“Let’s Go Fish’n”: The Importance of Reflexivity within Qualitative Research

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In 2005, James Skinner and Allan Edwards published an article in the Journal of Sport Management titled, ‘Inventive Pathways: Fresh Visions of Sport Management Research’. In this article they suggest that although qualitative methodologies have grown to become more accepted within academia, the use of these methodologies, such as ethnography underpinned by a critical lens, is limited within sport management (Skinner & Edwards, 2005). Recently, sociological work conducted within areas of sport, and particularly sport-for-development, emphasize the importance of carrying out reflexive methodological approaches, in order to account for underlying power dynamics, cross-cultural differences, postcolonial relations, and intersections of gender, race, and class (Chawansky, 2015; Darnell, 2012; Forde, 2015). As qualitative research becomes increasingly more prominent in the field of sport management (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016), and areas such as sport-for-development continue to grow (Hayhurst, 2015), it becomes important to explore the role of reflexivity when conducting qualitative research, and in particular when using an ethnographic methodology where the researcher negotiates roles of insider and outsider. Little scholarly work within sport management has discussed the importance of researcher reflexivity when conducting studies, and furthermore, limited examples of how researchers negotiate their role while in the field have been offered.

Reflexivity, broadly defined as “a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference,” (Davies, 2008, p.4) is intimately tied to qualitative research, and more specifically, ethnographic inquiry. Reflexivity requires a researcher to be aware of their value-laden role in research as well as how their own knowledge has been shaped, produced, and favoured (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). This is most prominent when considering that, as an ethnographer, researchers negotiate their role as an insider-outsider, many times deciding on how to act when involved in specific contexts while in the field (Fine, 1994). As an insider-outsider, a researcher must consider the multiple ‘screens’ they bring to a research setting, such as gender, sexuality, race, and class (Berger, 2015; Patton, 2002). These screens that the researcher carries throughout the research process influence their role as an insider-outsider, and as they go through phases of development within the field, such as moving from a complete outsider to partial insider, characteristics of their own identities shift in relation to the identities of participants they interact with (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). It is this understanding that Fine (1994) refers to as the “hyphen” or space between “self” (i.e., the researcher) and “other” (i.e., the participants) and the realization that as an ethnographer negotiating the roles of ‘insider-outsider’, one may never be able to fully occupy the role of insider due to their own history, subjectivity, experience, and personal traits. Additionally, when conducting fieldwork, the reflexive ethnographer must also consider how access to and willingness of participant’s to share information and knowledge, as well as include and accept the ethnographer based on similarities or differences in personal characteristics between them and the researcher, affects the “self-other” relationship (Berger, 2015; Fine, 1994). Thus, although qualitative researchers have discussed and emphasized the value of reflexivity when conducting ethnography and other related methodologies, little within the sport management literature has spoken directly about doing ethnography, acting as an insider-outsider, and being reflexive while in the ‘field’ (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016).

Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is to discuss the importance of reflexivity within qualitative methodology in sport management research, particularly when carrying out ethnography, and more specifically to discuss the opportunities and challenges being reflexive presents to researchers operating as insiders, outsiders, and ‘in-between’ (Fine, 1994; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). The objectives of this presentation are to:
1) Describe and explain the multiple roles of a researcher and the reflexive ‘screens’ that arose while conducting ethnography within the field, by providing examples from recent fieldwork within Southern Africa from May to August 2016 within a sport-for-development organization.
2) Provide an in-depth look into the challenges, questions, and opportunities that being reflexive allows for qualitative sport management researchers acting as insiders-outsiders.
As Shaw and Hoeber (2016) suggest, integrating reflexivity into research within sport management can have a profound impact on how scholars engage with participants in research contexts. Examining the role that reflexivity plays throughout the research process helps initiate an inner dialogue for the researcher to utilize when analyzing their own subjectivity during data collection, data analysis, and the write up of research findings and conclusions. Providing specific examples of how a researcher copes when acting as an insider-outsider by being reflexive allows for sport management researchers to think and reflect on their own experiences within their own studies, and ultimately challenge how their own ‘reflexive screens’ may play a role in the shaping of knowledge and the research they conduct.

In conclusion, this presentation adds to the body of knowledge in the field of sport management by suggesting that qualitative researchers within sport would benefit from furthering discussion around methodological inquiry that requires alternating between researcher roles in specific contexts. Highlighting specific examples of how researchers negotiate their role may open up the way that qualitative researchers within sport approach methodology and builds on new ways of achieving trustworthiness and conducting studies ethically, while also remaining open to how the researcher themselves is a subjective part involved in the relations of the research context (Tracy, 2010). As qualitative research continues to increase within sport, the approach to qualitative research inquiry that scholars adopt need to be discussed in order to provide experienced as well as new academics the opportunity to learn firsthand how to engage in innovative ways of research.