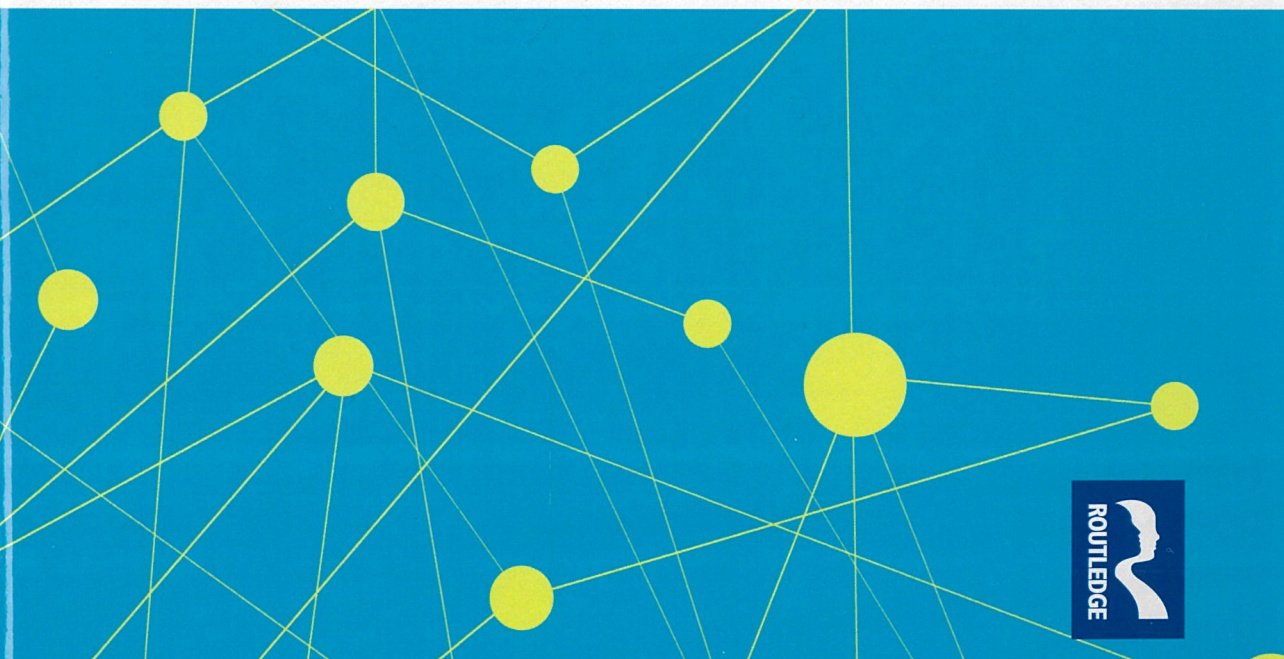
Sport in the Global Society: Contemporary Perspectives

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES FOR SPORT SCHOLARSHIP

Edited by
James Skinner and Terry Engelberg



ROUTLEDGE

Research Methodologies for Sport Scholarship

When investigating the diverse, complex and changing contemporary field of sport, we recognize there is no methodology that meets the needs of all sport. Sport researchers should take advantage of innovative approaches from other fields to explore emerging phenomena or innovatively advance scholarly sport research approaches. For example, technology, globalization and commercialization may be the principal trends, but they are not the only trends. Sport researchers have the opportunity to study other trends, including the modernization of sport organizations, changing governance practices, regulatory changes, innovation, merchandising, media and broadcasting technologies, socio demographic influences (i.e. aging populations, change in employment patterns, increasing diversity), sport for development, physical activity and sport participation changes. As such, this book introduces innovative research methods and approaches that can be applied to the sport discipline.

