

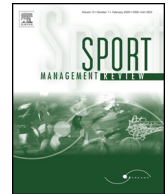


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Insiders, outsiders, and agents of change: First person action inquiry in community sport management

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ABSTRACT

Using first-person inquiry, we explore the use of reflexive practice as a means of self-study in community sport management research. In the context of a participatory action research project with a rural Northern Ontario community recreation committee, we describe our process of conducting first person action inquiry, explore how it enriched the process and outcomes of the project, and explain how it informed our understanding of researchers (ourselves) as instruments of research and agents of change within the research process. Through the process of self-study and iterative discussions between a graduate student (sometimes) insider and academic supervisor outsider, we demonstrate how reflexive practice led to a better understanding of community contexts as well as the roles and limitations of the researchers therein. Consequently, reflections allowed for a moulding of the methodological approach to be more effective (for research and action) with(in) the community. Based on our discussion, we highlight the potential of diverse research practices and paradigms to offer new perspectives for sport management research and practice.

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Participatory action research approaches have emerged as effective strategies to engage communities in research that addresses pertinent and practical issues in a given community context. Rather than being described as a method or methodology, action-oriented approaches are often described as orientations to research that seek to de-centre power relationships inherent in the research process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). As defined by Bradbury-Huang, action research can be described as “an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners” not only to understand processes and phenomena, “but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders” (2010, p. 93). While this definition succinctly defines and describes the purpose of action research, the process of conducting this sort of inquiry may not unfold as eloquently. Indeed, adopting this orientation to research entails a relinquishing of control over the research process which is atypical of conventional research methodologies and ethical procedures. Within the context of sport management, Frisby, Reid, Millar, and Hoerber (2005) discussed the messiness of the approach and how ethical, funding, and academic systems shaped the ways and extent to which community engagement is facilitated in the research process.

The complexity of action research approaches is underpinned by a commitment and sensitivity to the context of community(ies) with which the research takes place. This commitment is partially achieved through reflexivity and

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recognition of the positionality and assumptions of the researcher or research team, which may or may not align with the understandings and realities of the communities involved. The process of self-study in this context can be referred to as first-person action research (Marshall & Mead, 2005; Torbert, 2001). While reflection is a useful methodological tool for addressing and understanding power relationships in the research process, it can also be transformational in shaping our thinking and understandings of ourselves and the roles that we play in the many contexts of our lives (Humphrey, 2007; Marshall, 2001). In the context of research, Burgess described the “principles, promises, and perils” of action research approaches and how addressing her underlying assumptions through first-person inquiry allowed her to “embrace these tensions of personal transformation and community partnership” (Burgess, 2006, p. 420). In her reflective account, Burgess (2006) illustrated the effective use of first-person action inquiry by a graduate student in order to adopt a participatory worldview, navigate power relationships, and better understand the complex processes inherent in action research. Similarly, Humphrey (2007) utilized a first-person approach as a graduate student to examine her dual and changing roles, and understandings of herself as an insider and outsider in the various contexts of her action research project in an organizational setting. Within this work, conducted with self-organizing groups in union settings, Humphrey (2007) explored the complexities of navigating multiple roles, which exist along continuums (of insider and outsider) within multiple contexts. Together, these insights (Burgess, 2006; Humphrey, 2007) demonstrate the messiness and uncertainty of the often-turbulent processes involved in first-person action inquiry and how reflexivity can be useful in navigating and understanding these processes.

In this paper, we draw from the first author’s dissertation research which involved participatory action research with rural community sport managers. Using a first person voice, we discuss the first author’s reflexive practice throughout the research process. The purpose of this manuscript is to explore and describe the process of employing first-person action inquiry, how it enriched (and continues to enrich) the research processes and outcomes, as well as how it informed our understanding of researchers (ourselves) as agents of change (Bradbury-Huang, 2010). In doing this, we respond to Shaw and Hoerber’s (2016) call for more diversified methodological approaches as we demonstrate how research informed by diverse paradigms (e.g., a participatory worldview) may be deemed beneficial for providing new perspectives, and how alternative criteria (e.g., reflexivity) may be used by sport management researchers to judge the value of this work. Through the first author’s voice we explore both the roles of student as the primary researcher, as well as that of the academic supervisor in overseeing and supporting an action research project in the intersectional realm of rural sport management studies. In order to tackle these objectives, we first offer an overview of the research project and how learning about a participatory worldview and action research approaches informed the research process. We draw from processes of reflection and action to discuss the specific ways in which first-person action research was used to enrich the research process: (a) by enhancing our awareness, understanding, and interpretation of identities and contexts within the community, and (b) by informing emerging methodological considerations to better reflect these community contexts. Through these examples, we demonstrate how self-study served to strengthen the research process methodologically and improved the project by allowing us to coherently understand and articulate the role of the researchers as agents of change within the process. Further, we suggest that this understanding of researchers as agents of change may be useful for understanding the role of practitioners engaged in community sport management and governance. Finally, we reflect more broadly on the procedures and paradigms involved in first-person research and echo the suggestion of Kerwin and Hoerber (2015) that reflection may be a useful and fruitful methodological tool for sport management researchers and the study of sport management more broadly.

