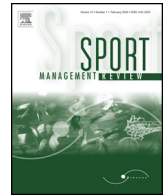


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Insiders, outsiders, and agents of change: First person action inquiry in community sport management



Kyle A. Rich*, Laura Misener

Western University, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Using first-person inquiry, we explore the use of reflexive practice as a means of self-study in community sport management research. In the context of a participatory action research project with a rural Northern Ontario community recreation committee, we describe our process of conducting first person action inquiry, explore how it enriched the process and outcomes of the project, and explain how it informed our understanding of researchers (ourselves) as instruments of research and agents of change within the research process. Through the process of self-study and iterative discussions between a graduate student (sometimes) insider and academic supervisor outsider, we demonstrate how reflexive practice led to a better understanding of community contexts as well as the roles and limitations of the researchers therein. Consequently, reflections allowed for a moulding of the methodological approach to be more effective (for research and action) with(in) the community. Based on our discussion, we highlight the potential of diverse research practices and paradigms to offer new perspectives for sport management research and practice.

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Participatory action research approaches have emerged as effective strategies to engage communities in research that addresses pertinent and practical issues in a given community context. Rather than being described as a method or methodology, action-oriented approaches are often described as orientations to research that seek to de-centre power relationships inherent in the research process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). As defined by Bradbury-Huang, action research can be described as “an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners” not only to understand processes and phenomena, “but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders” (2010, p. 93). While this definition succinctly defines and describes the purpose of action research, the process of conducting this sort of inquiry may not unfold as eloquently. Indeed, adopting this orientation to research entails a relinquishing of control over the research process which is atypical of conventional research methodologies and ethical procedures. Within the context of sport management, Frisby, Reid, Millar, and Hoerber (2005) discussed the messiness of the approach and how ethical, funding, and academic systems shaped the ways and extent to which community engagement is facilitated in the research process.

The complexity of action research approaches is underpinned by a commitment and sensitivity to the context of community(ies) with which the research takes place. This commitment is partially achieved through reflexivity and

* Corresponding author.

recognition of the positionality and assumptions of the researcher or research team, which may or may not align with the understandings and realities of the communities involved. The process of self-study in this context can be referred to as first-person action research (Marshall & Mead, 2005; Torbert, 2001). While reflection is a useful methodological tool for addressing and understanding power relationships in the research process, it can also be transformational in shaping our thinking and understandings of ourselves and the roles that we play in the many contexts of our lives (Humphrey, 2007; Marshall, 2001). In the context of research, Burgess described the “principles, promises, and perils” of action research approaches and how addressing her underlying assumptions through first-person inquiry allowed her to “embrace these tensions of personal transformation and community partnership” (Burgess, 2006, p. 420). In her reflective account, Burgess (2006) illustrated the effective use of first-person action inquiry by a graduate student in order to adopt a participatory worldview, navigate power relationships, and better understand the complex processes inherent in action research. Similarly, Humphrey (2007) utilized a first-person approach as a graduate student to examine her dual and changing roles, and understandings of herself as an insider and outsider in the various contexts of her action research project in an organizational setting. Within this work, conducted with self-organizing groups in union settings, Humphrey (2007) explored the complexities of navigating multiple roles, which exist along continuums (of insider and outsider) within multiple contexts. Together, these insights (Burgess, 2006; Humphrey, 2007) demonstrate the messiness and uncertainty of the often-turbulent processes involved in first-person action inquiry and how reflexivity can be useful in navigating and understanding these processes.

In this paper, we draw from the first author’s dissertation research which involved participatory action research with rural community sport managers. Using a first person voice, we discuss the first author’s reflexive practice throughout the research process. The purpose of this manuscript is to explore and describe the process of employing first-person action inquiry, how it enriched (and continues to enrich) the research processes and outcomes, as well as how it informed our understanding of researchers (ourselves) as agents of change (Bradbury-Huang, 2010). In doing this, we respond to Shaw and Hoerber’s (2016) call for more diversified methodological approaches as we demonstrate how research informed by diverse paradigms (e.g., a participatory worldview) may be deemed beneficial for providing new perspectives, and how alternative criteria (e.g., reflexivity) may be used by sport management researchers to judge the value of this work. Through the first author’s voice we explore both the roles of student as the primary researcher, as well as that of the academic supervisor in overseeing and supporting an action research project in the intersectional realm of rural sport management studies. In order to tackle these objectives, we first offer an overview of the research project and how learning about a participatory worldview and action research approaches informed the research process. We draw from processes of reflection and action to discuss the specific ways in which first-person action research was used to enrich the research process: (a) by enhancing our awareness, understanding, and interpretation of identities and contexts within the community, and (b) by informing emerging methodological considerations to better reflect these community contexts. Through these examples, we demonstrate how self-study served to strengthen the research process methodologically and improved the project by allowing us to coherently understand and articulate the role of the researchers as agents of change within the process. Further, we suggest that this understanding of researchers as agents of change may be useful for understanding the role of practitioners engaged in community sport management and governance. Finally, we reflect more broadly on the procedures and paradigms involved in first-person research and echo the suggestion of Kerwin and Hoerber (2015) that reflection may be a useful and fruitful methodological tool for sport management researchers and the study of sport management more broadly.

1. The process of reflection and first-person inquiry

Reflexivity is an important part of participatory research approaches. Key thinkers who influenced the development of participatory action research, such as Lewin (1946) and Freire (1972) emphasized the importance of action-reflection cycles and a critical consciousness, respectively (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). While reflections can take many forms, Torbert (2001) discusses the processes of first, second, and third-person research and practice. First-person inquiry involves “self-study-in-the-midst-of-action” (Torbert, 2001, p. 252) and reflection on the gaps or incongruence within and without of ourselves, our identities, and our social systems. Second and third-person research/practice involve the study of our own interactions with others, and the workings of groups or organizations, respectively (Torbert, 2001). Marshall (2001) described first-person inquiry as a process of iterative cycles that examine personal meaning making, assumptions, questioning, and understandings. She also contended that reflection is not a personal activity but rather a “life process” as it involves examining and understanding your multiple selves in and out of the research process (Marshall, 2001, p. 438). This process can be useful for navigating and documenting personal transformation and power struggles that are often part of conducting research. The first-person inquiry described by Burgess (2006), and the reflections of Humphrey (2007), are illustrative of the processes of transformation undertaken as graduate students conducting participatory research and reconciling roles of researcher-practitioner and insider-outsider, respectively. As outlined below, these accounts were highly influential in this work and directed reflections and navigation of multiple selves and roles as insiders, outsiders, and agents of change in the community. Further, interactive discussions between the doctoral student as (sometimes) insider and supervisor as outsider provided additional insights into the reflexive process, allowing particular attention to be paid to assumptions and so-called biases from each perspective. We reflect further on these processes below in describing the evolution of our participatory approach.

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