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Review

Theory and theory development in sport management

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ABSTRACT

Sport Management Review has been the sport management leader in publishing literature reviews and new theoretical frameworks. Despite these advances, scholars have not critically examined theory and its place in sport management scholarship. The purpose of this scholarly exchange is to address these issues, such that five scholars were invited to discuss how they conceptualize theory, the role of theory in the academia, and the process in which they engage when developing their own theories. This article provides an overview of the topic and introduces the articles.

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1. Introduction

Theory, or a statement of constructs and their relationships to one another that explain how, when, why, and under what conditions phenomena take place, is a critical element in the advancement of an academic discipline. In fact, [Kerlinger and Lee \(2000\)](#) argued that theory represents the fundamental aim of science. Analysis of *Sport Management Review* demonstrates that the journal has a long history of publishing work where authors offer a new theoretical framework or provide an integrative review of the literature. For instance, early works published in the “Conceptual Advance” section included a review of the organizational behavior literature ([Doherty, 1998](#)), a critical analysis of sport tourism ([Gibson, 1998](#)), the introduction of the Psychological Continuum Model ([Funk & James, 2001](#)), and an integrated model of work–family conflict ([Dixon & Bruening, 2005](#))—some of the more widely cited articles in the sport management literature. More recently, authors have published works under the “Reviews” section, with a focus on a wide variety of topics, including masculinity ([Anderson, 2009](#)), physical activity interventions ([Henderson, 2009](#)), the unique features of sport ([Smith & Stewart, 2010](#)), organizational justice ([Mahony, Hums, Andrew, & Dittmore, 2011](#)), racial inequality ([Cunningham, 2010](#)), attitudes toward sponsorships ([Chen & Zhang, 2011](#)), institutional theory ([Washington & Patterson, 2011](#)), gambling in sport ([Lamont, Hing, & Gainsbury, 2011](#)), and sport for development ([Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011](#)). These articles serve to integrate the literature and coalesce what would otherwise seem to be divergent views surrounding a topic. They also provide theoretical integrations and unique ways of approaching critical topics in the field.

A review of this scholarship, and the broader sport management literature in general, shows that one topic has been curiously omitted: theory and theory development. Of course, this is not to suggest that theory is absent from this scholarship; in fact, analysis of the articles published in the “Conceptual Advance” and “Reviews” sections points to a *strong* focus on theory. What is missing, though, is a treatment of theory in general. Is it important to sport management scholarship, and if so, why? What is the process of theory development? The purpose of this scholarly exchange is to flesh out some of these issues in greater depth. Specifically the contributors to this collection reflect on the role of theory and theory development in sport management academia. Coming from different research niches and backgrounds (i.e., leadership,

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human resource management, consumer behavior, and sponsorship), the contributors also understandably offer unique perspectives concerning the topic. In the following space, I introduce the articles included in this exchange, highlighting their unique contributions.

2. Overview

Five scholars contributed to this collection of papers. Doherty (2013) offers an overview of how she conceptualizes theory and draws from her previous work to provide illustrative examples. She then convincingly argues that sport management scholars should “invest in theory” by using it to undergird research, practice, and teaching. In the second article, Irwin and Ryan (2013) focus on ties with industry and suggest researchers can generate theory by engaging in authentic, collaborative interactions with persons working in the field. They further articulate several benefits of engaging in what they term “authentic research and learning environments,” including better student learning and faculty instruction, improved industry relationships, and enhanced scholarship.

In the third contribution, Fink (2013) also provides an overview of how she conceptualizes theory and then focuses on the process in which she engages when theorizing. Importantly, Fink emphasizes the need for sport-focused theory, a point Chalip (2006) has also made, and the potential constraints to developing theory. Finally, Chelladurai (2013), one of the most accomplished theoreticians in sport management, offers a personal account of his experience in theory development. In doing so, he highlights the processes in which he has engaged to develop theories related to athletic teams as coalitions, the sport management discipline, organizational effectiveness, and leadership.

