

USING CRITICAL REALISM IN RESEARCH ON THE MANAGEMENT OF SPORT: A NEW PERSPECTIVE OF VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTARY SPORT ORGANISATIONS

Author:
Terri Byers

email:
t.byers@coventry.ac.uk

Co-authors:
Thurston, Alex

University:
Coventry University

Faculty:
Sport and Event Management

- 2. &consisting of superficial and deep structures
- 3. Objects and structures have causal power
- 4. Actors discursive knowledge regarding reality has a construction effect on the outcomes of social interrelations
- 5. Structures such as cultures, ideologies, and institutional practises enable and constrain everyday social activities rather than determine outcomes
- 6. Social science involves the study of reflexive agents who may construct, deconstruct and reconstruct structures

Criticisms of the CR perspective can be found in post-structuralist readings on management (see, e.g. Willmott, 2005). Broader debates around theory development have included CR and suggest that the perspective is useful for theory verification, a much neglected area of management and social science research (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). While research on voluntary sport organisations and volunteering has grown and continues to attract attention from academics and policy makers, further research would benefit from new methodological insights which may be instrumental in developing new theories through verification of existing knowledge or generation of new theory.

We attempt to engage in the above mentioned debates by applying a Critical Theoretical lens to the study of control in voluntary sport organisations as has been reported in Byers, Henry and Slack's (2007) preliminary research findings. Critical Realism enabled a three dimensional view of control which took into consideration the social context of volunteers as well as broader organisational context. Organisational control has received much attention in the mainstream management literature yet there is very little consensus on what control is or how it can be achieved within organisations. Likewise, Critical Realism has been the centre of debate in organisation and management studies for several decades. This paper argues that it is time for an explicit discussion of the role of Critical Realism in understanding voluntary sport and we provide an overview and application of CR to encourage further debate and questioning of how to use CR in research on the management of voluntary sport organisations.

Abstract

Downward (2005) argued that critical realism (CR) provides a useful framework for research seeking to inform policy or management advice and can help policy and management failures be better understood. The Critical Realist philosophy is a growing movement that has a unique ontological stance that suggests reality is multi-dimensional. Extending Downward's discussion of the use of a critical realist ontology in research on sport tourism, this paper provides a more comprehensive discussion of the critical realist perspective and its application to research on volunteers and the context in which they work, voluntary sport organisations. We address two main issues: what are the key elements of the CR research philosophy and how can these help to advance our understanding of the volunteer and voluntary sport organisation? The use of and debates surrounding CR in mainstream management research is explored and examples from the empirical analysis of control in voluntary sport organisations (e.g. Byers, Henry and Slack, 2007) are used to illustrate the application of CR to voluntary sport.

According to CR, the social world is comprised of four levels of reality: material, ideal, artefactual and social. The levels of reality correspond to the depth of reality being considered ranging from the superficial material reality to the deeply embedded social reality. CR also suggests a unique relationship among structures and agents when seeking to understand this multi-reality. To clarify, we examine six major assumptions of CR articulated by Marsh (1999):

- 1. There is a reality external to individuals

References:

Byers, T., Henry, I. and Slack, T. (2007). Understanding control in voluntary sport organisations, in Parent, M.M. and Slack, T. (eds.). *International perspectives on the management of sport*. Elsevier, London.

Downward, P. (2005). Critical (Realist) reflection on policy and management research in Sport, Tourism and Sports Tourism. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 5(3): 303-20.

Marsh, D. (1999). *Post War British politics in perspective*. London, Polity Press.

Tsang, E.W. (1999). Replication and theory development in organizational science: A Critical Realist perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 24(4): 759-80.

Willmott, H. (2005). Theorizing contemporary control: Some post-structuralist responses to some Critical Realist questions. *Organization*, 12(5): 747-80.