1. The process of reflection and first-person inquiry

Reflexivity is an important part of participatory research approaches. Key thinkers who influenced the development of participatory action research, such as Lewin (1946) and Freire (1972) emphasized the importance of action-reflection cycles and a critical consciousness, respectively (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). While reflections can take many forms, Torbert (2001) discusses the processes of first, second, and third-person research and practice. First-person inquiry involves “self-study-in-the-midst-of-action” (Torbert, 2001, p. 252) and reflection on the gaps or incongruence within and without of ourselves, our identities, and our social systems. Second and third-person research/practice involve the study of our own interactions with others, and the workings of groups or organizations, respectively (Torbert, 2001). Marshall (2001) described first-person inquiry as a process of iterative cycles that examine personal meaning making, assumptions, questioning, and understandings. She also contended that reflection is not a personal activity but rather a “life process” as it involves examining and understanding your multiple selves in and out of the research process (Marshall, 2001, p. 438). This process can be useful for navigating and documenting personal transformation and power struggles that are often part of conducting research. The first-person inquiry described by Burgess (2006), and the reflections of Humphrey (2007), are illustrative of the processes of transformation undertaken as graduate students conducting participatory research and reconciling roles of researcher-practitioner and insider-outsider, respectively. As outlined below, these accounts were highly influential in this work and directed reflections and navigation of multiple selves and roles as insiders, outsiders, and agents of change in the community. Further, interactive discussions between the doctoral student as (sometimes) insider and supervisor as outsider provided additional insights into the reflexive process, allowing particular attention to be paid to assumptions and so-called biases from each perspective. We reflect further on these processes below in describing the evolution of our participatory approach.

1.1. Reflective research in sport management

As much of the sport and recreation management literature focuses on group or organizational analysis (more coherently aligned with third-person research), there is a dearth of inquiry employing first and second person approaches. Some examples of self-study in sport management include work by [Hoeber and Kerwin \(2013\)](#) and [Kerwin and Hoeber \(2015\)](#) who used collaborative self-ethnography to examine their experiences as female sport fans, as well as [Kodama, Doherty, and Popovic \(2013\)](#) and [Fleming and Fullagar \(2007\)](#) who used autoethnography to explore the experience of volunteering at a major sport event and a gendered experience in cricket management, respectively. While (participatory) action research approaches have been employed in various ways in the sport management literature (see [Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010, 2015](#); [Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009](#); [Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997](#); [Frisby et al., 2005](#); [Green, 1997](#); [Shilbury & Ferkins, 2015](#); [Vail, 2007](#)), few publications have directly addressed the process of reflection within this methodological approach. For the research described in this paper, the first author employed a first-person research/practice approach in an attempt to better understand the role of the researcher(s) as the research instrument ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)), as an insider (and sometimes outsider, [Humphrey, 2007](#)), and as an agent of change ([Bradbury-Huang, 2010](#)) in the context of rural community sport and recreation management. The intention herein is to provide a discussion about the process of reflexivity in community-based field work demonstrating how participatory approaches can be strengthened through methodological and theoretical involvement of the community, specifically in sport management research.

2. The research project

The purpose of the research project from which this paper is drawn is to examine the sociocultural significance of sport and recreation in rural Canadian communities, with an emphasis on developing managerial approaches to increase participation in sport and recreation. The project was conducted with a rural municipality in Ontario, Canada. The community, located about 300 km north of Toronto, was the small town where the lead author spent the first 18 years of his life. After leaving town for the better part of eight years to pursue post-secondary education (including doctoral coursework), a decision was made to return to live, work, and conduct dissertation research. As the basis of the project is about exploring the broad sociocultural significance of sport and recreation in this rural community, through an embedded participatory approach, working in close collaboration with the Municipal Recreation Director and the local Recreation Committee was essential. This collaboration involved the first author participating in grant writing, program design and delivery, staff training, marketing, promotion, event planning, policy making, as well as program delivery and evaluation. Given the nature of a participatory design, the project has evolved based on working with the committee to focus on the role that sport and recreation has played in community development and how the Recreation Committee could support these processes. Specifically, the parties involved agreed that the project should seek to increase opportunities to participate in sport and recreation as well as (and inherently through) understand(ing) the role and significance of sport and recreation for various groups in the community (e.g., newcomers, youth, community organizations). As the role of the Recreation Committee in the community was understood to be broad and multi-faceted, the scope of the project was adjusted accordingly (e.g., by not focusing solely on one group/demographic; by involving as many related groups/organizations as possible, and; by the researchers participating in a variety of activities with both specific objectives, such as program delivery, as well as those with broader implications, such as municipal policy making).

In approaching the project, the researchers involved (student and advisory committee) discussed the need to consider the context of the community in order to understand the role of sport and recreation in community development. Rural Canadian communities are diverse in terms of exposure (or a lack thereof) to global economies, metro-adjacency (or remoteness), stability (or fluctuation) of markets, and varying levels of community capacity ([Reimer, 2002](#)), as well as typically very active informal economies ([Reimer, 2006](#)) that work to create diverse rural contexts. Further, authors have highlighted major health disparities experienced by rural populations ([DesMeules et al., 2006](#)) including cycles of decline involving youth outmigration and ageing populations ([Senate, 2006](#)). Much of the literature on rurality, and in sport studies more broadly, has failed to consider the importance of cultural and community context. Thus, as part of the initial stages of engaging in the process of field research, it was important to begin to theorize more about sport and recreation in diverse contexts. As it was noted that the community was quite homogenous and the first author identified as a white, cis-gendered male, there were few concerns about social implications related to these positions. However, the first author had grown up in the community, within a working class family, and left through the process of youth outmigration, resulting in a complex social network of past and current friends and family members both within and outside of sport and recreation. It was acknowledged that the many perceptions and understandings held by the first author were time, place, and circumstantially sensitive and would necessitate consideration moving forward. Accordingly, in order to craft a project that took account of the roles and process of sport and recreation in this rural community, the work would need to be highly contextualized and explicitly consider the positionality of the researcher within the research process.

