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Review

Unclipping our wings: Ways forward in qualitative research in sport management

Sally Shaw^{a,*}, Larena Hoerber^{b,1}

^a School of Physical Education, Sport and Exercise Sciences, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

^b Faculty of Kinesiology & Health Studies, 3737 Wascana Parkway, University of Regina, Regina, SK, Canada S7N 0A2

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ABSTRACT

In this review article, we aim to explore and promote dialogue regarding the use of contemporary qualitative research methods being used in sport management. The first section is a snapshot of qualitative research from 2011 to 2013 in the three main sport management journals: Sport Management Review (SMR), the Journal of Sport Management (JSM), and European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ). Secondly, we comment on this snapshot, outlining not only how far we have come in qualitative research in sport management but also drawing attention to some of the constraints to its current use. Thirdly, we illustrate what might help us to reflect on our use of qualitative research methods. This leads us to our final section, in which we utilise that reflection to outline some ways forward; how can we contribute to sport management by using qualitative research methods in imaginative and innovative ways?

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1. Sally

I've always wanted my research to make a difference. It came as a huge shock to me when I did my PhD that the people in the organisations that I was conducting my research with didn't embrace it. One or two people 'got it', but for others it was dismissed as 'biased' and 'anecdotal'. I was astonished! How could my carefully constructed research be rejected in such a cavalier manner? Perhaps my reaction to this criticism was so sharp because I was invested in that research: I wanted to make a difference to sport organisations. This investment is a feature of all of my research; whether to help organisations work out how to govern better, enter into more productive partnerships, or become places where people want to go to work regardless of their gender or sexuality. Qualitative research provides opportunities to do this, using participants' experiences to understand a topic and then possibly frame alternatives, whether those alternatives are radical or incremental change (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). These alternatives can be explicit, for example policy driven, or implicit such as providing alternative ways to create an organisation. Even the status quo might be the outcome, as long as it is considered after critical organizational engagement. Qualitative research also provides the opportunity to 'write ourselves into' the research, that is to recognise our personal interest in research but also remember that we are researchers and so have to have some distance from our work.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 3 479 5037; fax: +64 3 479 8309.

E-mail addresses: sally.shaw@otago.ac.nz (S. Shaw), larena.hoerber@uregina.ca (L. Hoerber).

¹ Tel.: +1 306 585 4363.

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In short, I think that qualitative research has great potential to help improve sport management and, in order to harness this potential, we need to use it to its fullest. My experience as a reviewer for *Sport Management Review*, *Journal of Sport Management* and occasionally for *European Sport Management Quarterly* is that we shy away from such efforts in our qualitative research. We don't push qualitative research or ourselves hard enough to articulate those potential changes. In part, this may be because we are afraid to push the boundaries in a competitive educational system that rewards the status quo. It may also be that we don't know what else to do, so we stick with the tried and true semi-structured interviews and case studies. Larena and I have talked about this on many occasions. What follows is an attempt to put our stake in the ground regarding the role of qualitative research in sport management and to articulate a way through which researchers might use the strengths of qualitative research to their fullest to promote social change?.

2. Larena

Numerous times I have heard a faculty member, who traditionally uses quantitative methods, ask a graduate student using qualitative methods 'How did you address your biases?' This question is almost never asked to those using quantitative methods. I say almost never because I am usually the one who will ask this to students using quantitative approaches. Maybe I should not do that as it is not fair to a student who is not trained or expected to address one's subjectivities. But equally so, for a student who is trained to accept, acknowledge, and address their preconceived ideas, prior experiences, and assumptions (i.e., researcher reflexivity) it is not fair to claim they are biased. I cringe when I hear that word (bias), because biases are viewed as something to be excluded or removed from research in order to achieve objectivity. I have wondered 'How do I forget what I already know when I collect and analyze the data? Do we want to completely remove our emotions, hunches, intuitions, and experiences from our research? Can I critically evaluate the data without acknowledging my own expectations and knowledge?' While we need to be careful with our biases as they can lead us to unjustified conclusions, it is unrealistic to suggest that we can or want to keep them in check.

At the same time, I am happy to see that it is more common for studies based on qualitative methods to be presented at conferences and published in journals in our field. Sport management research has evolved since Olafson (1990) observed that the most common data collection methods in our field were questionnaires (55%) and archival methods (20%). Very few studies at that time used qualitative research methods, such as interviews (7%) or observations (0%). Now, there is recognition of the value of qualitative research to further our knowledge of sport management phenomena (see Nite & Singer, 2013). However, I go back to Olafson's (1990, p. 116) paper where he critiqued the sport management field for its over-reliance on questionnaires and argued that "given the wide range of data collection procedures available, SM [sport management] researchers must begin to explore other data gathering methods." While we are using a wider range of qualitative and quantitative methods, I must admit, I do not often review an article or an abstract and think 'This is a new and exciting approach. I'd like to learn more about it.' Instead, many qualitative researchers in sport management (including myself) use safe, traditional designs, data collection methods, and data analysis approaches. Maybe this is happening because the disbelievers are just starting to accept qualitative research, and thus we do not want to risk acceptance in the field by discussing or using less conventional data collection and analysis methods or ways of disseminating research. Or perhaps there is a lack of awareness of different, creative and innovative qualitative approaches that are being used in other fields like nursing, education, sociology and organisation studies. For example, Buchanan and Bryman's (2009) edited book on organisational research methods includes chapters on innovative approaches such as narrative-based methods, discourse analysis, visual methods, organizational auto/ethnography, and using film as data. Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) regularly updated handbook on qualitative research methods provides overviews of traditional (e.g., case study, observations, focus groups) and contemporary research methods (e.g., participatory action research, narrative inquiry, arts-based inquiry, online ethnography).

