Framing Interdisciplinary Research Questions: An Example from the Field of Play

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At NASSM 2018, a research methods symposium focused on developing interdisciplinary research (IDR), around the example of youth sport concussion management. IDR is gaining traction in the sport management academy (Hoeber et al., 2016; Ratten, 2016; Dickson et al., 2017) where it can benefit from sharing insights in a collegial forum. Authentic IDR is a process of “relating, integrating, and relocating disciplinary thinking” as scholars and stakeholders from different disciplines working closely together arrive “at a mutually-determined research program that represents new ways of conceptualizing [a phenomenon]” (Doherty, 2012, p. 1). It is a particularly suitable approach for addressing complex or “wicked” problems (Brown et al., 2010) that seem to be more prevalent in sport management (e.g., Doherty, 2012; Misener & Misener, 2017; Thibault, 2009). The fundamental IDR steps of identifying, relating and integrating many and different lenses “hold[s] the potential to develop better social theory… and real avenues for social change” (Mair, 2006, p. 201).

A systematic IDR process (Kessel et al., 2008; Konig et al., 2013; Oughton & Bracken, 2009; Repko, 2012) begins with framing, or identifying and bounding, the research problem. This involves (1) determining relevant disciplines; (2) engaging the literature, scholars and stakeholders from those disciplines with regard to knowledge and gaps pertaining to the phenomenon of interest; and (3) negotiating across disciplines to create common (new) ground that represents the IDR framework for empirical investigation. Borrowing from Oughton and Bracken (2009), we posit that using a real or hypothetical case to illustrate the emergent interdisciplinary framework can help to confirm the framing and common focus for the research team. The case represents a perhaps typical scenario pertaining to the phenomenon of interest and highlights the complex and multidimensional research questions. This provides a real world example of the phenomenon to focus the IDR team, and allows the research questions to be further scrutinized or “tested” as to their relevance vis-à-vis such an example.

The first steps of framing IDR were the focus of the NASSM 2018 symposium where a panel of scholars and stakeholders engaged in sharing and integrating perspectives about key issues in youth sport concussion management. The purpose of this subsequent presentation is to briefly review the framing process of our IDR program (which has extended beyond the symposium panel) and to share the hypothetical case generated around youth sport concussion management. The case considers a scenario where an athlete sustains a blow to the head on the soccer field. Questions include (but are not limited to): “What roles do athlete identity, parental pressure, referees’ knowledge, and club policy play in removal of the athlete from the game again (or not)?” “Does (the fear of) legal liability influence the action of referees, and club volunteers?” and “Which of these forces is most powerful?” In the presentation we reflect on, and will encourage discussion about, the merits and challenges of this step in the IDR process as the field of sport management continues to consider and engage in this potentially valuable approach to addressing complex problems.