Research in community sport management tends to lack contextual information supporting the overarching research processes. Perhaps due to journal restrictions on manuscripts or traditions of empiricism, emphasis has typically been on pragmatism and “filling gaps” ([Shaw & Hoeber, 2016](#)), overshadowing discussions about social, cultural, and political

systems which are often understood to shape and underpin social experiences of sport and recreation in communities (Dyck, 2000). This is not to say that there is not contextual research published in sport and recreation literature. Indeed, scholarly works such as Atherly (2006), Oncescu and Robertson (2010), Spaaij (2009), and Tonts and Atherley (2005) have all provided useful contextual analyses that served as points of departure for researching rural community sport and recreation management. However, conducting research as an insider inevitably provokes cautions about mitigating so-called biases in order to produce rigorous academic research. Thus, in designing this research project, it was necessary to choose a methodological approach that would allow for contextual and in depth explorations of sport and recreation management in a way that foregrounded context and researcher positionality.

2.1. Entering the field and considering reflexive practice

Preliminary interactions with sport and recreation leaders in the community where the research would take place reinforced a need to develop a project that was both meaningful and useful for the community beyond production of a traditional dissertation report. Thus, the logical inroad was to consider an action research approach. Action research approaches are underpinned by a post-modern participatory worldview that informs research with potentially emerging designs focusing often on practical issues by mobilizing knowledge in action (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Despite a long history which continues to persist in many institutions of dissuading post-graduate students from undertaking such 'messy' approaches to research, action research has more recently received substantial scholarly attention noting the promising potential (rather than risky ambition) of "student-insider researchers" (Coghlan & Holian, 2007, p. 8). Within sport research, few researchers have adopted action research approaches. While some researchers in sport management have adopted some processes of action research, Chalip (2015) has rightly noted "[a]lthough action research is well established in mainstream social science, the dearth of action research by sport scholars is noteworthy" (p. 400). In the sport and recreation management context, much of the action research conducted has taken place at the state (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015) and national sport organization level (Ferkins et al., 2009; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2015), which required a more distant type of engagement than the current project. At the community level, the feminist participatory action research of Wendy Frisby and colleagues (1997, 2002, 2005) demonstrated the possibilities and potential of fully-embedded approaches to work in sport and recreation research. In regards to the research described here, Frisby and colleagues' projects shared contextual commonalities of working with underserved communities in sport and recreation provision. However, as our own project developed, participatory action research within the community began to seem an unlikely endeavour because of the potential enormity of the task and the emerging barriers to action-oriented opportunities. Although the contexts of this work and that of Frisby and colleagues shared similarities, community partners for this project were members of a rural community recreation committee who already appeared to be overloaded with commitments and responsibilities, and did not necessarily see a need for change or a desire to add to their workload.

Similar to the experience of Burgess (2006), the first author's reflections and discussions on the history and development of participatory approaches helped solidify the appropriate methodological approach within the traditions of participatory action research. These traditions are often referred to as northern and southern traditions, each with their own theoretical groundings and ideologies (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). The northern tradition was heavily influenced by the work of Kurt Lewin who called for "a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action" (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). This tradition is based in the field of inter-group relations and the approach rooted in organizational work with the intention of modifying practice and policy to be more effective and democratic for all parties (e.g., majority and minority groups). On the other hand, the southern tradition was largely influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1972). This tradition developed out of work with groups who were systemically marginalized and often sought information and resources from outside the given context in order to educate those involved in the research process. Approaches rooted in the southern tradition assume that education is emancipatory and can affect systemic change. While both traditions are grounded in participatory and action-oriented values, Brown and Tandon (1983) highlighted the political and ideological nuances of these approaches. Notably, the northern tradition developed from ideologies valuing efficiency and satisfying multiple stakeholders, whereas the southern tradition grew out of ideas of emancipation and the uprooting of systems of oppression (Brown & Tandon, 1983). Wallerstein and Duran (2003) extended this further, proposing that these traditions exist as a continuum of action research, rather than two distinct approaches. Such a conceptualization allows for fluidity in situating this work along the continuum, rather than being required to operate solely within the approach of one tradition. Although we were working closely with a pre-established organization, the committee lacked the resources and capacity to effectively manage all of the tasks in their portfolio, let alone plan strategically to adjust or implement new tasks or policies. Thus, our approach often involved supporting the committee, providing in-kind resources, and helping to facilitate changes in ways that were manageable, community driven, and hopefully sustainable, in line with the southern tradition of participatory action research. Through this process, we wrestled with negotiating how a graduate student's education and knowledge of sport and recreation management builds up assumptions about best practices and the way things "ought to be done". Exploring these tensions around perceived knowledge in relation to these two research traditions helped to clarify the many processes of education, action, evaluation, and reflection with the community as well as the roles of the researchers as insiders, outsiders, and agents of change.

3. Reflection and data collection

While reflection can be used to generate data in a variety of methodologies (e.g., auto or self-ethnography, action research, narrative analysis, ethnography), the process through which these reflections are conducted and recorded varies. Many researchers who engage in reflection or first-person inquiry utilize various forms of tracking (Marshall, 2001) to record and reflect on their experiences (e.g., field notes, journaling, etc.). Some researchers engage in self-study individually, and others through processes involving multiple researchers. For example, Rich, Bean, and Apramian (2014) used a process of reflection where one author's narrative of participating in a community sport event was recorded and then analyzed by others individually. Subsequently, the authors collectively discussed these experiences and reflected on the various possible perspectives and interpretations to unpack the complexity of the experiences described. In another example, Kerwin and Hoeber (2015) utilized an approach where each author recorded their experiences in a journal and then shared their experiences through discussions and reflections over Skype. These conversations were also recorded, transcribed, and served as data for their research. Both of these aforementioned approaches tracked experiences, and also drew upon reflections, discussions, and diverse interpretations of experiences in order to provide rich and holistic analyses of lived experiences in sport.

