Charting the Course: Enhancing Qualitative Research with Life Maps

Allyson C. Hartzell, The University of Texas at Austin  
Marlene Dixon, Texas A&M University  
David W. Walsh, University of Houston  
Jennifer McGarry, University of Connecticut  
B. Christine Green, University of Illinois

Method - Qualitative (Other)  
60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop  
Abstract 2017-053  
Thursday, June 1, 2017 2:10 PM  
Room: Oxford

Sport management and leisure researchers continue to promote the benefits of taking a life course approach in their research (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Buning & Gibson, 2016). Life course theorists (e.g., Elder, 1994) argue that by understanding the context within which an individual lives and acts, we are able to gain insight. A life course approach allows researchers to examine the patterns that have contributed to an individual’s life (e.g., family, sport, leisure, career) as well as the internal and external influences on such patterns. The authors of this workshop have utilized life course theory and its related methods to examine issues in sport management. We present this symposium to facilitate a better understanding of the benefits and functionality of life history calendars or life maps for conducting such analysis in sport management. Participants in the workshop will garner theoretical and practical value for furthering their own work in this area.

Life course theory involves four central frames, within which people experience growth, family, education, sport participation, and/or career trajectories that are influenced by social context and key turning points. The first involves the interaction of a person’s life with historical times (Elder, 1994). For example, women who have participated or worked in sport after the passing of Title IX have had very different experiences from those who did so before this important law was enacted (Hartzell, 2015). The second frame is timing of lives, which refers to typical age-graded expectations that take into account one’s developmental stage and social roles (Elder, 1994). Conflicting social and developmental milestones exist that impact sport experiences. For instance, childbearing years often coincide with peak competition years for elite athletes (Dixon & Bruening, 2011). The third frame is linked lives, which highlights that people are social beings and develop connections with others throughout their lives (Elder, 1994). For instance, sport and leisure participation choices both depend upon and impact family members of the participants (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Green & Chalip, 1997). The fourth frame is human agency, which refers to the idea that individual decisions are made from an array of available options, which may be wide or narrow, depending on personal circumstances. Actions taken toward such decisions then help mold and shape one’s life path or trajectory (Elder, 1994).

One developing method for exploring life course patterns and trajectories is the life history calendar (LHC), also referred to as a life map. The LHC was developed as a method to provide research participants the opportunity to identify and organize the stages and key events of their lives as they perceive them. The LHC can incorporate inquiries about event sequences and streams, visual aids, and context to assist participants to reflect on various life events (Caspi et al., 1996). Life history calendars can improve the quality of data obtained from retrospective accounts of events and transitions that individuals have experienced throughout their lives, as experiences and events are more easily recalled when they are connected to key reference points. As such, using the LHC can enhance the accuracy of data collection (Scott & Alwin, 1998). The use of this data collection method can help clarify the complex context surrounding important events and turning points in people’s lives by both providing a graphical representation and enhancing the discussion about their experiences in an interview (Worth, 2011).

Hartzell (2015) utilized such a method when examining the ways in which female intercollegiate athletic administrators’ perceptions of their past personal and professional life experiences influenced the decisions they made regarding their careers. Each participant was asked to complete a LHC (or life/career map) prior to being interviewed. The “map” template included a timeline of social events that were relevant to the study’s population to provide historical context to the period of life they were in when experiencing their own personal life and career events. In addition to the listed social events, participants were asked to map any other social events important to
their life or career path. Ample space was included for the women to specify personal events and their relative importance, based on the significance of each to her life and career path. Not only did this tool aid in the recall of past events, but it also helped guide the interview in a way that allowed for the tailoring of questions to each participant’s own lived experience and contributed to the richness of the data obtained from the interview.

Similarly, Walsh (2014) assessed the reciprocal effects of sport and life transitions to determine sport’s capacity as a developmental force. Participants 55 and older were asked to complete a life course map (cf. Harrison, Angel, & Mann, 2008) describing and rating their sport experiences and life transitions from their earliest memory until the time of the interview. Consistent with Hartzell (2015), recall and data richness were enhanced using life maps. In addition, the charts created displayed path trajectories of the phenomena that were used as a descriptive heuristic for analyzing and interpreting interview data that otherwise could have been missed. For example, a comparison of respondents’ life maps showed a negative correlation between sport participation and life transitions, but only between the ages of 25 and 40. This prompted a more in-depth analysis, and showed that the multiplicity and magnitude of transitions (e.g., marriage, divorce, having children, graduate school, first job, death of parent) during a particular life stage may impede a person's ability to participate in sport.

Drawing on previous applications of the LHC or life map method, this symposium will include two components: a brief panel presentation and an attendee workshop. First, a panel of experts in qualitative research will provide an overview of the LHC or life map technique, its utility, procedures, corresponding qualitative research design, and implications for sport management research. The presenters will then discuss the ability of the life mapping method to affect the richness, authenticity, transferability, and trustworthiness of data collected.

The main body of the symposium will be a hands-on workshop and discussion. Each attendee will complete a sport participation LHC, pulling from his/her personal experiences. Attendees will then share and discuss their experiences completing the map using the nominal group technique. The nominal group technique is effective in generating rich, original ideas while balancing individual and group participation (Clark & Stein, 2004; Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975). The workshop will conclude with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the method for sport management research.

In this workshop, attendees will gain first-hand experience with life mapping and its usefulness for recalling memories of past events, as well as learn to analyze results from a life course approach. Attendees will leave with a theoretical understanding of the life mapping technique and the skill to put the technique into practice to enhance future qualitative research in sport management.