Like Sally, I agree that qualitative research methods have the potential to push our research in sport management. While researchers commonly use them to explore relatively new concepts and phenomena, such as organisational readiness (Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2012) and sense of community (Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Warner & Dixon, 2011), qualitative research methods can add new insight to concepts that have been the focus of study for some time like volunteerism (e.g., Byers, 2013) or organisational change (e.g., Nite & Singer, 2012; Skille, 2011). For example, one could come to the conclusion based on the existing literature on sport fandom that there is a shared and stable understanding of what it means to be a sport fan. I am more apt to believe that there are some common experiences, but that women, as one distinct group, face challenges that men do not as fans. Qualitative approaches can help us to learn about and uncover what it means to be female and a sport fan, or a visible minority who is a new supporter of a local team, or a male non-fan. Traditional research methods based on an objectivist epistemology (i.e., "meaning [of things] exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness"; Crotty, 2011, p. 8) and a (post-) positivist approach (i.e., the researcher follows the scientific method to uncover the true meaning of objects) would be inappropriate in capturing personal and unique experiences of a range of sport fans as it would assume there is one true and shared understanding of fandom. In contrast, qualitative methods based on constructionist (i.e., people construct meanings of things) or interpretivist (i.e., meanings are contextually and historically situated; Crotty, 2011) viewpoints would acknowledge that interpretations and experiences of phenomena, like fandom, are not shared but rather are varied and subjective.

In this review article, we aim to explore and promote dialogue regarding the use of contemporary qualitative research methods. This is not to replace traditional qualitative methods but rather to add to the plurality (Amis & Silk, 2008) of those being used in sport management. For the purpose of this paper, we use Buchanan and Bryman's (2009) conceptualization of methods as "procedures for data collection", which includes a discussion of designs and data collection methods in addition

to “the wider set of considerations involving research objectives, epistemological choices, and the opportunities and choices presented by the . . . setting in which research is conducted” (p. xxvii). Data analysis is “a closely related but separate field, with its own specialist literature” (p. xxvii), and thus goes beyond what we can adequately discuss in this paper. Further, we follow [Buchanan and Bryman’s \(2009\)](#) view of contemporary methods being those that are innovative, non-traditional, and fresh.

In order to achieve our aim, we will address it in four sections. The first section is a snapshot of qualitative research from 2011 to 2013 in the three main sport management journals: *Sport Management Review* (SMR), the *Journal of Sport Management* (JSM), and *European Sport Management Quarterly* (ESMQ). Secondly, we comment on this snapshot, outlining not only how far we have come in qualitative research in sport management but also drawing attention to some of the constraints to its current use. Thirdly, we illustrate what might help us to reflect on our use of qualitative research methods. This leads us to our final section, in which we utilise that reflection to outline some ways forward; how can we contribute to sport management by using qualitative research methods in imaginative and innovative ways?

3. An article snapshot: 2011–2013

From 2011 to 2013, we identified 72 out of 309 articles published in SMR, JSM, and ESMQ in which the authors used qualitative methods (i.e., designs and data collection procedures). We chose this time frame for three main reasons. Firstly, the period starts five years after [Amis and Silk’s \(2005\)](#) special issue on *Expanding Horizons: Promoting critical and Innovative Approaches to the Study of Sport Management*. This may seem like a long gap; however, it reflects the period taken for researchers to absorb and apply the special issue’s messages, develop and conduct their research, and have it published. Secondly, as members of editorial boards for SMR and JSM, and regular guest reviewers for ESMQ, we both noticed an increase in qualitative approaches in the articles we reviewed, since our respective appointments to the boards of JSM and SMR in 2008 and 2011. Finally, our intention here is to provide a snapshot as a basis for the rest of our review. By this, we mean a short, accurate picture of the state of research when we began this review, not a lengthy analysis of the various types of data collection and analysis on offer.

We excluded those using mixed methods, as while there is merit in this approach, our focus was on those using qualitative methods exclusively. The majority of articles were published in JSM (29), then SMR (27) and ESMQ (16). This total represents a fairly healthy engagement with qualitative research, which may be a consequence of Amis and Silk’s special issue ([Amis & Silk, 2005](#)) and Wendy Frisby’s Zeigler lecture ([Frisby, 2005](#)).

Of the 72 articles we identified, case studies and semi-structured interviews were the most popular research designs and data collection methods. For example, of the 16 ESMQ articles, only one qualitative research design did not use case studies or semi-structured interviews. This research was an autoethnography ([Kodama, Doherty, & Popovic, 2013](#)). This approach is valuable as it provided first-person insight into the experiences of volunteering at a major sport event. The majority of articles in JSM represented a mix of case studies (if the design was identified) using semi-structured interviews or focus groups. The articles in SMR reflected a similar pattern, with 25 using the same mix as JSM. As this snapshot shows, many qualitative researchers in sport management cling to a very standard form of case studies, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

On one hand, this is a good thing; it represents an engagement with qualitative research and an appreciation of its potential to increase our knowledge in the field. What we are failing to do, though, is push the boundaries of our engagement and utilise methods that might change the face of our taken for granted assumptions about what makes ‘good research’ and develop our field (cf. [Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013](#); [Amis & Silk, 2008](#); [Nite & Singer, 2012](#)). Given this, we think that [Amis and Silk’s \(2005, p. 367\)](#) comment still holds true: “what currently holds the center in sport management research is a somewhat narrow definition of the field that . . . blinkers sport management scholars in their ability and potential to provide a critical examination.”