This book was originally published as a special issue of *Sport in Society.*

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Sport in the Global Society: Contemporary Perspectives

Series Editor: Boria Majumdar, University of Central Lancashire, UK

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INTRODUCTION

New problems, new challenges: embracing innovative approaches to sport research

James Skinner and Terry Engelberg

Sport research should systematically advance knowledge about the discipline and thus be relevant to both academics and practitioners. Research methods play an important role in advancing knowledge, and continuous efforts to develop and apply new research methods are essential for sport research to capture the complexities of the contemporary sporting landscape (Smith and Stewart 2010). Important but complex research issues have emerged as sport continues to globalize and further embed itself in the social, cultural and economic fabric of society. In many cases, addressing these research problems challenges research designs and methods in which sport researchers have been trained. However it is clear that when investigating the diverse, complex and changing contemporary field of sport we need to recognize there is no longer a methodology that meets the needs of all sport-related research (Hoeber and Shaw 2017).

Diversity in methods and approaches can facilitate the development of the discipline. Historically under the influence of the dominant positivist paradigm, sport-related research predominately focused on scientific explanation and prediction through as value free of a lens as possible (Glesne 2006). Positivists usually embraced an ontological view that there is one reality which can be quantified and measured. Epistemologically, positivists believed that reality consists of facts and with appropriate methods scientists can ascertain those facts (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). As such, positivists were usually characterized by a belief that, if an investigation follows the rigid methods set forth, and establishes a degree of methodological validity and reliability, the results can be considered objective and value-free facts of the world (Kuhn 1962).

Sport research to a large extent grew out of the view that researchers should use research methods that were similar to those which had seemed to lead to the discovery of objective laws and regularities in the natural sciences (Skinner and Edwards 2005). The appropriate way of going about knowledge production is thought to be by means of the hypothetic-deductive method in which the sport researcher begins with a clearly articulated theory, deduces hypotheses which are logically consistent with the theory, and then tests the hypotheses under experimental conditions. Such methodology assumes that through observation and precise measurement, social reality (Kuhn 1962), which is external to and

independent of the mind of the observer, may be rendered comprehensible to the sport researcher (van Manen 1997).

According to Sharp and Green (1975), it is in approaches to theorization, as much as in the methodology itself, that the 'inherent weakness' of such deductive research is revealed. Critical sport theorists challenged the positivist logical empiricist tradition and argued that whilst 'fact finding' and 'head counting' produces voluminous statistical data, it does not address the social circumstances out of which such data arise (Frisby 2005). Criticism of the separation of the individual from social structures, which is a characteristic of the positivist tradition, coupled with a philosophical attack upon the tenets of positivism, and the realization that social advances do not necessarily follow any correct scientific manner (Kuhn 1962), led to the emergence of more interpretive research (Woods and Hammersley 1977). This approach shares a common concern with the investigation of ways in which human actors themselves construct the social world through the interpretation of the interaction with other human actors. This relationship between the research and informant prompted the emergence of new paradigms emerging in sport research. Sport researchers' embracing these new research paradigms signalled a growing awareness in the sport research community that there is no single or right way to understand social reality (Smith and Sparkes 2016).

The emergence of mixed-methods design was a recognition of how the positivist and interpretative paradigms could be used together. In following a mixed-method approach the sport researcher collects both quantitative data (quantifiable data) as well as qualitative data (images, interviews, stories). This is not simply a process of collecting two distinct types of data – quantitative and qualitative. The research method integrates, links or embeds both strands. The strength of this design is that it combines the advantages of each form of data – that is, quantitative data provides for generalizability, whereas the qualitative data offers information about the context or setting. This design enables a sport researcher to gather information that uses the best features of both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Skinner, Edwards, and Corbett 2015).

What the above discussion indicates is that the positivist and interpretative paradigms could co-exist and that there is no one best research approach. The sport researcher should determine which approach will be most effective given the research question. As these questions become more complex there is a need for more innovative methods and approaches to explore new emerging sport phenomena, for example the social and economic influence of the growth E-Sports. Conducting and publishing research with real implications for sport practice has long been a challenge for sport researchers (Frisby 2005), the challenge looms even larger as sport as the industry continues to evolve and expand rapidly. Emerging new research phenomena can only be addressed through innovative research methods or approaches. Innovation in this sense might mean the development of new methods, approaches or procedures or the integration of multiple methods in innovative ways.

