types. According to Whetten, good theory (and its effective use) will have all four components.

Sutton and Staw's (1995) portrayal also encourages investment in theory that is broad and deep; that considers both microprocesses and lateral concepts. Fig. 1 presents a broad, although certainly not exhaustive, depiction of an open systems model of sport organizations that is intended to illustrate relationships among variables pertinent to the external environment and internal operations of a sport enterprise; it considers “management as a process or group of processes rather than as ‘how-to’ areas of content” (Soucie & Doherty, 1996, p. 495). In so doing, it helps depict what (purportedly) comes before and after a variable of interest, and places that within a bigger picture which draws attention to still other factors that may be related and help to explain a phenomenon. Further, the model highlights the complexity of management and suggests that sport management as a field, and specific phenomena within that field, may be best explained by multiple lenses representing different theoretical perspectives (cf. Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). Combining these lenses can enhance the ability to investigate and critique management theory and practice (Currie, Knights, & Starkey, 2010).

Yet, clearly we cannot measure (or teach) everything. Indeed, it can be a struggle to narrow one's focus to particular variables and relationships of interest. Nonetheless, there is a tendency to over-rely on “micro-theory” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), which is “limited to the set of relationships than can be covered empirically in one study” (van Knippenberg, 2011, p. 3); that is, focusing on what *can* be tested, rather than what *should* be tested. Thus, it is important to keep a holistic grasp of complex relationships and “broader ranging theoretical perspectives that speak more comprehensively to the issues under consideration” (van Knippenberg, 2011, p. 3).

In the consideration of what theory is, it is important to address the various terms that are used in relation to the term. What is a theory, a theoretical framework, and a conceptual model?; terms that are often used interchangeably. As defined earlier, a *theory* is a set of concepts and the relationship among them. *Theoretical* thus describes something, perhaps a set of concepts, as having the character of a theory; meaning the proposed relationship among them is indicated and explained.

¹ In their study of administrators in voluntary sport organizations, Sakires et al. (2009) explained that perceived role ambiguity would be negatively associated with individual effort because when someone lacks clarity about what they are supposed to be doing their effort may be expected to be impaired. Their findings supported this hypothesis, and also revealed that clarity about how to carry out the task (means-ends knowledge) and what difference it would make (performance outcomes) were the strongest predictors of effort. The authors endeavored to further explain these particular findings.

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