We argue that the ways that some sport management scholars (including ourselves) undertake qualitative research has become too comfortable and does not challenge us enough. We have not yet embraced the process of “a more self-conscious . . . struggle with a whole set of claims related to authorship, truth, validity, and reliability, and that bring to the fore some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing” ([Amis & Silk, 2005, p. 365](#)). We now turn to an overview of the academic and wider social pressures that have led to this limited understanding and use of qualitative research. There are two related concerns here. The first is the market-driven academic environment in which we operate and the second is the resultant ‘gap filling’ research that does not necessarily help to develop the field.

4. Constraints to using qualitative research approaches

4.1. Market-driven academic environment

Academics operate within a cut-throat environment. While the origins of the term ‘publish or perish’ are somewhat murky, there is little doubt that the phrase was coined at the latest in 1942 in *The Academic Man: A Study in the Sociology of a Profession* ([Wilson, 1942](#)). More than seventy years on, the phrase is reinforced in our neo-liberal influenced competitive funding regimes. Whether we are the servants of the Performance Based Research Fund (New Zealand), the Research Excellence Framework (United Kingdom), the American Education Research Association, or the myriad of other audit

agencies in academia, we all know that what we write, how we justify it, and how it is evaluated have fairly immediate organisational and personal implications for, amongst other things, funding, promotion and tenure.

What is the connection between our neo-liberal funding environment and our choice of research methods? Simply put, there is an assumption that quantitative work is bias-free, controlled and clear cut (Denzin, 2009). Policy makers support such research because it gives them a clean, seemingly objective base on which to plan policy development. In contrast, few qualitative researchers “think in a language of evidence, they think instead about experience, emotions, events, processes, performances, narratives, poetics, the politics of possibility” (Denzin, 2009, p. 143). Unsurprisingly, policy makers, funders, and other stakeholders in academic research are unnerved by this. They tend to shy away from research which, they believe, is anecdotal and subjective and thus not truthful. For example, the American Education Research Association has guidelines for establishing trustworthiness for qualitative but not quantitative data. The Association highlights how the researcher’s perspective can influence qualitative but not quantitative research. As Denzin (2009) argues in such regimes, “qualitative research is down-graded to the status of a marginal science, second class citizenship. Since it lacks trustworthiness, it can be used for discovery purposes but not the real work of science, which is verification” (p. 150). Qualitative researchers are therefore perceived to engage in potentially untrustworthy work and “untrustworthy persons lie, misrepresent, cheat, engage in fraud, alter documents” (Denzin, 2009, p. 150). The absence of trustworthiness guidelines for quantitative analysis implies its implicit trustworthiness (Denzin, 2009). It is developments like this that encourage qualitative researchers to use methodological approaches grounded in objectivist epistemology. Indeed, Amis and Silk (2008) have written powerfully on this exact point: that how we think our work will be received may be a strong influence on what we study, how we study it, and how we present our research.

Whether or not Denzin’s arguments are entirely cogent regarding the implications of AERA guidelines is debateable. What they do, however, is engineer an interesting conversation about the differences in how qualitative research is assessed and understood both in academia and in the wider field. I (Sally) have had a report rejected from a funding body for exactly the reasons outlined by Denzin. The report was informed by interviews and documentary analysis, all based on rigorous qualitative procedures. Although the funding body supported the project for 12 months, once the final report was written, it was rejected for being “anecdotal and biased.” This was a bitter pill to swallow as I had gone to some lengths to explain the methodology and methods, and to ensure that the data were collected from as many individuals as possible to ensure a full, consistent picture was provided of the funder’s activities.

Denzin’s arguments, and Sally’s experiences, also hint at a more specific outcome of our neo-liberal environment, which is research characterised by “methodological conservatism” (Tracy, 2010, p. 837). We conduct research in, and on behalf of, institutions that are funded by agencies that do not trust qualitative research. It is not then surprising that, if we are brave enough to undertake such research, we will couch it in terms that make sense to our funders.

There are other influences at play here, too. For example, some North American doctoral programmes actively dissuade PhD candidates and young scholars from engaging in qualitative research until they have achieved tenure (Bansal & Corley, 2011). Nite and Singer (2013) found that qualitative research methods is an optional course requirement in sport management doctoral programmes in the United States, whereas training in quantitative methods is required. The privileging of training in quantitative methods was attributed to a belief that qualitative methods lacked rigour and that “advanced statistics were deemed to be advanced research methods” (Nite & Singer, 2013, p. 29). Similarly, in my (Larena’s) experience at a Canadian institution, undergraduate students in my faculty (kinesiology & health studies) often receive very little exposure to qualitative research methods, and at the graduate level qualitative methodology courses are a choice rather than a requirement. A research methods class is required for all undergraduate students in my faculty. However, within the 12-week course, students receive two weeks (at most) of content specifically focused on qualitative methods, with the remainder on quantitative methods. During this time, students are introduced to foundational qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups.

