

The Retrospective Method in Sport Management Research: Potential and Pitfalls

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The study of psychological constructs, such as motivation or ego involvement, is a common approach taken by researchers seeking to understand engagement in sport activities (e.g., Beard & Ragheb, 1983; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Havitz & Dimanche, 1999; McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002). These psychological variables have also been studied as ways of explaining commitment and behavioral loyalty to a sport activity or recreational agency (e.g., Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon, 2004; Kyle & Mowen, 2005). However, in most instances research has been conducted on a cross-sectional basis. A notable exception is the work of Havitz and Howard (1995) that examined the stability of ego involvement in three leisure activities (golf, downhill skiing, windsurfing) over the period of a year. They collected data at three distinct points in time (i.e., in-season, off season, preseason) and found evidence that most facets of involvement remained stable, while others did not. Questions remain, however, with respect to how enduring some of these constructs really are over extended periods of time. Specifically, we know little about the genesis of ego involvement in individuals (Funk et al., 2004), the extent to which it fluctuates (up and down) over the course of life spans, what happens to ego involvement levels among people who have disengaged from active participation in a particular activity or sport, and what are the effects of ancillary situational contexts (coaching, spectating, etc.) on ego involvement levels (Naylor & Havitz, 2007). An approach to gaining insight into these issues would be through the use of longitudinal research. It has been suggested that longitudinal research provides a more complete approach to empirical research (Ruspini, 1999).

There are essentially two forms of longitudinal research: prospective and retrospective. The prospective design is widely regarded as the preferred approach, because of its ability to collect data that is contemporaneous and therefore more valid, rather than data which is based on memory (Henry et al., 1994; Yarrow et al., 1970). Henry et al noted that retrospective errors can occur because people (a) forget past events, (b) are unable to accurately recall dates, and (c) reconstruct the past to fit with their current situation. They concluded that “their results failed to find substantial evidence of the validity (in the form of agreement with prospective measures) of retrospective measures of subjective psychological states and family processes”(p. 99). Their finding is generally consistent with work by Jaspers et al. (2008) that compared contemporaneous and retrospective data on attitudes; however, some noteworthy exceptions exist. However, a prospective longitudinal approach may be undesirable for a number of reasons including the time it takes to complete the research project, cost, and significant participant drop out (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Also, a long-term longitudinal approach may not be possible in certain cases, such as those involving older adults. Although the consensus in the literature is that the retrospective method does not produce similar objective results as obtained through the prospective method, there is an important benefit that must be noted. The retrospective approach results in a useful way of capturing the subjective interpretations of the past from the perspective of the person who lived those experiences. Although the exact path or causality of experiences may not be captured, the relative importance of their interpretations to current psychological states would be obtained (Henry et al., 1994; Yarrow et al., 1970). As our past or narrative identity, is an important part of who we are (McAdams, 1985), the current subjective interpretations of the past may be more important than objective assessments. To the extent that people make decisions about the future based on the past, the subjective measure of a construct on a retrospective basis would be much more important for the researcher to understand. In addition, we will explore avenues for increasing the reliability of retrospective approaches. For example, photo elicitation techniques have an established history in leisure research (Stewart & Floyd, 2004) and Samuels (2007) outlined numerous benefits to using photo elicitation in research contexts. In summary, the purpose of this paper will be to highlight the critiques of the retrospective method to date, and the potential for its use in sport management research. In light of a research project's objectives, specific strategies will be suggested to overcome potential weaknesses in a retrospective design.