A Review of Ethnography in the Journal of Sport Management

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Method - Qualitative (Other)
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For years, scholars have discussed the need to diversify methods used in sport management research (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016; Singer et al., 2016), including in the North American Society for Sport Management’s (NASSM) associated journal, Journal of Sport Management (JSM). Despite calls from leaders in our discipline, less traditional research methods have been slow to gain momentum, including the use of ethnography (Skinner & Edwards, 2005). The purpose of this work was to understand how frequently ethnography has been used as a method in JSM, and to identify trends regarding the type of ethnography used and particular topics studied; JSM was selected because it is the official research journal of NASSM.

Ethnography affords researchers the opportunity to immerse themselves in an environment to explore an idea (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). Ethnography can range from traditional approaches in which the researcher acts as a strict observer in an unfamiliar setting (aligning with principles of positivism or post-positivism), to more nontraditional approaches, where a researcher is a participant and observer in the setting (paradigmatically shifting toward principles of critical theory or constructivism), and may even involve observing the self. Within sport, ethnography has been used to understand the culture and lived experiences of individuals in a variety of settings, including employment (Rehman & Frisby, 2000), tourism (Costa & Chalip, 2005), and fans of teams (Delia, 2017).

All articles (705) published in JSM from 1987 through 2017 were reviewed to understand the method used, with details for each article recorded in a file. When ethnography was used, additional details were noted, including research topic, type of ethnography, and role of the researcher. The first ethnography published in JSM was in 2000, and a total of seven ethnographies have been published in JSM (1% of all articles reviewed). In 19 other articles, authors mentioned the use of participant observation as part of a study, but not the primary method (and not ethnography). Among the ethnographies published in JSM, topics included consumer behavior (3), organizational behavior (2), tourism (1), and media (1), indicating interest in and applicability of the method in a range of sport management sub-disciplines. Considering calls from scholars to move beyond positivism in ethnographic research (Skinner & Edwards, 2005), it appears researchers have answered these calls—multiple authors discussed using an interpretive approach to ethnography, their role as full participants in the research, and the need for reflexivity in the research act. Further, in two articles, the authors used autoethnography, studying the self as a mode of inquiry.

This review suggests that although the use of ethnography as a method in JSM publications has increased since the turn of the century, it remains unique. As evidenced by the ethnographies published in JSM to date, the method is valuable in understanding and theorizing from the experiences of individuals and communities in sport settings. A full review of the use of ethnography in JSM and direction for those interested in using the method will be discussed in the presentation.