These experiences reflect many of our universities’ approaches to teaching qualitative methods (Amis & Silk, 2008). There is little time or incentive to introduce students to, and get them excited about, innovative qualitative designs and data collection methods. Instead, it is assumed that qualitative research method “[are] a marginal mode of inquiry or . . . so straightforward it requires little in the way of special training” (Page, 2001, p. 21), and thus can be learned on one’s own time (Schwartz-Shea, 2003). This overemphasis of quantitative research methods can be attributed to the trend of having instructors who are primarily trained in quantitative methods teaching qualitative classes (see also Page, 2001). Perhaps, this situation is not surprising as there are usually more quantitatively-trained researchers in kinesiology, physical education, and sport management programmes. Nonetheless, it is indicative of the reinforcement that ‘quality research = quantitative research’ approaches (cf. Amis & Silk, 2008). If qualitative methods are on par with quantitative, we should not need qualitative champions in our faculties to ensure that students are made aware of them. Rather, we should be promoting and facilitating an education based on “epistemological diversity” (Nite & Singer, 2013, p. 32). From a practical workplace perspective, sport management students will likely be asked to lead interviews, focus groups, and observations, in addition to surveys and questionnaires, in order to conduct needs assessments and programme evaluations. It is surely key to their education that they are provided with more time to learn about and become better trained with these qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods can therefore be the preserve of all sport management educators.

In countries such as the UK, there is less of a stigma attached to qualitative research, according to Bansal and Corley (2011). When I (Sally) read Bansal and Corley’s article, I was shocked and disbelieving! I too came from the UK tradition and was encouraged by my supervisors, Professor Trevor Slack and Professor Dawn Penney, to use the methods appropriate to

the project and the research questions being posed. In my case, I thought there was no question about the use of qualitative methods to research managers' experiences of gender equity in National Governing Bodies. On reflection, though, I remember my first North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) conference where, presenting as a student, I was asked by a senior NASSM member, "who interpreted your data?" To which I replied "me". The member then responded "yeah, so it's biased"! This was a baffling experience for a young PhD student and fortunately I received some support from the audience. It also provided me with a salutary lesson in being well prepared for such questions and knowing exactly *why* I was using qualitative methods and *how* I had used them. Professor Slack's advice after the event was "never apologise for your methods: just make sure you can argue the case for them". These were sage words, and a comment I have passed on many times to students working with me.

Similar pressures can also come from reviews of our work internally (e.g., peer review for tenure) and externally (e.g., grant reviewers, journals, conferences). It is important to note that research and methodological conservatism are not unique to the sport management field. Although Buchanan and Bryman (2009) suggested that "paradigmatic diversity and methodological innovation" (p. 4) are evident in organisational research, Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) and Corbett, Cornelissen, Delios, and Harley (2014) have argued for more creative, non-conformist research methods in management more generally. Specifically, Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) want to see more approaches that challenge existing assumptions in addition to those that are focused on demonstrating rigour (e.g., statistical analysis, causal mapping). Corbett et al. (2014) stated that these pressures may be particularly acute for new scholars: "To achieve academic success, management scholars, and particularly those early in their careers, are under pressure to conform to norms concerning the form, the content, the methods, and the type of contribution of their studies" (p. 4).

We argue, therefore, that our environmental and institutional pressures lead to a cautious engagement with qualitative research. When we conduct qualitative research, these pressures clip our wings and do not allow us to fully engage with it. We discuss the opportunities to fly more freely later but for now, we turn to the outcomes of this constrained research: gap filling.

4.2. Filling research gaps

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) identified "the dominance of incremental gap-spotting in management studies" (p. 129) as a conservative approach to research, because identifying gaps in content knowledge and working to fill those gaps with new research does little to question the status quo. Although researchers may be contributing to the body of knowledge by adding information to existing questions, they do not necessarily critique the questions that informed the original research. Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) were surprised at this trend because "it is widely recognized that a theory attracts attention and becomes influential if it challenges our current assumptions, rather than reinforcing [our assumptions] by thoroughly and systematically filling a gap in existing literature" (p. 129). We see the same justification in sport management research. While incremental, systematic research development may have a place, like Nite and Singer (2012) we argue that it does little to utilise qualitative research to critique our research assumptions.

The point of qualitative research is to encourage reflection, critique, emancipation, and cultural, social and political awareness. Its purpose is to allow us to engage in emotion and belief. In our case, this helps us to understand the messiness of organisational life. While we congratulate ourselves on writing more research about, for example, gender in sport, we could be critiqued for being "formulaic and dull" (Alvesson & Sandberg, p. 130). Indeed, the fact that the impact of forty-plus years of research into gender and sport has been limited in terms of women's inclusion and the development of a balanced gender environment should surely make us realise that one problem is that we are going about it in a way that does not make a difference! It could also be attributed to the challenges with knowledge dissemination to the non-academic community. Our carefully constructed case studies, interviews, and focus groups may well garner 'interesting data', and they may tick our institutional promotion and tenure boxes, but they do not always lead to meaningful social and organisational change. Such research does not, necessarily, reach out to, and work for, the very people who we should represent: that is women and men who are affected by gender relations in sport.

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) argue gap spotting does not necessarily allow for change. By respectfully critiquing our colleagues' work and 'identifying gaps' to 'contribute to the literature', researchers may fail to critique the existing assumptions and methodologies upon which that research is built (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Singer, 2005). Perhaps the focus could be more on how we define those gaps and less on spotting gaps that fit with our conventional understanding. We can identify gaps by questioning the narrow guidelines that are established for our field and the constraints that encourage us to only cite from our discipline's fields. This exposes a different sort of gap, that is, our engagement in new, different, and interesting epistemological approaches, like critical inquiry, feminism, critical race theory, and indigenous research methods, that will challenge our assumptions about 'good' qualitative research.

