1
DEVELOPING THEORY IN SPORT MANAGEMENT

George B. Cunningham, Janet S. Fink and Alison Doherty

Introduction
Theory represents a ‘statement of constructs and their relationships to one another that explain how, when, why, and under what conditions phenomena take place’ (Cunningham, 2013, p. 1). We can think of constructs as approximated units (Bacharach, 1989) representing psychological, economic or social phenomena that cannot be readily observed. Examples include deep-level diversity, workplace creativity, an inclusive organisational climate and the like. Theorists use propositions to help specify how constructs are related to one another. For example, we might expect diversity to be positively associated with workplace creativity, particularly when the work environment is inclusive. In many ways, the constructs offer the descriptive component of theory – the what – while the propositions tell the reader the manner in which the constructs relate, thereby satisfy the how of theory.

Consistent with Whetten (1989), we suggest good theory moves beyond these elements to also provide the why, as well as the when and under what conditions. The why represents the real meat of the theory and provides the underlying rationale for the propositions. It provides the reason the phenomena occur, offering the underlying rationale so that others might better understand what is taking place. In other cases, the why aids in prediction, thereby aiding scholars in their quest to better understand various phenomena and for practitioners to apply the materials (van Knippenberg, 2011; Weick, 1989). In drawing from our aforementioned example, we might expect diversity to positively impact creativity because of the different viewpoints, experiences and perspectives that people from different backgrounds bring to the workplace. When they share these different ways of knowing with one another, the decision-making is likely to improve (for an expanded discussion of these linkages, see Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham and Melton, 2011; Florida, 2012).

Good theory also offers estimations of when these relationships might occur and under what conditions. These represent boundary conditions and constraints (Bacharach, 1989; Whetten, 1989). Context and time are important elements that potentially affect whether constructs are associated with one another. In again drawing from our example, we might expect diversity to be positively related to creativity when the work environment is inclusive, in which case inclusiveness serves to moderate the relationship between the two constructs. These benefits manifest because, in such environments, employees are likely to feel the psychological safety to express divergent
views to respectfully disagree with one another, and to flesh out those differences in order to arrive at a quality, creative decision.

Importantly, good theory is falsifiable and has utility (Bacharach, 1989). By falsifiable, we mean that it can be rigorously scrutinised and empirically examined (Popper, 1959). While theories are never proven, they can be supported or refuted. This means that they must be devised in such a way that allows scholars to examine and test them, discover the elements that pass muster, and revise or do away with those parts of the theory that, when empirically tested, are simply not accurate. By utility, we mean that theories must be useful. They should add value to the scholarly enterprise, the educational experience and the practice of sport (Doherty, 2013a; Fink, 2013; Irwin and Ryan, 2013). Absent such practicality, we question why the theory was developed in the first place. We expound upon theory’s utility in the following section.

More on theory’s utility

Theory’s place of preeminence in the academic world is unquestioned. This is particularly the case in the area of research. Authors have described it as ‘the bedrock upon which good scholarship rests’ (Cunningham, 2013, p. 2), ‘the basic aim of science’ (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000, p. 11), and ‘the currency of our scholarly realm’ (Corley and Gioia, 2011, p. 12). Theory ideally undergirds the scholar’s research questions and hypotheses, their study design, the analytical approach, the interpretation of the results and conclusions drawn. Absent such connections, the ultimate contribution of the work falls into question (Sutton and Staw, 1995).

A number of scholars have also commented on theory’s role in the advancement of an academic discipline (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2013a; Fink, 2013; Zhang, 2015). Costa also observed as much in her Delphi study (2005) of sport management leaders. The panelists expressed the belief that a strong theoretical foundation was crucial to successful research endeavours, particularly when the theory had high utility. Shilbury and Rentschler (2007) also noted the importance of theory in their analysis of journal quality. They observed that as the journal’s contribution to theory increased, so too did its prestige. These patterns are not unique to sport management, per se. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) analysed articles published in the Academy of Management Journal from 1963 to 2007. They found that as the journal matured, so too did the sophistication of the contributing authors’ theorising. Among individual articles within the journal, the degree to which the authors expanded and tested theory positively corresponded with number of times the article was cited – one important measure of an article’s impact. Thus, while acknowledging some critics’ contention that too much emphasis is placed on theory and theory development (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Hambrick, 2007; Weese, 1995), we join the chorus of others who sing theory’s praises in the scholarly realm.

And, while theory certainly plays an important role in the research domain, it is also significant in educational endeavours. We have modeled as much in our own work, connecting theory with application in our textbooks (Cunningham, 2015; Taylor, Doherty and McGraw, 2015). Embedding theory into teaching allows students to move beyond a descriptive awareness of phenomena to a deeper understanding of how, why and when activities occur, and as a result, they better understand actions in which they can engage to influence those activities. Teaching can also help the scholar to engage in better theory development. Chelladurai (2013) recognised this connection, noting:

One other feature of my forays into theorizing is that they have been triggered by my experience in teaching. That is, teaching a particular topic alerted me to the gaps in
Developing theory in sport management

the literature or the opposing view on a topic. The tension and discomfort of those instances led me to theorize on possible solutions to the issues at hand.

