Critical Conversations About Qualitative Research in Sport Management

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Method - Qualitative (Other)
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Since some of the early important work by Paton (1987) and Olafson (1990) on the state of research in the field of sport management, scholars have discussed the need for a diverse array of research approaches and embraced alternative ways of knowing that move beyond the traditional positivist paradigm and scientific method. For example, Inglis (1992) advocated for qualitative methodologies, particularly focus groups, as a viable approach to sport management research and practice. As another example, Chalip’s (1997) special issue on action research and social change in the Journal of Sport Management (JSM) challenged us to reexamine our methods and assumptions, and recognize the value of both qualitative and quantitative methods in action research. However, it can be argued that Frisby’s (2005) Ziegler lecture on the critical social science (CSS) paradigm and Amis and Silk’s (2005) special issue on critical and innovative approaches to the study of sport management in JSM is what really spawned a greater interest in and acceptance of qualitative research in the field. This is evidenced by an increase in the overall number of journal articles, conference presentations, and book projects (e.g., Edwards & Skinner, 2009) related to qualitative research in sport management since 2005 (see Shaw & Hoeber, 2016).

Despite this increased interest and acceptance of qualitative research in the field, qualitative research is still marginalized and underutilized in the sport management discipline today (Nite & Singer, 2012, 2013; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Nite and Singer’s (2013) preliminary examination of sport management doctoral programs in North America provides support for the notion that a strong bias toward quantitative approaches to research still persists in our academic discipline. Findings revealed that many doctoral students, the future academic leaders in the field, are required to take several statistics and quantitative-based courses in their degree programs, but courses focusing on qualitative inquiry are only optional in most programs and often limited in number, particularly in the United States. More recently, Shaw and Hoeber (2016) acknowledged the quantitative bias that exists in sport management research, and highlighted some of the constraints we face in our use of qualitative methods in sport management research. In particular, they discussed how the market-driven academic environment (i.e., neo-liberal funding environment) and reward system (e.g., tenure and promotion decisions) we currently operate in greatly favors quantitative research and discourages qualitative research. Unfortunately, policy makers, funding agencies, and other key academic stakeholders often view quantitative research as superior and more “scientific” (i.e., objective, value-neutral, rigorous) and downgrade qualitative research “to the status of marginal science, second class citizenship” (Denzin, 2009, p. 150).

In light of the myriad of challenges qualitative researchers face regarding the perceived value and legitimacy of the work they do, the purpose of this proposed session is to engage sport management scholars who have embraced qualitative research and primarily use it in their work in a critical conversation about its significance and future in the field. More specifically, the plan is for the lead author to serve as the moderator for a panel discussion where each scholar will respond to questions related to the following topics: 1) personal history and background with qualitative inquiry, 2) ethical dilemmas and challenges they have encountered, 3) examples of “good” qualitative studies in the field, 4) the current state of qualitative research in the field, 5) opportunities and challenges going forward. Each scholar will be given approximately 2 minutes to respond to each question. After each scholar’s response to each question the goal will be to allow the panelists to engage in a few minutes of dialogue around each question. At the end, we would like to leave time for questions and dialogue with the audience.
The idea for this session grew out of a doctoral level seminar on qualitative inquiry in sport management that the first author and moderator teaches at his university in the United States. During successive weeks students were required to read and discuss articles by Shaw and Hoeber (2016) and Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Lincoln, Morse, Pelias, and Richardson (2008). Shaw and Hoeber (2016) explored and promoted dialogue regarding the use of contemporary qualitative research methods in sport management. Ellis et al. (2008) was based on a special session at the 2006 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry entitled “Talking and Thinking About Qualitative Research”, where several prominent scholars who conduct qualitative research in their respective fields (i.e., education, communication, sociology, gender studies, performance studies, nursing and anthropology) engaged in a provocative panel discussion about their experiences with and thoughts about qualitative research. These two articles by Shaw and Hoeber (2016) and Ellis et al. (2008) sparked interesting class discussions amongst the professor and doctoral students in the above-mentioned doctoral seminar, and consequently, the idea that the NASSM membership could really benefit from a panel discussion similar to the one Ellis et al. (2008) conducted back in 2006 was born.

We deem this proposed session to be important and relevant to the NASSM membership for a couple of reasons. First, such a conversation can help address and counter some of the misconceptions various stakeholders (e.g., faculty, graduate students, and sport industry practitioners) might have about qualitative research and its value to the field. And second, it can also encourage critical reflections on the vital role qualitative research could and should play in advancing the field of sport management going forward. It is our hope and belief that this panel can help heighten understanding and respect for qualitative inquiry, and ultimately, encourage more scholars in the field to embrace this dynamic approach to research.