THEMES AND DIRECTIONS FOR THEORY IN SPORT MANAGEMENT

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

Introduction

In drawing from the perspectives of leaders across a range of disciplinary foci, our aim with this collection was to consider the place of theory in our field and relate how our sport management colleagues have engaged in the theory building process. The compilation of chapters represents a range of sport management contexts and theoretical premises. This serves to highlight the diversity of our field.

In this concluding chapter we draw together some apparent common themes across the chapters in this book that help to highlight key aspects of theory and theory development in sport management. To begin, each of the works focused on explaining some phenomenon in the sport context by outlining the key constructs and relationships among them so that one may understand ‘how, when, why, and under what conditions phenomena take place’ (Cunningham, 2013, p. 1). As noted in the opening chapter to this book, this is what good theory should do. As the authors’ accounts indicate, the theories presented here add value to scholarship, education and practice (they have utility; Bacharach, 1989), and they can be (and have been) rigorously scrutinised and empirically examined (Popper, 1959). Notably, several authors provide direction for future research that must (continue to) ‘test’ their theory, not being content to settle with what they have derived thus far.

The works reported here, and similar efforts, represent strong scholarly currency (Corley and Gioia, 2011) that our colleagues have invested in the advancement of our sport management discipline (Doherty, 2013). Although the level of sophistication of a theory – its refinement and complexity – may be a marker of its value and contribution to a field (cf. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Shilbury and Rentschler, 2007), this is not something we feel the need to assess, at least not at this point. Nonetheless, the authors’ descriptions of the evolution of their theorizing suggest increasing sophistication as that work has unfolded (see, for example, the chapters by Funk and James; Gerretsen and Rosentraub; Kane; Knoppers; Parent; Preuss). Importantly, the chapters provide several examples of theory testing and expansion that represent what may be described as a ripple effect, as the introduction of a given theory or framework stimulates and shapes further research and knowledge building,
as well as theory refinement. For example, Mahony’s theorizing about organisational justice in the intercollegiate athletics setting informed his own and other scholars’ related research, in turn shaping his original framework as it continued to evolve. Interestingly, Mahony relates how he then took that framework to yet another context – namely, educational administration – as another example of the continued influence of his theoretical work. Heere’s theory of team identification continues to unfold, with his most recent conceptualisation proposed within his chapter here; further theorizing that acknowledges advances in research on team identity by himself, his colleagues, and other scholars since it was first examined. Cornwell describes the ripple effect of her conceptualisation of sponsorship-linked marketing on research pertaining to sponsorship-linked advertising and internal marketing. She anticipates still further extensions of sponsorship-linked marketing to the critical phenomena of social media and corporate social responsibility. The application chapters have proven quite useful in highlighting this ripple effect, as colleagues describe how and why they picked up a particular theory/perspective to facilitate their own research (e.g., Donaldson), their teaching (e.g., Davies) and/or their practice (e.g., Dalrymple).

Themes in theory and theory development

‘Sport management theories’

As noted, the theories presented in the chapters here represent a range of theoretical premises, including derivation from parent theories and disciplines (e.g., Babiak, Heinze and Wolfe from CSR theory; Chelladurai from leadership theory; de Bosscher from economic competition theory; Wakefield from environmental psychology). In each case, the authors describe the importance of placing theory within the unique context of sport. Chalip’s (2006) oft-cited query about sport management as a unique discipline – and whether it is indeed unique – is consistently, albeit not always intentionally, addressed across the chapters. For example, Gladden focused on the four main components of Aaker’s (1991) framework for brand equity and brought that into the sport context by identifying the most important antecedents to the development of brand equity in sport. Babiak et al. relate that the CSR framework was informed by the general management literature yet grounded in the contextual factors of professional sport that are not present in other industries; namely, fan passion, transparency of management decisions, unique economic support and complex stakeholder management. Notably, Warner relates that the Sport and Sense of Community Theory was prompted to a large extent by her wondering, ‘what is distinctive about sport?’