5. Self-reflection on "doing a better job" and moving qualitative research ahead in sport management

When we started our academic careers, the objectivist epistemology and positivist viewpoint were dominant, and with it the use of quantitative approaches (cf. Amis & Silk, 2008). We often had to not only justify our use of qualitative methods, but also explain them to our audiences. While I (Larena) am more confident that qualitative research is accepted in the sport management field, I also realise that the types of and approaches to qualitative research continue to evolve. I was unaware of

research designs and methods like photovoice, autoethnographies, narrative analysis, virtual ethnographies, and community-based research during my graduate studies in the 1990s. Now as a co-instructor of a graduate level course on qualitative research methods, I am constantly educating myself on epistemological stances, qualitative designs, methods, and analytical approaches. Similarly, I (Sally) had no idea of how indigenous Māori research methods are constructed, which allow research to be conducted in culturally sensitive ways. Having worked with a Masters and a PhD student in this realm, I now see the benefits of the co-operative, collaborative ways of Kaupapa Māori.

Perhaps if we were not responsible for engagement with challenging post-graduate research, we would remain comfortable with a foundational knowledge of case studies (e.g., Yin, 1994), one-on-one interviews and participant observations. Further, what passed as acceptable qualitative research practices 20 years ago may not be appropriate or relevant now, or perhaps is too simplistic. Many (including ourselves) still refer to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness, which are credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. Yet, there are alternative understandings of rigour, like sincerity, significance of the contribution, ethical conduct, and worthiness of the topic that are rarely cited or followed (e.g., Meyrick, 2006; Tracy, 2010). It is common to read qualitative sport management research and see seminal books and articles by such authors as Creswell (2014), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), Patton (2015), and Strauss and Corbin (2014) being cited. While their multiple editions and continued citation speak to their value and relevance, some of them have been critiqued for reinforcing a positivist epistemology (cf. Amis & Silk, 2008). Additionally, there are other contemporary methods-based texts that could inform our qualitative research practices and that are presented from a variety of epistemologies including interpretivism, constructionism, critical inquiry, and feminism (cf. Crotty, 2011). Books and articles on specific approaches like action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), community-based research (Creese & Frisby, 2011; Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006), critical race theory and methodology (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; see also special issue of Qualitative Inquiry, 2002), cultural studies and physical culture (Giardina & Newman, 2013; Silk & Andrews, 2011; Young & Atkinson, 2012), ethnographies and its variants (Ellis, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), feminist research approaches (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002), visual methodologies (Pink, 2011; Rose, 2012), and indigenous research methods (Denzin, Lincoln, & Tuhiwai Smith, 2008; Henry & Pene, 2001; Kovach, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2006; Wilson, 2008) to name a few, could find their way into the reference lists of sport management research.

When we reviewed qualitative research articles in the three journals, we observed little variation in the design, data collection methods and analytical approaches (we include our own work in this category). We have often relied on traditional qualitative methods, but done so because they are appropriate for the research questions. For example, I (Larena) used semi-structured, one-off interviews (i.e., one interview per participant) for recent work on gender relations among sport fans. The openness of semi-structured interviews fit a constructivist approach, as I wanted them to share their own lived experiences as fans, rather than having them respond to or confirm what the current literature has identified. What we have failed to do is to determine if other data collection methods or variations of traditional methods (e.g., other interview types) could be used. I (Larena) could have used focus groups to encourage more discussion amongst male and female sport fans, multiple interviews with individuals to discuss their history of interacting with other men and women in their role as fans, or photo-elicitation to get a visual understanding of their thoughts on other male and female sport fans. Although the approaches we have used were relevant for the research questions, perhaps we could take more time to really think about which designs or data collection methods are appropriate to answer our research question. But are we willing (or can we) take a risk and try a new approach?

Sometimes, our reluctance to try new methods is the fear of making mistakes, and thus jeopardising our research. When my colleagues and I (Larena) conducted research on the barriers facing Aboriginal sport volunteers (Riemer, Dorsch, Hoerber, & Bell, 2003), we used focus groups as they allowed for many voices to be heard at one time. For a follow-up project on volunteer management practices with Aboriginal sport volunteers, I continued to use focus groups, but was more aware of indigenous research practices such as the arrangement of the table and chairs in a circle and the importance of offering reciprocity (e.g., honoraria) in exchange for sharing of one's experiences (Hoerber, 2010). During one session, an elder in attendance brought a talking rock. When a person holds the rock (or other object like a stick), that person is permitted to speak without interruption, while others in attendance are asked to listen (Baskin, Koleszar-Green, Hendry, Lavallée, & Murrin, 2008). This procedure is different than typical focus groups where speakers often interject or interrupt each other. I appreciated the use of the talking rock as it allowed me, as the researcher, to focus on each speaker's stories. I did, however, make a mistake in that I passed the rock in the wrong direction. Thankfully, the elder educated me on the correct direction in which to pass it.