For this paper, a process of journaling, reflecting, and discussing similar to that of Marshall (2001) and Kerwin and Hoeber (2015) was adopted. During field work with the community over a period of 16 months (November 2014 to March 2016) the lead author kept a journal which included descriptive field notes of events and activities as well as more in depth reflections on participation. In many ways, this approach draws from the method of participant observation (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002) that is common in contemporary ethnographic studies which seek to locate the researcher and their experiences within the research process (Tedlock, 2003). Within these entries, familiarity with the community allowed for deeper reflection on aspects of the local culture, language, existing sport and recreation infrastructure, as well as previous experiences and current participation in these systems. This intricate insider knowledge was balanced with constant reflection and discussion with others including the supervisor, other academics, and community partners. Following these descriptive notes, self-reflections on participation and meaning making within the activity as well as in the systems and processes at work were used, what Marshall (2001) described as inner and outer arcs of attention.

On numerous occasions, these reflective entries were shared with either (or both) the academic supervisor and/or the facilities and recreation manager in the community (the main partner and community contact). In either case, discussions often explored interesting events/activities, methodological issues, and conflicting ideas, in order to gather different perspectives and interpretations (from both the outside and inside). The discussions shared with these two individuals throughout this process served to provoke further reflection and in some cases adjustments to the research approach.

4. Reflection in action

As discussed above, the research described in this paper took place with a rural community in Northern Ontario. Following amalgamation of communities across the province of Ontario in the early 2000s (Kushner & Siegel, 2003), the population of this community currently rests at approximately 3200, dispersed within two (previously distinct) town centres and the outlying township. Located about 35 km outside of a larger centre, this community can be described as a “bedroom” or “commuter” community, as many residents are employed in the larger centre, but commute back and forth daily. Formerly based in agriculture and forestry, much of the local economy now involves the trades and labour work to service the surrounding area. Residents of the community are predominantly settler or non-indigenous Canadians; however, it is a socio-economically diverse community. The municipality boasts extensive sport and recreational infrastructure for its size, including two arenas, three baseball diamonds (one which has been repurposed to serve as two small soccer pitches, and another serving the dual purpose of outdoor skating rink in the winter), a seasonal outdoor pool, and a curling club, as well as two playground structures, a fair ground (which hosts events like a rodeo, truck pulls, equine events, etc.), a public beach, and a trail system that are maintained by the municipality and community groups. Through the research process, it became clear that a variety of community organizations/facilities including two local Lions Clubs,¹ community centre boards/booster clubs, several seniors groups, the local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion,² two local public schools, and the local library also played important roles in sport and recreation delivery within the community. As the reflections and discussions that follow are messy and touch on many social and political systems, it is important to consider the context(s) in which they took place.

Throughout the process of reflection, discussions explored many aspects of the community in multiple, overlapping, and sometimes uncoordinated ways. As action research is underpinned by a participatory worldview, Bradbury-Huang (2010) noted that one might judge this type of research according to alternative criteria, one of which is reflexivity or the extent to which the researchers effectively locate themselves within systems and as agents of change. Thus, through reflexivity, the first author's positions as a white, cis-gendered, closeted sexual minority, considered insider, former athlete, and current sport/recreation professional were engaged in various intersectional ways within diverse community contexts. Further, we

¹ Lions Clubs are community groups that do local humanitarian work in over 200 hundred countries around the world (Lions Clubs International, 2016).

² The Royal Canadian Legion is an ex-service non-profit organization that has branches in many Canadian communities.

explored the tensions, so-called biases, processes of meaning-making, and action generation that emerged as a result of these roles and identities engaging with the sociocultural contexts of the rural community. In order to do this, while writing reflective entries, previous reflections were often re-read in order to compare thoughts over time and identify common trends and themes. In some cases, additional reflections were added to previous entries to link ideas and commonalities. These notes were dated and noted separately to remain distinct from the original. Reflecting on trends and patterns allowed for further exploration into the nature of these trends and what influenced the reflecting that was happening (as well as what was possibly being overlooked). For example, during a period while the first author was writing a book chapter on sexual rights and sport diplomacy, it was noted that reflections increasingly discussed understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity within the community and the implications of these understandings on lived experiences (particularly within sport and recreation activities). In many ways, these reflections allowed for adjustments to the way research was approached and interpreted as well as how we came to navigate and understand the role of the researchers as agents of change within the community, and the limitations of these roles. In the following section, some of these reflections will be unpacked and discussed with the goal of describing how the process of first-person inquiry served to enrich the research by giving attention to contextual factors and also by addressing power relationships in sport, recreation, and the research process in and with the community. Thus, herein the first author describes, through his own voice, the self-reflexive process undertaken in the rural community-based research project.

5. Reflexive methodological practice

Within the context of community-based action research, first-person inquiry emerged as an important methodological tool in the process of doing participatory research. Here, I outline how reflexive practice allowed me: (1) to achieve a much greater understanding of self and other identities within contexts of the community including reconciling my own insider and outsider statuses; (2) to adjust the methodological approach to be more effective in and for the community; and (3) how I came to understand, theorize, and articulate my own role as an agent of change within the community. As these reflections are based on participating in sport and recreation governance and provision of services at the community level, the discussion below has implications not only for researchers, but also for community sport managers. The following excerpts from my reflective entries demonstrate the value of this process for the research and emphasize the relationship between the research approach, methodological considerations, and implications for the practice of sport management at the community level. Indeed, as I was working in close collaboration with and in some cases as a local sport manager, many of these reflections may provide useful considerations for practitioners working in community sport management.