Finally, theory can help inform practice. Lewin’s (1952) famous remark – ‘there is nothing more practical than a good theory’ (p. 169) – captures these possibilities. If the aim of theory is to better understand and predict phenomena, then certainly good theory can and should help inform practice. The reciprocal can also occur, such that, through engagement with industry professionals, scholars can identify needs in the field, and by melding their understanding of practice with their scholarly expertise, develop theory to help explain and inform these actions (Irwin and Ryan, 2013). Van Knippenberg (2011) also commented on this relationship, suggesting ‘theory explains and thus allows practice to move beyond an ill-understood “bag of tricks” to better informed actions, and theory guides the further development of knowledge to develop more sophisticated practice’ (p. 3).

Impetus for the current volume

Given the value of theory in research, teaching and practice, we were interested in better understanding how people engaged in the theory-building process. To that end, George Cunningham organised a session on theory and theory development as part of his past-President’s workshop at the annual conference for the North American Society for Sport Management in 2011. In building from the fruitful dialogue that ensued, the three of us, along with P. Chelladurai, Richard Irwin and Tim Ryan, took part in a scholarly exchange in an issue of Sport Management Review (volume 16, issue 1). We discussed the different thoughts on what constituted theory, its usefulness in sport management, factors that spurred us to develop our theories, and the ways we went about doing so. While commonalities certainly existed, the essays also highlighted the diversity of approaches, viewpoints and processes in which we all engaged.

Thus, in addition to answering some of the questions that drove the scholarly exchange – what is the place of theory in the academy and how do people go about developing it – the writings also led to more questions and a greater sense of curiosity about developing theory. How common were the experiences among those who contributed to the scholarly exchange? Does theory development vary based on the questions asked or disciplinary focus? How have people extended, revised or tweaked their work since the initial iteration, and what is the road they anticipate going forward?

These questions led us to pursue and develop this work: the *Routledge Handbook of Theory in Sport Management*. In assembling the *Handbook*, we adhered to several principles. First, we wanted to understand how scholars had developed theories and frameworks commonly used in sport management, and as such, we limited the scope to contributions from authors who had done just that. This approach differs from others who have written about theories developed in other disciplines but that are nevertheless germane to the field of sport management. As several scholars have accomplished this task admirably (e.g., Chelladurai, 2014; Slack and Parent, 2006), we saw no reason to duplicate these efforts. Instead, the *Handbook* represents the first collection of which we are aware that brings together authors who discuss the genesis and process of developing theory in sport management.

Second, we sought a broad treatment of the field. This includes theories that we broadly classified into four categories: managerial, marketing, sociological and economic. We appreciate
that some might take exception with such a broad focus and argue the approach is more in line with a sport studies text than a sport management text. We adopt a different lens and suggest the management of sport and sport organisations is best understood by adopting a multidisciplinary perspective. Otherwise, we limit our scope and capacity to address major issues in sport (Doherty, 2013b; see also Cunningham, 2002).

With these foundational principles in mind, we next needed to decide who to ask to write and about which of their works. In doing so, we first identified highly influential theories, as measured by citations in Google Scholar. While there are many measures of impact, citation counts are regularly used to determine the scholarly influence of specific articles (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007) or journals (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Bachrach and Podsakoff, 2005; but see also Alberts, 2013). Thus, we first identified the theoretical articles with the highest number of citations. Second, we recognised this approach disadvantages newer work and scholarship with a narrower disciplinary focus, and that it might not capture truly novel approaches to theory building. Thus, we also requested contributions from authors who (a) have only recently developed their theories, but who were nonetheless meaningfully impacting the discipline; and (b) used inductive approaches to theory building, such as grounded theory – theory building techniques that, while still relatively rare in our field, hold substantial promise (see also Doherty, 2013a; Locke, 2007; Weed, 2009). Third, we sought an international list of contributors, wary of the pitfalls of having a North American-centric text.

While we believe the list is thorough, it does not include contributions from some scholars who have developed notable and well-cited theories. In one case, this was due to the author’s illness and other commitments. In other cases, this was due to the duplication of topic areas. For instance, a number of authors have contributed to the understanding of the under-representation of women in leadership positions, and we certainly valued the contribution of each. However, we also did not necessarily want a book that was over-represented in some topics. In this case, and others like it, we generally relied on the citation count to inform the author from whom we requested a chapter.

Additionally, the reader will see that we have included Application sections for each chapter. In discussing the book with others, we received feedback that it would be helpful to hear from others who have also used the theory in their research, teaching or practice. We agreed. After all, such sentiments are consistent with Bacharach’s (1989) notion that good theory has utility, and what better way to learn about its utility than from the very people who have used it?

Finally, with the bones of framework in place, we perceived the need for introductory chapters. We are of the general belief that the research questions should drive the methods one uses, and each of us has employed quantitative and qualitative approaches in our scholarly work. That noted, we have also observed some differences in researchers’ use of theory depending on their analytical and methodological approach. Thus, we saw value in asking two scholars we hold in high esteem – Sally Shaw and James Zhang – to write about their use of theory in qualitative and quantitative research, respectively.

**Final thoughts**

With these principles in mind, we arrived at the final 33-chapter collection. We believe this represents a definitive collection of essays concerning theory and theory development in the field of sport management. The authors offer insightful, reflective, cogent writings, sure to both inform and delight. In reflecting on the chapters, we cannot help but recall Henry Mintzberg’s (2005) call to scholars over a decade ago:
Developing theory in sport management

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 alternative theories—multiple explanations of the same phenomena. Our students and readers should leave our classrooms and publications pondering, wondering, thinking—not knowing.

(p. 356)

Here’s to more theory and its development!

References