Similarly, I (Sally) supervised a Master's student who used the Māori research methods approach Kaupapa Māori. In this, a person's family, life, cultural values, history, and genealogy are all important to understanding how people act and interact. Māori are very protective of their physical and cultural knowledge, after years of colonial appropriation. My position was therefore very much as an outsider, hoping to go some way to understanding the research with help from a Māori co-supervisor. I was nervous as I was in the position of being a 'supervisor' with knowledge about research processes and 'how to do' a Masters but very little knowledge about the complexities of the approach. Going in to the project, I had a very limited understanding of the importance and depth of relationships between individuals and Iwi (tribes) and the time that it would take to develop the relationships required for the research to take place. Fortunately, my colleague and the student were able to assist me and I have certainly learned a considerable amount from the process.

Another explanation for the lack of variation of qualitative research methods is that due to the pressures of publishing and presenting we do what we know and can accomplish in a short period of time. Do we have time to learn new methods? I (Larena) ambitiously assume that I will have the summer months to read books on research methods. In reality, it is more likely that I will read particular chapters of books or look for articles that summarise an approach. I have had two books on visual research methods sitting on my desk for over two years. I have read some sections of them, but have yet to completely read them (and maybe never will). Perhaps we, as a discipline, need to make it easier to become aware of and learn about new methodologies. Since we do not often publish articles (outside of special issues) on methodologies and, from my observations, methods-based presentations are uncommon at sport management conferences, we should encourage our discipline-specific journals and conferences to establish methods-only sections and sessions. Presenting new methodologies within our discipline might make them more accessible to more people.

Maybe we need to re-familiarise ourselves with the value of qualitative approaches. It can be used for exploratory purposes to examine what is unknown. This is helpful for starting to understand relatively new phenomena, such as the use of social media by fans. Qualitative research emphasises and appreciates the interpretive and naturalistic side of life (Tracy, 2010). The focus of qualitative researchers is on the lived experience, from the perspectives of those who live it. Thus, it is helpful for understanding the experiences of those involved in the management of sport or those affected by sport management. It is also useful for capturing and understanding the natural setting (not constructed, safe, artificial, controlled lab settings) in which phenomena happen. Sport happens on fields, pitches, pools, and rinks. It is enjoyed in the stands, in the comforts of one's home, or via one's smartphone. We can observe how sport is experienced in these various settings. It can also provide an alternative and complimentary perspective to quantitative research, whether in conjunction with it or to challenge what has been found using quantitative approaches.

It is important to point out that qualitative research is not inherently interpretivistic. One can take a variety of epistemological approaches to the collection of qualitative data. For instance, a researcher can collect qualitative data (e.g., stories, images, text) and analyse it from a positivist approach (Crotty, 2011). Perhaps this is one of the problems with some of the research in sport management research using qualitative methods – it remains positivist. While this work provides descriptive information, it does not go far enough to interpret or challenge the data, through constructivistic, post-modern, critical, femininity, critical race, and indigenous epistemologies, as well as interpretivistic (see Crotty, 2011; Singer, 2005).

We also need to be reminded of the characteristics of qualitative researchers to point to some areas that we could do better. In Rossman and Rallis' (2003) introductory textbook to qualitative methods, they identify four roles and characteristics. Qualitative researchers:

View social worlds as holistic and complex, engage in systematic reflection on the conduct of the research, remain sensitive to their own biographies / social identities and how these shape the study . . . , and rely on complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pp. 8, 10).

I (Larena) rarely reflect on the conduct of the research. How did it go? What could have gone better? And if I do, I spend little time in presentations and publications discussing this. So, although I may be aware of how to improve my own research, I rarely share this with others to improve others' practice. Maybe this is too idealistic, but as reviewers we could encourage authors to provide a more honest depiction of the 'messiness' of the research process. Such a move would contrast with, and encourage a move away from, the "impression of clear design, rational and linear procedures, . . . and a logical step-by-step process from research question to delivery of result" (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013, p. 249). Further, very few authors explicitly identify their own experiences and identities and more importantly discuss how they contribute to the research outcomes. This is not unique to sport management research as Bansal and Corley (2011) also remarked on the lack of self-reflexivity in management research.

6. Ways forward

Our remaining question is 'how do we move qualitative research forward in sport management?' We propose four areas for consideration and reflection. These are: (a) research supervision, (b) editorial expectations, (c) undergraduate and post-graduate teaching of research methods courses, and (d) our own research.

6.1. Research supervision

Amongst other things, our job as supervisors is to advise, mentor, support, prompt, and motivate (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). We are all products of our own education, and for some of us, that education may be traditional or even a little out of date! We cannot expect to be experts in every field; however, we can reflect on our own backgrounds and research preferences. We also need to give our students the space, freedom, and support to develop their methodological approaches, however alien or challenging we may find them. It goes without saying that those approaches need to be framed with rigour but we need to challenge ourselves to accept differences. An interesting example can be found in the discussion of 'voice' in qualitative research (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). It is conventional to suggest in many qualitative projects that the methods used 'give voice' to (particularly marginalised) participants, or are able to articulate a level of consciousness on behalf of our participants. Qualitative research is, as we have argued here, focused on presenting data that are as close to representing participants' recollections of events as accurately as possible. What we may miss, however, is that in our quest to present:

'exact words' as if they are transparent ... [fail] to consider how as researchers we are always already shaping those 'exact words' through the unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative research agendas and timelines. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009, p. 2)

If we supervise students whose research includes marginalised or less powerful participants, then we need to, not only, ensure that they know how to employ methods that allow them to engage with the participants but also consider their own position as creators and followers of power dynamics as a researcher (cf. Ferguson, 1994; Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). We may not be experts in this area ourselves but we need to be able to explore opportunities with our students in order to ensure that they are suitably prepared to engage in discussions in the field.

