An Application of Retrospective Methods to the Study of Involvement with Running

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Researchers have argued that an over-reliance on cross-sectional survey designs has resulted in limited long-term understandings of involvement and disengagement with sport and recreation (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Kyle & Chick, 2004). Snelgrove and Havitz (2010) argued that "this short-term perspective represents a serious limitation in the extant literature, as little is known about the enduring nature of these involvements and commitments" (p. 338). Similarly, other scholars have argued that limitations exist in terms of understanding the origins of involvement with sport spectating and participation (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Kyle, Absher, Hammitt, & Cavin, 2006), and how initial attraction may develop into attachment or loyalty in a variety of sport contexts (Funk & James, 2006).

Snelgrove and Havitz proposed that these research gaps may be overcome, in part, by employing retrospective approaches that collect data over a period of time. Specifically, this entails participants looking back in time, including substantial periods (e.g., over their entire lives). Although they provided a number of suggestions on how retrospective methods might be employed, empirical examples were not the focus of their paper. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide examples of how retrospective methods were employed in a large mixed-method research project on the study of involvement over the life course. Past NCAA cross country runners were participants in this project. In detailing our methods, it is hoped that researchers will be able to learn from our successes, failures or contextual nuances, and employ or adapt similar approaches to the future study of sport involvement or other areas of focus.

Methods employed include (a) quantitative survey responses, (b) in-depth open ended survey responses, (c) semi-structured to unstructured one-on-one interviews, and (d) semi-structured to unstructured group interviews. Examples of questions and participants’ responses will be presented. In employing these methods, techniques were used to increase accurate recall and reduce reconstructions of the past. Specifically, we will discuss the use of techniques such as photo elicitation, fictitious profiles that highlight various commitments to running over time, allowing for "don't know or don't remember" responses, interviewing participants in group contexts with past teammates, and interviewing participants in the physical setting of past experiences.

Research suggests that people are more accurate in their recall of past events when the subject is tied to their identities (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Ross, 1989). As running was an important part of our participants' lives, it is not surprising that responses were often detailed. As one 74 year-old man said, "It's amazing how much burns into the memory chips in your brain to the point where most runners can remember just about every step of each race ... almost every race they ran." Participants who have since stopped running were also part of the study. An 88 year-old man explained his connection to running by stating, "I still run in my dreams" and backed that statement with lucid detail related to context and outcomes. Another 71 year-old respondent wrote after viewing some project prompts, "Thank you so very much for sending the pictures. Oh what memories they retrieve from the depths of my being!" Although memory concerns were an important consideration throughout data collection, other unanticipated challenges and opportunities arose such as participants’ deference to elite runners as gatekeepers of memories, and issues related to representing experiences of deceased runners through recollections and words of friends and family.