5.1. Entering the game: locating my place in the field

Throughout the process of my initial research, I often used the term “community” in the spatial sense to refer to the geographic community with which the research was conducted. However, through participating in this research project, I came to understand the term “community” as much more complex. Indeed, the literature on participatory research provides ample discussion of the difficulties in accurately defining and delimiting a community. This process is a complex one, skewed by power relationships, as researchers’ attempts to share power can never be fully realized with an entire “community” (Israel et al., 2003). One of the most prominent contributions that first-person inquiry made to the research process in this case was allowing for an acute awareness and detailed discussion of the diversity within the community and its many contexts. In the newly amalgamated geographic community, local identity politics were prominently discussed and a concern for representation of the former communities in policy making activities as well as an articulated need to “pull the community together” (Reflective Entry, January 7th, 2016) was expressed. These issues added a layer of complexity to many municipal activities, especially those involving the allocation of already scarce resources. Throughout the research process with the community, I was able to reflect on the complexity of multiple identities within numerous contexts, and how they became apparent in sport and recreation. In one entry, I noted that I was “paying increased attention to the importance of intersectionality in everything that I do/see/interpret. Within this, I’ve stopped reducing experiences to a single circumstance/context/interpretation/understanding, and I’m trying to stop seeing and describing [them] as such” (Reflective Entry, August 16, 2015). As I will discuss in detail below, this became particularly evident in my reflections about gender, social class, and engagement in sport and recreation by community members. Rather than simply reflecting on gendered experiences in sport and recreation, I also began to interrogate circumstances more broadly including considerations of socioeconomic status, which former community participants identified with, as well as how participants viewed and incorporated family histories and narratives of tradition into their understanding of sport and recreation participation, as well as my own. Indeed, through my own “clashes and incongruencies of cultures, contexts, and identities” (Reflective Entry, August 6th, 2015) I came to understand the community in a broader sense as complex systems of social, cultural, and political contexts, rather than a unit of geographic classification. Importantly, this also led to a more thorough understanding and interpretation of municipal policy making activities, which came through more clearly following discussions with my supervisor. While observing and participating in policy making discussions (e.g., creating policy documents, participating in budget discussions), I also reflected on how tradition and perceived social values influenced decision making (e.g., the autonomy offered to some community groups in regards to facility management and rental agreements). My awareness of these values and traditions enabled me to both articulate the complex role of sport and recreation in the community as well

as sensitively formulate questions about these decisions both in public meetings as well as in private interviews (i.e., data collection). Consequently, I believe that this process not only allowed me to collect more rich and holistic data, but also allowed me to more effectively engage with my role as an agent of change within the community and these policy-making activities. Furthermore, these descriptions also provided important insights regarding social dynamics and processes of municipal sport governance, which are important considerations for community sport practitioners.

Tensions surrounding identities were also highlighted through my own struggle to reconcile my insider and outsider statuses, and locating the field as such. Similar to the experiences shared by Humphrey (2007), this process allowed me to understand and value my insider and outsider roles as productive. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this experience occurred one weekend while I was playing “Oldtimer’s” ice hockey at one of the local arenas (located in the smaller of the two former communities). While I had participated semi-regularly with the group, one particular experience stood out:

On the bench one of the guys asked me what my name was. Even though I’ve been playing regularly, and have known this guy (or thought I had) for a long time, I guess I’m not really “one of the boys.” This had me thinking about how I can be an insider in some contexts and not in others. Later, in the dressing room, I heard this guy ask my uncle “what does Kyle do?” My uncle responded with a laugh – somewhat condescendingly – saying “he’s *still* going to university.” This was somewhat rattling. It wasn’t that I felt excluded, more so devalued. It seemed that in this situation, the path that I had taken – to pursue higher education and do research – wasn’t necessarily valued or considered legitimate, *even by members of my own family*. Based on what I know of the group and my uncle, this is likely linked to ideas of masculinity and expectations about work ethic and what is considered a normal lifestyle for a 26-year old from this community. That is, what is expected and required to be a productive and valuable member of a community. (Reflective Entry, November 9, 2015)

Through this reflection, I began to reconcile the terms of my own status as an insider in some contexts within the community but as an outsider in others. Although I had grown up in the community and was familiar with many community members, I would never share the same experiences, understandings, and values of the older men in the community who simply grew up at a different time and, for the most part, shared different experiences and values, particularly in regards to education and employment. These reflections also enriched my understanding of the social and cultural systems and structures in the community and how different individuals relate and interact within them.

These experiences also led me to consider other aspects of myself that I chose to disclose and conceal in certain contexts within and outside of the community. Just as Humphrey (2007) described the process of coming to terms with her closets and dungeons, I also had to come to terms with my own identities, to tell the full story of myself and the community. For example, I noted that I would often participate in conversations that were underpinned by (and sometimes openly expressed) racist, classist, and homophobic beliefs. While I contributed in ways that appeared to be appropriate in these situations, I often censored myself in order to remain accepted in the conversation. Rather than expressing my opinions and passing judgement on others, I would sometimes offer alternative perspectives and other times not contribute at all. After a trip to a hunt camp (a remote cabin used for land-based activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping) with a group of male family members and friends, I reflected on how that experience “emphasized my different approaches, and knowing when to contribute and when to observe. Sometimes I feel as though the conversation would shut down if I were to express certain perspectives” (Reflective Entry, November 15, 2015). Indeed, in many instances I reflected on the tensions that arose with my own closet(s) and the concealment of my own (more fluid) sexuality (which I struggled to define myself during this period of my life) and how I might be perceived and treated differently if this aspect of my identity were made public in different contexts such as Old-timers ice hockey, within the children’s day camp program, or at the hunt camp. These experiences led me to consider the research process and questions of how I functioned as a research instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

