A Methodology for Evidence-Informed Sport Management Knowledge: The Systematic Literature Review

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Sport management is a relatively new and growing field, with many areas of research still evolving and developing (Mahony, Hums, Andrew, & Dittmore, 2010). It is a multidisciplinary field that uses theory rooted in both business and leisure studies, which are derivatives of sociology, psychology/social psychology, economics and law (Shilbury & Rentschler, 2007). Therefore, sport management uses theories from other disciplines to build upon existing theory and to develop theory that is uniquely applicable to sport. As a burgeoning field of research, sport management faces the challenges once addressed by the early services marketing scholars whose new ideas and concepts were accepted slowly within the conservative culture of academia (Shannon, 1999). Thus, sport management scholars have sought a variety of publication outlets for their work while they confront a debate on the distinctiveness of the sport setting, the lack of a coherent force for unification or tenable theory (Shannon, 1999; Zeigler, 2007). In addition, the acceleration of knowledge production in sport management has resulted in a body of knowledge that is increasingly transdisciplinary, fragmented, and interdependent from advancement in social sciences. In management research the literature review is a key tool used to manage the diversity of knowledge for an academic inquiry; however, a critique of these reviews is that they are typically descriptive accounts of contributions of selected writers often arbitrarily chosen for inclusion by the researcher, and that these reviews may lack a critical assessment of included studies (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). In contrast, a systematic literature review (SLR), a methodology adopted from the medical sciences, is different from traditional narrative reviews in that it adopts a replicable, scientific and transparent process that aims to mitigate bias through exhaustive literature searches and by providing an audit trail of the conclusions. A current gap in sport management research is a discussion of how to conduct a SLR, how to critically assess studies, and how to integrate the conclusions. Thus, the aim of this presentation is to elucidate and discuss how to conduct a SLR in the field of sport management, how to critically assess studies, and how to integrate the conclusions. We will demonstrate the process of conducting a SLR and discuss how this methodology can be applied in the sport management field to produce a reliable knowledge base in a multidisciplinary and fragmented field.

SLRs are objective, replicable, systematic, comprehensive, and the process is reported in the same manner as for reporting empirical research (Weed, 2005). The origin of SLRs is in the medical, health care, and policy fields, where they have been used to assemble the best evidence to make clinical and policy decisions (Cook, Mulrow, & Haynes, 1997; Tranfield et al., 2003). The methodology will be illustrated by showcasing a SLR we conducted in order to provide an evidence-informed answer to how does servant leadership work, and how can we apply it? Like the field of sport management, servant leadership is a new research area where scholars are seeking publication outlets as critics debate whether this new leadership philosophy is significantly distinct, viable, and valuable for organizational success. This SLR was conducted in order to shape the current state of the field in servant leadership and inform subsequent studies undertaken by the authors that investigated servant leadership in the context of cause-related sporting events. The approach of this review entailed extensive searches of relevant databases with the intention of ensuring, as far as possible, that all literature on servant leadership was identified while maintaining the focus on literature of greatest pertinence to the research questions – (i.e., empirical studies that have applied servant leadership in organizational settings). We will discuss our search methods, inclusion and exclusion criteria, sample, and data analysis.

First, published studies were identified through searches of electronic databases accessible through the authors' university in a systematic manner. The initial search required that articles included in the review were studies that must: a) be published in a peer-reviewed journal; b) be in the English language; and (c) use the keyword “servant leadership.” The number of articles retrieved from each database was recorded. Second, we recorded the number of external duplicates, and then deleted the duplicated journal articles from the last database searched while keeping a running total of new articles found. Third, we conducted a secondary screening to assess eligibility against inclusion criteria and then full text articles were retrieved for those that met the inclusion criteria. The second screening
required that articles meet the following four specifications: a) be in the English language; b) be an empirical study (i.e., not an essay, book review, letter, literature review, editorial, opinion, journalistic or antedotal article); c) discuss servant leadership as the main topical theme; and d) examine an application of servant leadership either quantitatively or qualitatively. Articles were excluded if any of these four components was not addressed in the abstract, results, or discussion sections of the respective study. Finally, additional articles meeting the inclusion criteria were found by examining the bibliographies of resources identified through the secondary screening. The Matrix Method (Garrard, 1999) was utilized as the strategy for organizing and abstracting pertinent information from these publications. In addition, for each publication, the methodology used to examine servant leadership was evaluated. For qualitative studies, we used a critical appraisal tool designed by Letts et al. (2007), and for quantitative studies we used a critical appraisal tool designed by the Institute for Public Health Sciences (2002). In addition to these two appraisal assessments we used Stoltz, Udén, and William’s (2004) critical appraisal tool, which assessed both quantitative and qualitative studies. We adopted these three critical appraisal tools to create a three-point scale to reflect the quality of studies: high (I); medium (II) – used if studies did not meet criteria for high (I) or low quality; and low (III). The findings from these studies were summarized and placed into matrixes (i.e., tables). The SLR findings consist of a synthesis of the results from all studies along with the assessment of quality for each study. Further, we assessed the level of supporting evidence for thematic conclusions drawn from combining the results of multiple studies. We classified these conclusions as A (strong evidence) or B (moderate evidence) based on scientific strength.

During the presentation, we will discuss our contribution to the understanding of conducting a SLR and how this rigorous methodology can be applied to other research streams within sport management as an aid in holistically synthesizing the state of the field in various topical areas. Future directions will be proposed that will further aid in the advancement of this methodology within sport management, such as developing critical appraisal tools for assessing quantitative and qualitative research that are sensitive to the context and dynamics of the field.