Prompting and shaping the theorizing process

When providing guidance regarding chapter structure, we were particularly interested in what spurred authors’ interest in the topic and theorizing about it, and what shaped their thinking and the eventual theory. What emerged was a range of stories about what influenced the authors to pursue and formulate a theoretical explanation for a particular phenomenon. Some authors related several influences to their work, and we highlight some of the common themes here. What is notable is that in no instances did any of the authors seek merely to fill a gap in the literature. Rather, they recount various experiences and tensions that prompted their theorizing and research efforts to explain phenomenon and build knowledge in our field.
Need for a way to explain a particular phenomenon

This was the most common impetus to theory development described across the chapters. The need was either based on a belief that no relevant theory existed (e.g., Lyras and Welty Peachy; Parent), or that existing explanations were insufficient (e.g., Hylton; Fink). For example, Kihl could not find existing theory to explain micro-level consequences of corruption on organisational stakeholders and so developed her work on post-corruption experiences in the sport setting. De Bosscher, along with her colleagues, noted ‘the lack of an empirically-grounded, coherent theory on the factors determining international sporting success’ (including a method to compare nations and consider the complicated question of the relationship between elite sport policy and success). In contrast, Knoppers was not satisfied with the existing explanations presented about the lack of female leaders in sport, feeling that the individual and structural explanations put forth to that point were insufficient to explain what was happening in that context. Similarly, Kane was dissatisfied with how the literature was explaining the hierarchical gendered power relations in sport. James reports feeling that the existing literature and methods were not sufficiently addressing the process of developing fan loyalty. Rather than relying on recall information from adults, he talked with children in different cognitive stages and different levels of fan loyalty to gain a better understanding of the development of fandom. Mason’s theorizing about the nature of the sport product was prompted by a sense that the establishment, in the sports economics literature, ‘that the core product for sports leagues was the uncertainty of game outcomes . . . did not seem to capture the complexities of the sports fan consumption experience’. These authors, and many others who indicated that theory was insufficient or non-existent to explain their sport phenomenon of interest, were prompted to push the envelope in terms of considering new and different ways of explanation. Their struggles in this regard are apparent in their stories, which nonetheless reveal the opportunity they took to develop new knowledge.

Need for synthesis of a range of concepts

Several authors describe how their theory development process involved synthesising a variety of concepts, and more concrete constructs, into a model that they felt would at least begin to capture the explanations they were trying to generate about a phenomenon. For example, Skille felt compelled to integrate what turned out to be ‘very different theories’ in order to arrive at a framework that would enable him to explain the implementation of sport policy at the grassroots level. ‘Chella’ Chelladurai also combined theories, each of which he felt were insufficient on their own, to explain sport leadership. Fink drew on a range of concepts in the literature and ‘slowly the framework began to take form’ in a way that aligned with her personal musings about diversity management in the sport context. Trail endeavoured to develop a more complete explanation of sport consumer behaviour and in doing so integrated numerous variables (e.g., motives, identification, self-esteem responses) using a variety of theoretical premises (e.g., theories of satisfaction and self-esteem) to build and justify the model. Funk and James’ hierarchical Psychological Continuum Model ‘organise[s] literature from various academic disciplines’, drawing particularly on psychological and sociological processes to explain sport consumer behaviour through attitude formation. These examples highlight two key points: theory is often not simple, but rather involves a collection of constructs that are considered important to (begin to) explain a phenomenon; and those constructs are integrated, rather than hanging alone, as together they propose a (more) meaningful explanation. Parent describes a senior colleague advising her that ‘if [she] could illustrate in one image the various theories and concepts to be examined in [her] study, then [she] was on the right track’.
Emerged from empirical work