Is not being myself (whatever that is) corrupting the research process? Does over-thinking my own position sabotage the way I (genuinely) interact with others? Is it ethical to hide identities in this process? Why is it considered unethical to hide your status as a “researcher” but not your other identities? How does this affect what others share with and conceal from me? (Reflective Entry, November 15, 2015)

Often these tensions would fuel conversations with my supervisor about the research and my role(s) within the community. As she was quite aware and informed of my many identities and the contexts in which I was operating, we would often discuss these experiences openly. Engaging in reflexive discussions (i.e., not censored as my interactions with community members were), in an open and iterative process, was an integral part of coming to terms with myself and the community through reflexive practice. Similarly, she also encouraged me to reflect on the role of outmigration in the construction of my position within the community, and on how the process of leaving and returning after (or in this case as part of) studying may engender certain feelings, interpretations, and understandings about me. These understandings undoubtedly influenced who engaged with the project and the discussions that I had with community members throughout my time there. These discussions and reflections were crucial in helping me understand myself as a research instrument and my role as an agent of change in the community, by bringing my ‘new’ understandings of community, sport, and recreation to the forefront of my consciousness.

By coupling the self/instrument reflections with other data collection activities (semi-structured interviews and participant observation) I was able to develop a more holistic understanding of sport and recreation and their management

in the community as well as the power relationships inherent in these processes. For example, my reflections on gender, class, and cultural capital in my own participation in sport and recreation mapped directly onto observations in organizational practices of other leaders/managers in the community, an outcome that I might not have been attentive to without this reflexive practice. This is clearly illustrated in the organization of the annual family ice hockey tournament which takes place in the community each year:

The tournament is rife with symbolism concerning the family unit, gender roles, and the community. The ongoing joke (at least in my family), when daughters introduce new boyfriends to the family is an overwhelming concern with how good of a hockey player he is, as he needs to contribute to the team in the family tournament. . . While the women's teams aren't restricted by the same family factions, the team is still clearly an important unit of identity that is carried on year after year. Interestingly, in/exclusion from these units have social ramifications, particularly for newcomers to the community who may be excluded from participating based on the foundational idea of the tournament (Reflective Entry, January 20, 2015).

The experience of participating in and observing sport and recreational activities in the community was crucial in helping me understand the complex systems and contexts involved. Reflecting on these experiences and observations allowed me to formulate holistic understandings and analyses of these activities and the implications of my own actions and identities within the research process and outcomes; effectively how I was writing myself into the research (Fleming & Fullagar, 2007). Further, as these reflections were formulated based on my participation in the work undertaken by local sport managers, I would also argue that reflexive practice may be a useful tool for community sport managers to move beyond service provision and better understand and consider the social, cultural, and political antecedents and implications of their work. Taken as a whole, the process of self-reflection enabled me to harness the opportunity of community-based research which is fluid and evolves as the field is considered, altered, and negotiated in order to understand my roles of insider, outsider, and an agent of change in and through the research process.

5.2. Finding a strategy: methodological fluidity

Throughout the participatory research process, tracking my reflections proved to be useful not only for understanding the community contexts and my role as an instrument of research, but also in directing the project methodologically. While methodological practices are typically complex in participatory approaches, my own reflexive practice allowed me not only to identify non-traditional approaches, but also to adjust these approaches based on the successes, shortcomings, and observations of the project as it evolved within the community context. Furthermore, this process also allowed me to record and discuss action items with the community that occurred through participation in the research process rather than as a planned outcome. For example, I was often required to explain to potential participants why their perspective would be of value to the project and how it could help improve sport and recreation management in and for the community. By explaining to potential participants the importance of their contribution, I believe that I was able to stimulate discussions and develop understandings about the broader implications of sport and recreation in the community. An example of this explanation was clearly illustrated in an email conversation I had with a municipal councillor and board member of a community group:

He wrote: "I was never one to get involved in organized sports. My interests were geared more to hunting and fishing and building forts and go carts. I never joined a hockey team or baseball team. I am probably not your best choice as a resource for this project" (Reflective Entry, September 9, 2015).

Although this community member was involved in leadership positions municipally and in a prominent community group that is clearly involved in sport and recreation programming, he didn't perceive himself as a "resource" for this "sport"-oriented project. Having a conversation with this individual allowed me to assure him that not only his position on the board, but also his experiences participating in other recreational activities in the community actually made him an ideal participant who could offer a diverse perspective on sport and recreation. As Misener and Schulentorf (2016) have noted, often community members do not locate themselves as assets in the community even when they are in positions of authority. My reflections on conversations and personal connections within the community were undoubtedly an important factor in securing diverse participants within sport and recreation management and consequently achieving a rich and holistic representation from the data collected. Throughout this process, discussions with my supervisor assured me that often recruitment and participation in the research process occurs in non-linear, undefined ways, but that this is rarely discussed in the process of producing outputs.

Furthermore, these reflections allowed me to document action items that were achieved through the research process and were not a strategic aim of the project. A clear example of this occurred through my discussions with the local library regarding their role in sport and recreation provision (they host a variety of activity groups, weekly programs, and information sessions on various recreational activities from quilting and knitting to yoga and health and fitness more broadly, as well as a youth summer program with a significant physical activity component). Within these discussions, I casually questioned why library representatives did not attend and participate in recreation committee activities, as it was an open forum and it appeared to be a likely place to connect and engage with other programs and organizations in the

community? Following these discussions, I shared meeting information with them and noted that library representatives began attending and participating in the meetings regularly (Reflective Entry, January 7th, 2016). In this case, participation in the research project motivated an unplanned outcome (a community group regularly engaging in local policy making), and my reflexive practice allowed me to document and track this outcome, where I might otherwise have missed this nuance.

