

HOW I BECAME AN ELITE FINNISH SPORT MANAGER NARRATIVE STUDY ON HOW FINNISH SPORT MANAGERS LEGITIMIZE THEMSELVES, THEIR ROLE AND POSITIONS

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Aim of the abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine through Finnish sport managers' narratives how they became Finnish sport managers as well as what kind of contents and meanings do sport managers give - how they legitimize themselves, their role and positions in their narratives? What can be found out through their narration? This was achieved through an analysis of the narrative interviews of 16 top level Finnish sport managers.

Theoretical background

Internationally, there are only a few narrative studies concerning sport management (Edwards, Skinner & Gilbert 2004; Rinehart 2005). This study will open a new perspective into the field of sport management both thematically and methodologically. Compared to traditional methods of sport management research (quantitative, e.g. survey), narrative research can provide different kinds of answers and give a deeper and better understanding of the lived experiences of sport managers.

The core of narrative research is the analysis of stories. Narrative research methods focus on individuals' lives, how they experience them, and on those meanings that they give to their lives through stories. (Czarniawska 1998; Polkinghorne 1995) By narrative approach sport management researchers and practitioners have an opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding from personal experience narratives as well as their autobiographical career spans.

Methodology

The study includes the narrative interviews of 16 Finnish sport managers from the top of the Finnish sport management – the elite – 12 male and 4 female, aged between 45-73 years. They are operational and governmental managers at three different organizational levels: the administration, the private (i.e. business) and the third sector (i.e. associations). The 16 sport managers interviewed form quite a representative sample in Finland where, with the population of approximately 5 million, there are not so numerous top level/elite sport managers. The interviews were first recorded and then transcribed (over 480 pages of text).

The interviews were read very thoroughly several times, one at the time. Then, the stories were condensed into core stories, based on the research questions. By exploring these core stories, the purpose was to find out how sport managers recounted and described the actions and events in their pathways to becoming sport managers. How did they describe their motivations to become and to be elite sport managers? What actions and events did the stories contain and how did the interviewees place themselves and other players in the stories?

Further analysis was done by using the mind-map, the actantial model (Greimas 1980) and Atlas.ti-program. The actantial model consists of six actants, which all have a role in the story (Greimas 1980). With the help of the actantial model we can see values, legitimate and unwritten rules and well as models of action contained in the stories.

Results

On the basis of the data of this study, there are findings of the legitimate rite (Weber 1958) in the Finnish sport management - how elite sport managers are legitimized. This can be revealed through sport managers' stories, through their narration how they legitimize their own role and position in Finnish sport management (individual level). Legitimate rite can also be found through the kind of special characteristics that were required from them when they aimed/applied for the top sport manager position (cultural level).

According to this study the good, believable sport manager ought to have their background in sports. There seems to be a belief that a person who comes from "within the sport" has the required, even exceptional, skills. Also a career in politics seems to give justification in the field of Finnish sport management.

Discussion

On the basis of the narratives, the manager must have good management skills to be a successful sport manager. However, that alone is not enough. One has to understand and internalize the substance, i.e. the field of Finnish sports and athletics and its meanings, principles and implications.

Finnish sport is undergoing a major change – some structural changes have already been made, and also elite sports will face new challenges and changes. Thus, we may also say that Finnish sport management must change: sport management does not seem to be very highly appreciated at the moment. It is vital to have more research based on information about characteristics in sport management in this period of transition.

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