While some authors developed their theories conceptually (e.g., Cornwell; Kane; Lytras and Welty Peachy; Mason), several describe the empirical derivation of their framework. This suggests both typology and taxonomy approaches to theorizing (cf. Slack and Parent, 2006) within the field. Examples of empirically-derived theories include both Warner and Kihl, who each used a grounded theory approach to explore the meaning of sense of community in the sport context and post-corruption experiences in sport, respectively. Relatedly, Ferkins and Shilbury used developmental action research undertaken in the field to uncover their ever-developing explanation of strategic board capability in non-profit sport organisations. In contrast, de Bosscher presents the extensive process she and her colleagues have gone through in both the initial development of the SPLISS, as well as its subsequent versions. As another example, Rod Fort describes how he and Quirk used economic theory and data from various leagues to develop and refine their theory of competitive balance. Gratton, Shibli and Coleman’s theorizing about the economic impact of major sport events was prompted, and heavily informed, by the findings of commissioned research in several host cities. From multiple studies (and data sets) they developed their theory of key correlates of income generation in this context. Interestingly, their work has evolved recently to acknowledge other important benefits of hosting, including psychic income.

Personal experience in the industry

Several authors note that their theorizing was prompted and further informed by their personal experience in the sport industry; encountering circumstances that, in retrospect, were not able to be sufficiently or satisfactorily explained by existing literature. For example, Gladden’s experience in the sport industry prompted him to better understand and explain why some sport organisations could remain financially successful during extended years of poor performance. Bien-Aimé and Hardin describe how Hardin’s first-hand experience as a female journalist afforded her the opportunity to explain how (untested) media gatekeepers’ perceptions of the media audience influences what is covered in the sport news, particularly with regard to women’s sport. Meanwhile, Dixon and Breuning relate that their personal experience as college coaches, and leaving the profession because of anticipated work–family conflict, resonated with their theory building on work–life balance; ‘this experience motivated us to find new pathways for career and life success for ourselves and others’. Of note, they also relate that such personal experiences ‘created challenges for remaining objective as scholars’, and prompted them to continuously check their thinking and writing. Chelladurai also relates how his theorizing on leadership ‘has been based on my own experiences as a player and coach’. Interestingly, when examining the literature he found a ‘disconnect’ between what he was learning and his reality. This disconnect prompted his further enquiry and ultimate theorizing about sport leadership. Relatedly, Mahony experienced an inconsistency between his real life experience as an athletic administrator and what research was indicating about stakeholders’ perceptions of organisational justice in athletics. Like Chelladurai, this disconnect prompted Mahony’s efforts to explain the phenomenon. Heere’s theorizing about team identification was prompted by his personal experience as a spectator (from another country) at NBA and college sports games, and a need to reconcile the similarities and differences between the American and European professional sport experience. Meanwhile, Anderson’s experience as a coach, and his connections with both athletes and administrators, shaped his theory of inclusive masculinities. He outlines these experiences in his chapter, noting the changes he observed on a track and field team from the
time he served as coach to a decade later when he visited the team once more as an academic. Many of the authors let their passion and their personal questions drive and inform their theorizing.

Emerged from conversations with others

Another influence on the theory development process for several authors was engaging in conversations, typically with colleagues, about the phenomenon of interest. Both Warner and Kihl consider that conversations with colleagues provided encouragement, insight and opportunity for building their work. Ferkins and Shilbury relate that their ‘specific curiosity emerged as a result of wide-ranging discussions with sport practitioners’. They note that these conversations were not part of any fieldwork but were a critical part of the preliminary process of understanding the sport governance issues in the field. Cornwell relates that an exchange with a corporate executive at a professional sport event resonated with her and stimulated further theorizing about marketing through sport sponsorship. This theme reinforces the influence of personal experiences and connections with others in shaping our theorizing, as we talk through ideas and ‘bounce’ them off of others. Theory building is rarely undertaken in a vacuum.