3. Common themes

A review of the collection of papers points to two emergent themes: the importance of theory to the field and the complexity of developing theory. I outline both in the following sections.

3.1. Importance of theory in sport management

All contributing scholars in this exchange stress that theory serves a pivotal role for an academic discipline, and sport management is no exception. As Doherty (2013) notes, “theory should be the foundation of research (it guides research questions), practice (it aids explanation, prediction, and control), and teaching (it advances students’ learning and understanding, and subsequent research and practice)”. Irwin and Ryan (2013) extend this line of thinking by suggesting that theory can guide service and outreach activities, while Chelladurai (2013) notes that teaching informed the theories he developed, and vice versa.

Theory is the bedrock upon which good scholarship rests. Good theory has both utility and is testable (Bacharach, 1989; van Knippenberg, 2011). As such, researchers use theory to develop their research questions, craft their methods, analyze their data, interpret their results, and draw conclusions. Without this connection, researchers’ ability to advance scientific understanding comes into question (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

In a related way, theory also serves as the measure by which peer-reviewed articles and academic journals are judged. For instance, Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) analyzed articles published in the *Academy of Management Journal* from 1963 to 2007 and found that (a) as the journal and overall field of management matured, so too did the sophistication of theorizing and (b) both theory building and theory testing were positively associated with how frequently a particular article was cited—one measure of an article’s influence in the field. In a different analysis also pointing to the importance of theory, Shilbury and Rentschler (2007) asked sport management faculty members from around the world to rate the prestige of various academic journals. They observed that a sport-focused journal’s contribution to theory was strongly associated with its overall prestige, much more so than the journal’s contribution to practice or to teaching. Thus, remaining cognizant of critics’ assertions that management scholars are too focused on theory (Bennis & O’Toole, 2004; Hambrick, 2007; Weese, 1995), the data suggest that theory and theory development are highly predictive of how well the academic community receives a particular article or journal.

But, as previously noted, theory’s connection to sport management is not just through scholarship; instead, it also informs teaching, service, and practice. Lewin’s oft-cited quote perhaps best captures these sentiments: “there is nothing more practical than a good theory” (1952, p. 169; see also Van de Ven, 1989). That is, the best theories are the ones that help people make sense of the world around them. As seen in sport management scholarship, this sense-making process might occur when conducting participatory research (e.g., Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997), engaging in organizational diagnosis (e.g., Cunningham, 2009), teaching (e.g., Dixon & Bruening, 2006), or engaging in service and outreach activities (Bruening, Madsen, Evanovich, & Fuller, 2010).

A number of commentators have noted that, despite these purported connections, there remains a sizeable theory-practice gap (Cohen, 2007; Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007). In this collection, both Fink (2013) and Irwin and Ryan (2013) note this disconnect, and the latter contributors provide several ways to address this issue. They advocate developing links with industry professionals through research, teaching, and service. In drawing from their own experiences and those of others, they highlight how engaging in mutually beneficial research initiatives can assist (a) researchers in uncovering new advances taking place in the field and (b) practitioners in effectively drawing from theory and

scientific analysis to manage their workplaces. This symbiotic relationship should help to address the “knowledge transfer” and “knowledge production” problems thought to be at the genesis of the theory-practice gap (see also Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

3.2. Developing theory

Developing theory can be one of the most frustrating and arduous tasks in which a scholar engages, yet it is also invigorating, intellectually stimulating, and has the potential to allow for discoveries not otherwise possible. Furthermore, there is no clear “road map” for developing theory. This is perhaps best illustrated in Smith and Hitt’s (2005) wonderfully engaging book, *Great Minds in Management*. In this edited text, well-regarded theorists, including Bandura, Hambrick, Locke, Mintzberg, and Weick, describe the paths in which they ventured when developing their own theories. One of the most striking themes emerging from these chapters was the variation in the theory-building journeys upon which they embarked.