5.3. Executing the plays: flexible participatory methods

Following my experience of recruitment in the community, my reflections also allowed me to consider the overall flexibility necessary for data collection and analysis if I was to effectively manage my role as a change agent. Eventually, I began to take note of the experiences shared, and others withheld during the interviews. I reflected on “interviewing people that you are already familiar with... [and being] familiar with things that they were and weren't always mentioning” (Reflective Entry, August 18, 2015). As a participant in the sport and recreation community, I was quite aware of many organizations and initiatives, which also made me attentive to what participants were selecting to disclose and discuss, and also what they were not. These reflections forced me to question the underlying reasons why participants did or did not share stories: “was it because they assumed I already knew? because my question wasn't clear? or because they don't perceive/understand their role as one of a manager or community builder?” (Reflective Entry, August 18, 2015). The most notable example emerged in my reflections about gender and the process of collecting data:

My last two board member interviews have been with women and it is noticeably difficult for me to talk or relate to them about gender (surprise!). For example, the younger of the two brought up the experience of being a younger woman on a board with a bunch of old(er) people who were mostly men. When I tried to probe and ask about the experience, she just responded with “Oh, it was fine.” However, I suspect that there is more that I wasn't able to get into. The older participant had been a board member for many years and also worked as a teacher in the community, so I asked her about her role as woman in a position of leadership in the community throughout the years. She quite literally dodged the question with “I just love this community, everyone here is wonderful.” Again, I suspect there is much more to talk about, however, I am not the right person for the discussion (Reflective Entry, September 21, 2015).

My reflections on these specific interviews enabled me to explore my own position, as a young male researcher (and/or community member), who had left the community and **returned to** work in sport and recreation, and the impact that this identity has on the research process. This also led to further discussions with my supervisor about her understanding of the gendered aspects in the community, her own positionality in the process and how my own preconceptions may be influencing the process. Further, I also noted that “gender is likely not the only topic that I am not going to be able to tackle effectively” and that “these interactions illustrate the importance of power, discourse, and positionality in the research process” (Reflective Entry, September 21, 2015) and how these social forces influenced the data that I am able to collect. Thus, I faced another challenge in the research process that may have been overlooked had these reflections not been shared openly with my supervisor.

In these instances, reflecting and discussing these limitations with my supervisor and community contacts led us to explore different models of peer research such as those described by The Wellesley Institute (Flicker, Roche, & Guta, 2010; Guta, Flicker, & Roche, 2010; Roche, Guta, & Flicker, 2010). As I was beginning to conceptualize my research more closely with the southern tradition or approach to action research, I considered the different ways of incorporating community members in all parts of the research process. Although I had intended for my project to utilize a partner model where community members are involved in shared decision-making processes in “active and equitable role[s] across all phases of research (Roche et al., 2010, p. 13), my reflections demonstrated quite clearly that this was not taking place. Based on my reflections discussed above regarding a lack of time and resources for the recreation committee to fully engage in the process, the project thus far had more accurately employed an advisory model (Roche et al., 2010) where the committee had been aware of the project and helped to direct it, however had not been implicit or engaged in much of the actual research process (e.g., recruitment, data collection, analysis, dissemination, etc.). At this stage, reflections on how the community had been engaged in the project as well as how I was ill-suited as a research instrument to collect data that would paint a holistic picture of sport and recreation management in the community, suggested that the current approach was less than ideal, and that alternatives should be explored.

Roche et al. (2010) also described a third model of practice for peer research; the employment model. After discussing ethical implications with my supervisor (who was also a member of the University REB), and logistical implications with the community contact, we determined that it would be beneficial to explore this option:

The idea of using research assistants in the community appears to be where we will have to go. I likely should have considered this sooner but obviously resources become a question/issue. I also had hesitations about ethics but I was assured that I was covered under the emergent design I had described in my application (Reflective Entry, September 21, 2015).

Following these reflections, I circulated a posting (through community outlets and the local employment agency) for some casual help with a research project in the community. With the help of my supervisor, I was able to allocate a small budget to offer honoraria to research assistants who participated. Through the recreation committee and word of mouth, we were able

to find two youths (a male and a female) who were interested in being research assistants, as well as the support of two members of the recreation committee (both women) who offered to help with data collection. In this case, reflecting on the research process allowed me to adjust my approach to (hopefully) collect more holistic data that will be useful for myself as well as the community as we move forward with the project.

The two youths have also been actively involved in ongoing data analysis. Given logistical constraints involved with physically meeting, we have developed a strategy for the research assistants to be involved without the burden of attending all meetings. They have each been working on transcribing interviews and actively commenting and reflecting on them. These comments and reflections will serve as an additional source of data to fuel my own reflections and as points of discussion in future interviews and data analysis (e.g., with the recreation committee in an advisory capacity). For example, I noted:

I am really impressed with their reflections! For example, [one] discussed their own biases in regard to sport and rec activities but noted that they often forget to consider that they (and others) aren't always engaged or benefit from these activities. [They] considered that their own past history of being shy and somewhat disengaged might drive their desire to get as many kids engaged now as they can (Reflective Entries, January 11, 2015).

Using these reflections from multiple individuals is similar to the reflection and discussion processes described above (see [Kerwin & Hoerber, 2015](#); [Rich et al., 2014](#)). Furthermore, this process also begins to address the potential downfalls of single data sources identified in self-study research ([Holt, 2003](#)) and struggles to de-centre power in the research process ([Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003](#)).