This volume therefore aims to provide examples of a range of innovative research methodologies that can be applied in sport research. The papers within the volume each advance our theoretical understanding and practical application of research in sport. In doing so, the volume addresses contemporary research problems and applies an innovative research method(s).

Papers in this volume

The papers in this volume represent a cross section of sport research predominately drawn from the qualitative paradigm. This perhaps represents a departure from historical quantitative trends and a desire to seek deeper meaning and a greater understanding of the research issue under investigation. As a result of such critical analyses, it could be suggested that many of the long-standing beliefs and values pertaining to arguments of what makes scientific research are being challenged even more. At the core of these deliberations are perhaps deeply rooted philosophical questions such as what constitutes justifiable knowledge; in what ways is knowledge recognized and understood; and how is knowledge stored, distributed and put into use (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, and Richardson 2017)? Likewise, questions about the generation of knowledge claims and specifically how people can go about producing value-free facts about the world have spurned further debate (Glesne 2006). As Amis and Silk (2005) lamented: 'too often our work in sport has been presented as neutral and value free, with little regard for the historical, social, political and cultural context in which the work takes place' (p. 357).

Despite the qualitative focus of the collection of papers, we advocate that there is no best research approach: quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches all have a place in sport research. It is vital that sport researchers use designs that are the most applicable to their research and legitimizes the distinctiveness of sport research perspectives and agendas. Morton begins the collection of papers by providing an analysis of the burgeoning adventure sport industry in Scotland. Previous research had typically focussed on quantitative methodologies with male participants. Morton used three qualitative approaches to understand the lived experiences of female participants. This included auto-ethnography (making use of the researcher's own experiences as an adventure sport participant); ethnography (observatory and participatory activity conducted by the researcher); and, interviews with female adventure sport participants. In the second paper, Naess, an acknowledged 'fan' of the World Rally Championship (WRC), used a narrative ethnography, coupled with participatory observation, to understand the paradoxical forces of commercialism and tradition in the sport. An extensive knowledge of the sport enabled the researcher to frame data-gathering interviews as 'conversations' amongst fans.

Whilst having the researcher-as-a-participant can be an important methodological approach, the third paper presented by Wiser is based on her experience as a lacrosse umpire (and researcher). The paper offers a personal reflection on the opportunities and pitfalls that can occur when researchers have intersecting/overlapping roles. The research may be 'fun', but it will confront the researcher with a heavy personal responsibility, and balancing out those potential conflicts can impact on the quality of the research. Such issues are also voiced in the next paper by Collison and Marchesseault. These researchers show how 'Participatory Social Interaction Research', can elevate research beyond its traditional confines of policy, practice, and evaluation, into an activity that can result in cultural understanding and empowerment. Coombs and Osborne also use an auto-ethnographic approach in the next paper, albeit in quite different circumstances. The authors, two American women, immersed themselves into the hypermasculine world of English Premier League Football. Through prolonged immersion, the women became 'nothing special' and were able to integrate with the club's tribal fan-base. In the final ethnographic study in the volume, Hutchinson, Moston and Engelberg attempted to develop a theoretical framework

to understand recreational body-builders' use of banned performance enhancing substances. Unlike Coombs and Osborne, who immersed themselves into their community of interest, Hutchinson et al. analysed publicly available webpages of discussions on doping, thereby identifying users' motivational and normative factors that facilitated or deterred doping in this sport community.

The next two papers consider the application and potential of phenomenological approaches to sport research. Clark, Ferkins, Smythe and Jogulu employ a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of skiing. Once again, an extensive knowledge of the sport, enabled the researchers to frame research interviews as 'conversations' that elicited 'stories'. Such research approaches are very valuable, but caution should be taken as they may be subject to inconsistent application. In their paper, O'Halloran, Littlewood, Richardson, Tod and Nesti, offer theoretically informed guidelines for researchers. This includes the alignment of philosophical approaches with the chosen phenomenological approach. O'Halloran et al. also offer guidance on practical aspects of phenomenological research, including selection of sample size, and the selection of participants. They also offer guidance on how, through a variety of 'bracketing' approaches, researchers can set aside their own prior knowledge and experiences, to focus on the participant's lived experience.