Extending, revising and tweaking theory

Most of the chapter authors describe how they, and others, have engaged in extending their original work, often right away as they continue their line of enquiry. Typically this is prompted by the theory being refuted, an enhanced understanding of the phenomena, or simply changing times and contexts, resulting in changes to the relationships among constructs. For example, while Rosentraub notably wrote about how cities hosting professional sports teams in the 1990s were ‘major league losers’, in this volume he and Gerretsen outline ways in which those very cities can leverage their relationships with the team to further their economic, social and cultural capital. Like Rosentraub, Preuss put forth his original theory of event legacy in 2007 and a much more sophisticated version in 2015; he describes the development of both, including how the most recent version extends from the original, in his chapter. De Bosscher also outlines, in considerable detail, how she and her colleagues continued to evolve the SPLISS (from version 1.0 to 2.0) with the extension of the framework to still other nations’ elite sport systems and drilling down further to understand the critical success factors. This continued work was prompted by what de Bosscher describes as still insufficient explanations of the relationship between national sport policies and international sporting success. Ferkins and Shilbury also describe their progressive efforts and ‘milestones’ in developing an explanation for board strategic balance in the sport context. They illustrate their research flow and the evolution of their theorizing over time. While they share their most current modelling in the chapter, they also note that it is still emerging theory, as it is yet to be rigorously tested by others. In this way, they presume that it will continue to evolve.

In fact, all of the authors (perhaps at our prompting), acknowledge that theirs is a work in progress that will – and should – continue to evolve as it is adopted, tested, refined and extended by themselves and by others. Of note, Kirk Wakefield presumes that theorizing about the sportscape will be extended even further. In describing its ripple effect so far with respect to league brand associations, fan satisfaction and sensoryscape, he derives from those empirical efforts still further directions for research and refinement of the sportscape framework. Mason proposes several directions for research that examine the production of the sport product (including athletes, participation opportunities and achievement as products). Kihl notes that her work must now move from ‘substantive’ to ‘formal’ theory, through rigorous testing and broader application
that ‘would be at a higher level of abstraction that extends beyond a specific stakeholder group and/or organisation to generalise across a discipline’. The authors who have developed the theory presented in this book have not settled (nor will they) with the explanations they have generated.

**Theory in practice**

A few authors relate how their work has been picked up by practitioners, highlighting a theory-practice linkage. De Bosscher’s framework of elite sporting success has been adopted by policymakers around the world who have used it to evaluate their nation’s effectiveness on the international sport scene. Ferkins and Shilbury describe how their action research in the field has resulted in major changes to the governing structure of sport organisations, changes to board activity and individual board member perspectives along the way. Perhaps as a consequence, they have been contacted by CEOs and board members of national and state sport organisations in a selection of nations with similar sport systems. The impact of their work in practice is evidenced in the testimony of Neil Dalrymple of Bowls Australia in the application that accompanies their chapter. Lyras and Welty Peachy also describe the direct impact of Sport-for-Development Theory, through its application to a sport event, on a subsequently ‘revamped competition structure . . . [that] de-emphasised winning, and focused much more on the educational and cultural aspects of the event’. Hylton’s work with critical race theory has informed others’ scholarship, but has also impacted how they teach their classes and engage the sport enterprise. Further, Fink describes how her diversity management framework (Fink and Pastore, 1999) framed the guidelines for an NCAA ‘diversity in athletics’ award aimed at honouring and thus bringing attention to diversity management practices in intercollegiate athletic departments. As Fink notes, ‘the establishment of the award is a great exemplar of bridging scholarship and practice’.

**Concluding comments**

Many of us, our colleagues and our students may be prompted by a felt need to explain some phenomenon; maybe in response to a crisis, like Kihl experienced, or a personal disconnect between the literature and one’s reality, as Chelladurai describes. A perceived lack of sufficient or satisfactory explanation may be – and should be – an impetus for ‘someone [to] do research on this, maybe even me’ (Parent). Building theory is not an easy task and, as can be gleaned from the authors’ accounts in this book, it may be fraught with frustration, road blocks, inconclusive findings and a need to ‘get back to it’. Ferkins and Shilbury emphasise that, although the work presented in their chapter and illustrated graphically indicates a ‘chronological sequence in terms of publication dates, in reality, there were many hills and dales, peaks and troughs, and perhaps it is only in hindsight that we have been able to plot the milestones of this journey with any real clarity’. We wish you the best on your journey with theory in sport management.

**References**


Themes and directions for theory


