The Value and Challenges of Interdisciplinary Research in Sport Management

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Relevance to Sport Management

Interdisciplinary research can be viewed as people working across distinct disciplines to address the same issue or problem (Aboelela et al., 2007; Doherty, 2013), leveraging the skills and knowledge that each party brings to the work. Others have referred to this approach as transdisciplinary, cross disciplinary, or collaborative research (see Aboelela et al., 2007; König, Diehl, Tscherning, & Helming, 2013). Because such collaborations have the potential to impact research activities across domains, interdisciplinary research is often promoted by funding agencies (Aboelela et al., 2007; Doherty, 2013; Freedson, 2009; Vertinsky, 2009), highlighted as part of university strategic plans, and encouraged by senior university administrators. Within our field, a number of researchers have exemplified an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing complex issues and phenomena relevant to sport, including sport for development (Lytras & Welty Peachey, 2011), recreation and sport for marginalized populations (Forde, Lee, Mills, & Frisby, 2015; Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1998), sport tourism (Downward, 2005; Ritchie & Adair, 2004), and fan behaviour (Hoeber, Hoeber, El Meseery, Odoh, & Gopi, 2015). The promotion and active involvement in interdisciplinary research suggests that there are benefits to this approach. Nonetheless, Costa’s (2005) work on the status and future of our field highlighted a lack of consensus amongst respected sport management researchers regarding the disciplinarity of our work. Some felt that we should be more interdisciplinary but that it is not happening enough. Others argued that we are but it is sometimes marginalized.

Review of Relevant Literature

Sport management may be viewed as an inherently interdisciplinary field, as we draw upon theories, concepts, and methodologies from other fields to inform and inspire our own research, including management, marketing, law, ethics, ethnic studies, history, pedagogy, and sociology of sport to name a few (Doherty, 2013; Love & Andrew, 2012; Singer, 2005). Even though our field has a basis in interdisciplinarity, the theoretical foundations and body of literature within the field are sufficiently robust to no longer require that one work with others outside of sport management. While it is possible for a researcher to identify the need to know more about an topic beyond the boundaries of sport management in order to pursue a given research project, given the depth and complexity of academic research, and the scrutiny of the peer review process, doing so requires a substantial time commitment. Instead, our view of the future of interdisciplinary research in sport management is not for an individual to draw upon extra-disciplinary knowledge, but instead to work with others outside of our field to further the knowledge within our field.

In her NASSM 2012 Zeigler address, Doherty (2013) outlined four benefits of interdisciplinary research: addressing complex problems, examining phenomena from different perspectives, responding to monodisciplinarity, and acknowledging student interest in global problems. Despite these benefits, Doherty acknowledged that it can be difficult to work with others, there is a lack of culture of pursuing such work, and there is a general lack of peer support for it. Additionally, in his Zeigler address about the benefits of working together, Mahony (2008) noted “it is not a natural tendency in the academy to work across units on a campus or across universities. We tend to feel most comfortable operating in our own separate silos” (p. 8). Further, the university reward system, where individual effort is the focus, may be a deterrent to interdisciplinary research (Vertinsky, 2009).

Purpose
This roundtable is a response to Doherty’s Zeigler address (Doherty, 2013) and to a commonly cited issue that while many have promoted the value and benefits of interdisciplinary research, few have addressed the fundamental difficulties or attempted to solve the problems that are inherent in working with others of disparate backgrounds and skill sets (Dewulf, François, Pahl-Wostl, & Taillieu, 2009; König et al., 2013). The purpose of this roundtable is to share our lived experiences and provide advice about our approaches to interdisciplinary research. Our long-term goal is to encourage other sport management researchers to consider this approach to research, thus establishing a culture of inclusion and peer support for such work. We will highlight our work that moves beyond what is possible individually, and illustrate how including researchers from other disciplines can enable research that would be difficult to do on our own.

During the session, we will discuss three issues related to this research approach: (1) how can one initiate and undertake interdisciplinary research; (2) is interdisciplinary research valued at our institutions; and (3) what are the challenges and opportunities for publishing and presenting outside of sport management? The members of this panel are mid career researchers, working at a range of academic institutions (e.g., R1, mid-sized universities, American, Canadian), and have administrative experience with peer review.

Expertise and Contributions

Authors 1 and 2 have worked together on a series of projects including those related to the innovation process, data analysis methods, and interactive exploration of user-generated content. They will talk about their impetus for working together, and the trade-offs between the convenience of collaboration and working with others that one gets along with. Interdisciplinary research teams involve researchers with different perspectives, backgrounds, and training; the keys to effective collaboration is having a respectful and broad view of research, and an appreciation of how different disciplines can inform each other. The goal is not to have one discipline to simply serve as a toolkit for the other, but to have the research produce meaningful outcomes for all parties. Since the work that Authors 1 and 2 have done has primarily been curiosity-based, it has been in addition to their core disciplinary research activities. As a result, one challenge they have faced is convincing their academic units to value their interdisciplinary work at the same level as their disciplinary contributions. The difficulty is that their home academic units have no frame of reference against which the quality of the interdisciplinary work can be assessed. It is important to provide peer review committees and granting agencies the tools to assess the quality of it (e.g., ranking of conferences and journals, assessments of the value provided to both the core and the supporting disciplines, explanations of how the work could not have been done in isolation).

Authors 3 and 4 have worked with a variety of collaborators in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary projects. When actively pursued, diverse disciplines can reveal many overlapping areas of interest. Contributors from distinct content areas each view research problems through a different lens. Not only does the process of scholarly collaboration yield enhanced insights with regard to content, but it can also result in expanded applications of methodologies. For example, the adaptation of a methodology that is commonplace in one discipline to another discipline can provide a new approach to examine and answer key questions. In some cases, the broad underlying questions are similar across disciplinary boundaries. Yet in other cases, new perspectives can inform the development of new questions. In our experience, a cornerstone of successful cross disciplinary collaborations is the formation of a collaborative team of individuals who each respect and embrace the diverse skill sets and perspectives of their teammates.

Author 5’s experience suggests that the biggest problems we are seeking to address require an interdisciplinary focus. This is certainly the case in the area of diversity and inclusion, where Author 5 has worked with colleagues from recreation, public health, counselling psychology, and organizational psychology to examine a range of topics related to this sub-domain of sport management. Common hurdles to overcome include disciplinary differences in assumptions, terminology, and preferred methodological approaches. These are only hindrances in that they require additional time, consideration, and thoughtfulness during the collaborative process. That noted, the differences also make the interdisciplinary collaborations valuable, as the breadth and depth of decision making and creativity of the final solutions is enhanced.

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge
This roundtable will provide insight into the lived experiences of a group of sport management researchers who engage, in various ways, with an interdisciplinary research approach. Additionally, it will provide practical advice to our field, highlighting the viability of the approach and the intrinsic rewards, but also the challenges we have faced. As Doherty (2013) noted, if we want to push and challenge ourselves, we need to provide peer support and build a culture of interdisciplinary research. We aim to build such a culture by sharing our practical experiences.