Qualitative Inquiry: Quality Research that Bridges the Gap between Scholars and the Sport Populations

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The importance of scholarly research cannot be understated when it comes to the legitimization of an academic field. Research and theory development are the measuring criterion by which scholars, universities, and academic fields are ultimately evaluated. A strong theoretical foundation is crucial for knowledge to be advanced by any academic field. From the time of its inception, the field of Sport Management has endured the growing pains of a relatively new academic discipline in order to develop into a legitimate field through which scholarship and theory development can impact the world in which we live (Amis & Silk, 2005; Zeigler, 1992).

In order to disseminate the theories and research findings in the field of sport management, numerous journals (e.g., Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, European Sport Management Quarterly) have been created that allow scholars many different outlets for peer review and discussion (Cuneen & Parks, 1997). Theory and theory development are the criteria by which these journals, their articles, and ultimately scholars in our field are evaluated (Shilbury & Rentschler, 2007). These journals have also filled the need for sport management scholars to address the requirements placed upon them by universities to publish. Promotion and tenure at many universities are contingent on professors and scholars publishing their research in various journal outlets (Cuneen & Parks, 1997; Weese, 1995).

However, through the process of publishing and building the theoretical foundation of the field of sport management, some might argue that sport management research is not having the desired effects on the world of sport that we all believe it should. Weese (1995) suggests that any given journal article is read by less than one percent of the subscribers to that particular journal in which it is published. It has also been posited that research reported in peer-reviewed journals is essentially inaccessible by most members of the population (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005). This would suggest that key stakeholders in the sporting field are either not reading or not being exposed to the research being published by sport management scholars. Herein lies the challenge for sport management scholars. A lack of readership does not negate the importance of conducting research. It is unreasonable to suggest that professors stop engaging in scholarship that is subject to peer-review and critique because it is through this process that the foundations of knowledge are built for any particular field. Yet it could be viewed as being irresponsible to not search for insightful ways to engage the public with the significant findings of scholarly research. Earle Ziegler (2007), a pioneer in the founding of the academic discipline of sport management, spoke to the need for sport management to show social concern as it develops tenable theory. From our perspective, a part of showing social concern involves bridging the gap between research, theory, and practice.

Thus, for this presentation we will discuss possible strategies for bridging the gap between sport management researchers and the researched populations. This is important because it allows sport management scholars to not only engage in research that satisfies the expectations of the academy, but in the process, also serve the needs of sport populations. We need to guard against, as Zeigler (2007) cautioned, the tendency as sport management scholars "to speak to no one except each other" (p. 301), and instead, think about how we might make our research relevant to the "so-called real world, where sport takes place in its many forms daily" (p. 301). It is our position that qualitative research possesses the capabilities for effectively bridging the gap between the researcher and the public. Qualitative methods allow the participants in the research project to co-create the knowledge that is being produced (Frisby et al., 2005). Frisby et al. (2005) explains that qualitative methods remove the mystique that is often associated with the research process in order to make the research more accessible to the general population. When conducting qualitative research, often one of the primary objectives for the researcher is to empower the participants along with the readers of the study to become actively involved in the creation of knowledge that will ultimately address whatever question or problem the researcher is exploring (Frisby, 2005; Rinehart, 2005; Skinner & Edwards, 2005).
We will highlight the work of Wendy Frisby and colleagues as one example of how sport management scholars might utilize qualitative inquiry as a way to bridge the gap between researchers and sport populations. More specifically, these scholars’ use of the participatory action research (PAR) design (e.g., Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005; Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997) to combat the access discrimination against low income women in community-based recreation programs offers powerful insight into how sport management scholars have been successful at bridging the gap between researchers and sport populations. This “research as praxis”, as Lather (1986) would refer to it, demonstrates how qualitative research could be used to empower research participants and bring about meaningful social change in sport. This certainly speaks to not only the ability of these researchers to potentially develop relevant theories, but also their genuine concern for conducting research that significantly impacts sport populations.

The employment of qualitative inquiry to better engage sport populations in significant scholarly research is focal point of our presentation. Given its field based nature, where the researcher engages with sport populations in their “natural” environments, qualitative research is an effective tool for bridging the gap between sport management scholars and sport populations. However, we do acknowledge that there are other tactics for sport management scholars to consider as they seek to bridge this gap. In conclusion, we will emphasize the role that various forms of qualitative inquiry play in bridging the gap with the hope that this might stimulate critical thought and dialogue among sport management scholars so that we might, as Zeigler (2007) challenged us to do, show social concern as we conduct research and attempt to develop tenable theory.