The next three papers by: Agergaard, Dankers, Munk and Elbe; De Bosscher; and then Toohey, MacMahon, Weissensteiner, Thomson, Auld, Beaton, Burke and Woolcock employ multi-methods or mixed methods to the fields of youth physical activity participation, sport talent identification, and sport policy, respectively. Agergarard et al. contend that the through the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and interpretation, both the objective and subjective impacts of a complex intervention can be assessed. In their study, which evaluated an intervention to increase youth participation and the experience of social inclusion, the authors used standardized questionnaires (pre- and post-intervention and in the control groups) and qualitative observations and interviews of the students in the intervention classes. The authors note that through combining these methodologies, a more complex understanding of the impact of an intervention (both effect and impact) can be established. De Bosscher's paper also focuses on mixed-methods research. De Bosscher argues that mixed-methods research is still rarely used in sport management and sport policy research, thus, this paper discusses the utility of mixed methods in a large international study of elite sport policies. Integrating data from 15 different countries, with several 100 'factors' (or variables) into nine 'composite indicators', De Bosscher' shows the opportunities, and drawbacks, of merging multiple large scale international studies. Toohey et al., used a transdisciplinary methodology that involved sport practitioners and researchers with diverse theoretical perspectives, to isolate and explore a range of factors critical to successful sport talent identification and development (TID). This paper explores how this project moved TID research beyond its paradigmatic, quantitative, sport science lens and advanced knowledge and practice in TID from both theoretical and applied perspectives.

The final two papers apply different research approaches. Jensen and Turner is the only paper in this volume that showcases quantitative methodologies exclusively. Specifically, the study described in this paper attempts to diversify quantitative research in sport by providing a conceptual and methodological overview of Event History Analysis (EHA) approaches. The final paper by Corbett and Edwards employs the use of social media as a research tool. It documents the process of utilizing Twitter through a case study design in rugby governance.

It suggests that Twitter is a highly dynamic environment which is perhaps only beginning to settle down after a short embryonic period during which it has grown exponentially. It highlights the key benefits of using Twitter as a research tool and argues that the findings from this case study serve as the basis for the pursuit of more detailed future research with Twitter as the principal medium in focus within sport research.

Moving forward

Sport social science research can be considered a convergence of disciplines that include sport management, sport sociology, sport philosophy, sport economics, physical education, sport psychology, sport politics and sport governance and policy As such, to explore the complex nature of the different sub-disciplines across sport the application of innovative and relevant research methodologies are essential. In endeavouring to emulate rigorous standards of research sport researchers should take methodological 'risks' and embrace more eclectic research approaches. Expanding the scope of a method (its associated concepts and practices) within its sport context and sub-discipline, although low on a continuum of methodological innovation, can respond to the changing concerns of the sport discipline, raise new research questions, enhance a method's contribution and be a step toward further methodological innovation (Chang 2017).

New methods or research approaches can solve controversial issues and facilitate the development of new theories (Greenwald 2012). Sport researchers should take advantage of innovative approaches from other fields to explore emerging phenomena or innovatively advance scholarly sport research approaches. For example, technology, globalization and commercialization may be the principal trends, however they are not the only trends in sport. Sport researchers have the opportunity to study other trends, including the modernization of sport organizations, changing governance practices, regulatory changes, innovation, merchandizing, socio-demographic influences (i.e. ageing populations, change in employment patterns, increasing diversity), sport for development, physical activity and sport participation changes. As such, the development of innovative methods and approaches should be central to the sport discipline. Without new methodological insights sport researchers may only use those research approaches they are comfortable with or have been trained to do. This limits the scope of their exploration, as well as the development of sport research. Most importantly, method innovation requires developing a good command of multiple methods and for the future a close collaboration amongst researchers in different disciplinary fields (Faber 2015). As sport continues to expand across the globe sport researchers will need to equip themselves with multiple research skills, or alternatively connect with other researchers to form collaborative research teams to address the research problems of a fluid and dynamic sporting sector.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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