A word of caution is required here, however. With the best intentions to support our students, we must also guard against over-complication. Qualitative (and quantitative) research can be a powerful tool for social and organisational change. It is important that while we develop rigour and are cognisant of our roles in the researcher/participant relationship that we do not become lost in overly complex theoretical and methodological debates that lose focus on the potential for applied research (Silverman, 2007). Silverman does not disregard the need to ensure recognition of our place as researcher; however, he cautions that overcomplicating the conceptualisation and presentation of such research can obfuscate its purpose and intent. For example, if we want our research to have practical use, we should carefully consider the readability of our academic writing (see Dolnicar & Chapple's, 2015 study of the readability of tourism research).

6.2. Editorial decisions

Similarly to research supervision, we argue that our editorial boards need to adapt to engage with advances in qualitative research. We recognise that the various pressures outlined above mean that conservatism is often to the fore in editorial decisions: our main journals operate in a fiercely competitive environment. It is tempting to follow what other mainstream management journals do in terms of acceptability and quality standards. We see the changes that we have suggested as an opportunity to develop a niche in which our journals set the bar for strong, rigorous and ground-breaking qualitative research. We also suggest that editorial boards could be appointed which are more cognisant of a varied approach to qualitative research and of the methodological backgrounds of those on the boards. Reviewers could also be asked to conduct their reviews considering authors' use of innovation and reflection in their research. As we argued earlier, we spend far too much energy repeating case study approaches that barely scratch the surface of the potential of qualitative research. With change, we argue that qualitative research in sport management will become more dynamic, and relevant, and become a leading light in the broader management field.

6.3. Teaching

I (Larena) have taught a graduate level qualitative research methods class for over 10 years. From my experience, this class is usually the first time graduate students have been formally introduced to qualitative methodologies. During the class, my co-instructor and I introduce students to traditional data collection methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observations) and designs (e.g., case studies). However, they do not learn the methods and designs from a lecture-based format. We require students to undertake a mini qualitative research project, in four months, from conceptualisation to dissemination (Cummings-Vickaryous, Mills, Hoerber, & LeDrew, 2010). In doing so, students are forced to learn how to use qualitative methods in real settings. More importantly, they become comfortable with the basic techniques of qualitative research (e.g., purposeful sampling, interviewing, case study design), with the hope that they will then be willing to undertake other designs and data collection methods. Similarly, as researchers, we may also need to take a leap of faith and try out new research methodologies.

In recent years, I have purposefully brought in a discussion of researcher reflexivity/positionality (cf. Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2000; Aull Davis, 2008) and asked students to reflect upon these ideas for themselves and their mini research projects. I have found that many students struggle with these concepts as they have been told repeatedly that subjectivity is 'bad' and that as qualitative researchers they have biases that compromise the quality of their work. When I ask them to identify their experiences, background, and identities and consider how those impact their interest in the topic in the first place along with data collection, analysis, and dissemination, they are often reluctant to openly acknowledge these. Over time, I have witnessed more graduate students, whom I have taught, including a section in their thesis or dissertation about these areas and mentioning them in their proposals and defences, as a normal part of the research process. The more I encourage this practice in my teaching, the more I hope students see this as a normal part of the research process. Following my own advice, I sometimes, although not always, include a reflexive piece in my work (e.g., Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013; Kerwin & Hoerber, 2015; Sveinson & Hoerber, 2015). Including this section adds length to manuscripts, and as such, may be an area that is vulnerable to 'chopping out' if the manuscript is lengthy. Nonetheless, the more that we explicitly acknowledge researcher positionality or reflexivity, the more common it becomes, to the point where, perhaps, it is expected.

With respect to teaching, I realised that I do not need to be expert in all forms of qualitative research, but I should be familiar with them and know where I can direct students in order to learn more about them. For example, I ask colleagues, in my faculty or across the university, to speak about other research methods or designs that I am less familiar with, such as narrative inquiry, phenomenology, or indigenous research methods. I ask students to forward articles and other resources on

qualitative research methods that are new to me. I learn from the approaches that graduate students use in their own work. For example, one student learned about Seidman's (2006) three-interview approach to phenomenological research, whereby participants are interviewed three times. The first interview focuses on one's past or history. The second interview focuses on present experiences. With the last interview, participants are asked to reflect upon their experiences and conversations with the researcher to date. In my own work, I typically interview a participant once, but realise that with these one-offs it is difficult to establish rapport with them and to get a rich understanding of their experiences. Yet, I had not taken the time to find out if there were other ways or approaches for interviewing participants that could elicit deeper or richer understandings.

I will attempt to, but it does not always happen, update my lectures and syllabus with new articles and insight related to qualitative research methods, so that I am not reinforcing concepts and approaches that I learned 20 years ago. The field of qualitative research methods is evolving. This is exciting because there are new approaches to choose from, but it is also overwhelming to keep up with the changes.

6.4. In our research

One might think that with our research, as compared to the three other areas just mentioned (supervising students, reviewing academic work, teaching), we would be open to new research methodologies, because it is the most directly applicable. Yet, given what is on the line to get funding, published in journals or accepted at conferences, or to get our research completed in a timely manner, this area is likely where some of us are the most conservative or reluctant to try new approaches.