Chelladurai (2013), Doherty (2013), and Fink (2013) each presents a different approach in theory development, further solidifying the notion that there is no one best way to accomplish this task. However, despite the different approaches they take, there are commonalities that do emerge. First, several contributors to this collection note that their theorizing began with (a) interest in a particular topic and (b) pressing questions concerning that issue. More specifically, Chelladurai describes that much of his theorizing emanated from tensions he experienced with the current understanding of a particular phenomenon (for similar discussions related to this issue, see also Bandura, 2005; Smith & Hitt, 2005). In some cases, prevalent contemporary thought about a particular issue (e.g., stacking) did not correspond with his understanding of the issue, while in other cases, scholars had presented varying views about an issue (e.g., organizational effectiveness) that, through synthesis and integration, could be reconciled into a single theoretical model. For Fink, theorizing began with topics that interested her (e.g., women in sport) and pressing issues related to that topic that had not otherwise been addressed (e.g., the most effective way to market women’s sport).

Second, the authors also note their desire to address big issues—a point others have made, too (Kilduff, 2006; van Knippenberg, 2011). Certainly there are times when incremental adjustments to an existing theoretical framework (e.g., the addition of a new antecedent or moderator) are both sufficient and noteworthy. In many other cases, though, such additions represent a modest theoretical contribution. Perhaps recognizing this, several authors in this issue point to their desire to understand and explain large, complex issues. And this desire resulted in the development of new theoretical frameworks and ways of thinking about existing issues, such as diversity management strategies, open systems models of sport organizations, or leadership in sport teams.

Third, the uniqueness of sport contributes to many of the authors’ theoretical contributions. Chalip (2006) has previously discussed the need for sport-specific theories, and the contributors to this collection seemingly agree with this contention. Fink (2013) argues that, “the context of sport must be densely woven into any work in order to make a strong theoretical contribution to the *sport management* literature” (emphasis original). Indeed, the uniqueness of sport was a cornerstone in many of the authors’ theoretical advances, including Chelladurai’s work with stacking (cf. Chelladurai & Carron, 1977) and defining the field of sport management (cf. Chelladurai, 1994), and Doherty’s work pertaining to conflict (cf. Kerwin, Doherty, & Harman, 2007). In these examples, the authors observe phenomena in sport that were particular to that context, and in some cases, contrary to what scholars had theorized in other settings; thus, sport and its uniqueness served to drive their theoretical arguments. Note that the focus on sport or sport management does not mean that the authors restrict their literature review to that discipline; instead, both Chelladurai and Fink note the benefits of being well-read in several content areas. But, while supporting ideas and literature might come from a variety of disciplines, the focus on sport and its distinctiveness remained.

Finally, several contributors (Fink, 2013; Irwin & Ryan, 2013) point to constraints to theory building, including (a) the inability of scholars who consult with practitioners to use proprietary data to inform their frameworks; (b) the aforementioned theory-practice gap, and some academics’ perception that one can focus on informing practice or building theory, but not both; and (c) the value placed on quantity of publications in the tenure and promotion process. While these impediments can certainly thwart one’s motivation or ability to theorize, the authors also address strategies for overcoming them.

4. Conclusions

The motivation for commissioning these articles grew from the need for further reflection and analysis of sport management scholarship focusing on theory and its place in the academy. The result is a collection of work that illustrates (a) the need for theory in sport management research, teaching, service, and practice, and (b) the joys, frustrations, and complexities of developing theory. I close by drawing from the well-known management scholar Mintzberg (2005), who wrote:

So we need all kinds of theories—the more, the better. As researchers, scholars, and teachers, our obligation is to stimulate thinking, and a good way to do that is to offer alternate theories—multiple explanations of the same phenomena. Our students and readers should leave our classrooms and publications pondering, wondering, thinking—not knowing. (p. 356)

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