Shadowing as a Data Collection Method in Qualitative Sport Management Research

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As qualitative research has become more common in sport management academia, researchers have been encouraged to adopt contemporary and innovative methods of approaching such projects (Hoeber & Shaw, 2017). Seeking to advance the existing repertoire of research techniques in sport management, Shaw and Hoeber (2016) propose looking to other fields for such contemporary methods, including to parent-disciplines such as management or related management areas such as organizational studies. One such data collection method of promise is shadowing, which has chiefly been used and developed in the latter (Ferguson, 2016).

Although shadowing is perhaps best known as a tool for experiential learning, it is also suggested to hold value to qualitative researchers (McDonald, 2005). Shadowing allows the researcher to make sense of the observed actor and their path in multiple dimensions (including time and place), as well as in micro events (such as “water cooler chats” after an observed meeting) that don’t tend to be captured through traditional data collection techniques such as interviews and/or observation (McDonald & Simpson, 2014). Importantly, shadowing can be combined with additional data collection means such as photography, field notes, and audio/video recording. The purpose of this study, then, is to explore the value that shadowing has to qualitative researchers in sport management in particular.

Thus far, use of shadowing has been rare in the field of sport management, or it has not consistently been distinguished and/or decoupled from [participant] observation techniques. Indeed, shadowing is often implicit as a component of ethnography and is thus typically mentioned only in passing in such studies rather than being cited as a data collection method unto itself (see, e.g., Richards, 2015). However, the use of shadowing may help close the gap between researchers and practitioners. For instance, Radu & Emery (2007) employed shadowing at the request of their subject who, as a sport manager, was used to being shadowed by work-experience students and was thus unbothered by the presence of the researchers and their questions.

We will share our experience using shadowing as a data collection method within a qualitative case study of an Australian professional sport club. Across the 2018/19 season, four staff members in different departments of the organization’s front office were shadowed during the duration of their game day operations. In total these shadowing events lasted 26 hours and yielded 3,248 words of field notes and 223 photographs for subsequent analysis. Shadowing was found to enhance trust and engagement between researchers and subjects, a finding which we explored further in subsequent semi-structured interviews with the staff members who were shadowed. Consequently, the perspectives of both researchers and practitioners feature in our study.

Overall, our research makes two distinct contributions to sport management research. First, we highlight the ability of shadowing to generate in-depth data that goes beyond traditional data collection techniques used in qualitative sport management research (such as interviews and observation). Second, drawing on our practical experiences, we offer suggestions as to how sport researchers can most usefully employ the technique in real-world settings.