One way to improve our use of qualitative methods is to be aware of and learn from researchers in other disciplines and how they are implementing them. What research methods are being used in the fields of management, sociology, social psychology, education, nursing, health and so forth? One of my (Larena) current roles is the chair of the university's research ethics board. I have the privilege of reviewing applications from a variety of disciplines offered at my university, and from this have become aware of new and alternative research methods. Similarly, I (Sally) am the Chair of the Post-Graduate committee in my Department. We distribute competitive research grants to students and through this experience I am exposed to novel research methods. Not everyone has (or wants) an opportunity like this, but we encourage researchers to browse what is going on in other disciplines. One could scan current issues in general qualitative research journals (e.g., *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Research*, *International Review of Qualitative Research*), qualitative journals in specific disciplines (e.g., *Qualitative Research in Exercise, Sport and Health*, *Qualitative Health Research*, *Qualitative Research in Organisations and Management*, *Qualitative Sociology*), or journals focused on specific qualitative approaches like action research (*Action Research*, *Educational Action Research*), ethnography (*Ethnography*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Journal of Organisational Ethnography*), and visual methods (*Visual Methodologies*, *Visual Studies*). Academics also need to be aware of methodologies used in related sport fields and how those can help to inform the research in sport management (see Smith & Waddington, 2014). We can also learn about new qualitative approaches by attending and presenting at methods-based conferences, such as the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Methods Conference, and the Ethnographic & Qualitative Research Conference. We should not be merely sampling new approaches, like the flavour of the day, but rather drawing our attention to the possibilities of new and better approaches to inform our research.

7. Conclusions and new directions

In this review, we have sought to provide avenues for alternative directions in qualitative research in sport management. Moreover, we have articulated our reasons why we believe that we need to promote such change. Our snapshot of 2011–2013 provides an overview of reasonably recent offerings in our area. Clearly, there are multiple reasons for staying with the tried and tested versions of qualitative research that dominate our field. Yet, we argue that in order to develop our field, we need to challenge our thinking and embrace some alternative methods, some of which we present here.

While we do not have room to discuss a wide range of contemporary methods, we highlight a few that have potential value to sport management research. Photovoice is a technique in which participants are invited to take pictures of their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). The participant-created photographs serve as "evidence and [a way] to promote an effective, participatory means for sharing expertise and knowledge" (Wang & Burris, p. 369). Unlike other photo-based methods, photovoice aims to provide a voice for marginalised populations to participate in research and to have an active role in creating change in their communities (Wang & Burris). For example, photovoice could be used with low-income residents before, during, and after major sport events. Their photographs and involvement in the study could shed light on unjust displacement practices and lead to policy reform regarding that issue. This data collection method could also be used with new immigrants, who are not fluent in the local language (or the language of the researcher), to discuss their experiences with sport in their community. The sharing of their experiences may help researchers and policy makers better understand the role that sport plays (or does not play) in the integration of new residents to a community.

With the growing interest in and significance of social media and virtual technology in the sport world, virtual ethnography (also referred to as online ethnography, cyber-ethnography, or netnography; cf. Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2009) has significant potential for sport management research. Virtual ethnography is the in-depth exploration of what happens in technological cultures and online settings (e.g., chat rooms, fantasy leagues) or with virtual data (e.g., social media posts)

(Hine, 2000). This design could be used to explore the social media activity of multiple stakeholders, like coaches, athletes, administrators, and media, throughout one team's season, or to observe the culture of fantasy leagues.

Physical culture studies are growing in popularity with sport sociologists (cf. special issue of *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 2011; Silk & Andrews, 2011; Young & Atkinson, 2012) but is rarely used by sport management researchers. This approach focuses on the intersection of “human movement, embodiment, and corporeal representation” (Young & Atkinson, 2012, p. xiv). This approach could be used to explore the experiences of those actively engaging in sport management. For example, I (Sally) supervised a student who examined physical culture and management. He researched female athletes' experiences of pain and injury in elite water polo. Specifically, he examined how players' pain and injury was (or was not) managed by coaches, physiotherapists, and team managers. His research found some quite damning results in terms of how pain and injury could be masked and ignored if it meant that, in the short run, those elite players would play in the tournament for their national teams. Understanding how the women experienced this process could inform better injury management in the future.

If we want to advance our research, we need to consider not only the investigation of new research questions, or the application of new theoretical frameworks or concepts, but also the use of new methodological approaches. We are not saying that we should adopt every new data collection or analytical approach (although we admit that we are often curious about them just because they are new). Rather, before we proceed with research projects we need to consider the range of research approaches that could work to address and answer our research questions. These do not need to be exhaustive searches to see ‘what is out there’. Further, they do not always need to be complicated and sophisticated methodologies that require significant training or education. However, we, both as individual researchers and as a research community, need to push ourselves out of our research comfort zone from time to time. This could be through including researcher reflexivity into one's manuscript (e.g., Nicholson, Hoye, & Gallant, 2011; O'Brien & Ponting, 2013) or partnering with a colleague who is an expert in a contemporary data collection method, to name a few approaches. We could encourage journals, like SMR, JSM, and ESMQ, to include a section on methodology on a regular basis, and sport management conferences to establish regularly held sessions dedicated to methods.

Overall, we seek a field-wide reflection on the use and potential for alternative qualitative models (see also Nite & Singer, 2012). This will help to move our research forward, embrace new ideas, and hopefully enable sport management scholars to develop alternative approaches to questions that have perplexed us all for some time and develop new and interesting research questions that can help our field to grow.

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