While the research process to date involved flexibility and methodological fluidity in response to community contexts, cycles of reflection and action in the community have provided very useful insights into the processes of community sport management and doing participatory research in a rural context. More specifically, by engaging in first-person inquiry I was able to examine and adjust the approach to be more effective and methodologically sound. As the project continues to evolve, these reflections will also continue to direct the project both conceptually and methodologically. Additionally, the process of self-study was extremely helpful as a graduate student conducting participatory action research, as it also helped me to navigate and document the complex processes of reconciling identities and engaging in community partnership ([Burgess, 2006](#); [Humphrey, 2007](#)), as well as understanding and articulating my role as an agent of change ([Bradbury-Huang, 2010](#)) both in and through the research process.

6. Untangling reflexivity and accountability of knowledge

One of the often-cited drawbacks of self-study approaches is a lack of framework or criteria upon which to judge research. Furthermore, participatory research tends to lack a coherent theoretical orientation to inform peer review and assessments of quality ([Darroch & Giles, 2014](#)). Indeed, action research paradigms involve a (sometimes uncomfortable) shift in thinking about research, not as an endeavour that generates knowledge, but rather as a process that engages in discovery through partnership and participation ([Bradbury-Huang, 2010](#)). Within this process, reflexivity or self-study can be a very useful tool for understanding and enriching the research process. Indeed, self-study approaches can “push other scholars towards the recognition that no matter the method, the research, the researched, and the research process always remain intertwined” ([Giles & Williams, 2007](#), p. 192). This is further enhanced by the ongoing discussions about the concepts, processes, and paradigms between insiders conducting the research and outsiders supporting the research efforts. However, these approaches also face criticism in comparison to dominant research paradigms as there is no way to verify findings or make generalizations from a single source of data ([Holt, 2003](#)). Yet, in shifting away from dominant approaches to research, the opportunity for new and exciting research activities, as well as new ways of judging quality or rigour are plentiful. [Bradbury-Huang \(2010\)](#) outlined several “choicepoints” for determining the quality of action research (based on the criteria utilized by the editorial team of the *Action Research Journal*), one of which is reflexivity, or “the extent to which the authors explicitly locate themselves as change agents” ([Bradbury-Huang, 2010](#), p. 103). It is this perspective that we have taken up in this paper, in hopes of beginning to unpack some of the insights that might be derived from self-study approaches in sport management, and how these approaches can enrich the process and outcomes of research. Further, we have highlighted the importance of ongoing dialogue about underlying assumptions, tensions, and paradigms in research, as this practice can be extremely beneficial for scholars locating themselves within the field.

By taking up [Kerwin and Hoerber's \(2015\)](#) call for more sport management researchers to engage in reflection in their research, we have attempted to summarize the reflexive practices undertaken, and explore some of the ways in which first-person inquiry has enriched our processes of community-based research. Through the process of reflection, it was possible to gain more depth of understanding of some of the many contexts within the community as well as the role of the researchers as instruments of research and agents of change. For example, our discussion about the issue of gender and power in the community has turned out to be a critical perspective that may otherwise have been overlooked had this process not been used. As [Shaw and Frisby \(2006\)](#) noted in their contribution on gender in sport management research, by destabilizing our traditional theoretical perspectives and formalized ‘armchair’ approaches to research, “avenues for alternative views, policies, and practices may be developed” (p. 506). We argue that increased reflexivity could help sport management researchers and practitioners to be more attentive to the power relations inherent in the research processes and delivery of

sport and recreation within communities. Empirical and methodological insights such as those discussed in this paper, demonstrate the potential of reflexive practice to enrich the research process and generate not only meaningful academic dialogue but also actionable changes for communities as well as sport and recreation organizations. Additionally, in considering the potential of unplanned/unintended outcomes (such as those described in this paper), we urge researchers to consider the possibility of the research process as a driver or change. Furthermore, the insights generated through these reflections may also highlight the potential of reflexive practice to be used by sport managers who may benefit from a holistic understanding of the complex contexts and communities in which they work, as well as their own (in)abilities to engage and relate to diverse community members.

In the introduction to the 1997 special issue of the *Journal of Sport Management*, Chalip suggested that action research is “about more than change. [It is] about the ways in which the knowledge we produce as sport management scholars affects the ways in which we construct the practice of sport management” (Chalip, 1997, p. 3). In reflecting on the experiences shared in this paper, this quote is particularly resonant. The process of self-reflection coupled with ongoing scholarly dialogue is reflective of a new perspective on rigorous academic sport management research. All too often scholars disengage themselves from these processes and miss out on the construction of practices that are directly affected by the contexts in which they take place. In addition, as academic supervisors and other members of the academy often dissuade graduate students from taking on projects that create messiness in the process, we may be missing out on enriching experiences and promoting intellectual autonomy to derive creative new ways of understanding our field. Moving forward, we echo Kerwin and Hoerber's (2015) call for more researchers to incorporate reflexive practices in their research design and examine the ways in which these practices can enrich the research process and outcomes. We further extend the call to challenge sport management researchers to move beyond traditional paradigms within qualitative approaches to inform their reflections and the products of their research. As aptly put by Bradbury-Huang (2010, p. 104):

we must also acknowledge that confusion and disdain will always arise when we insistently evaluate one paradigm using the standards of the other. In simple terms we cannot compare apples and oranges, or, more properly as we are reflecting on paradigmatic difference, we cannot compare apples and blue.

Indeed, looking inward rather than solely outward is just one approach of many that may be useful for sport management researchers and practitioners (see Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). Allowing and encouraging new and emerging forms of research that consider the importance of context may offer new insights to the field of sport management, including discussions from different, multiple, and overlapping perspectives that we never knew we were missing.

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