

## **‘ In Splendid Isolation’ -Is the field missing something?**

### **Research in Outdoor Sports and Outdoor Education: Principles into practice**

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#### **Abstract**

It can be argued that much research in outdoor sport and outdoor activities has been undertaken and represented in ‘splendid isolation’ without recourse to research and theorizing from major disciplines. Wagner (1993) refers to the collective ignorance in educational research making reference to ‘blank’ and ‘blind’ spots. Blank spots are known areas such as theories and perspectives which are seen to require further questioning, whilst blind spots are those which are not known or cared about and so are ignored.

This paper considers the way in which interpretative research may be utilized to uncover ‘blank’ and ‘blind’ spots in outdoor sport and adventurous activities. It highlights the significance of a number of theoretical perspectives for making sense of the outdoors as a social and cultural phenomenon. Finally, it draws attention to ethnographic and life-history research and associated epistemological, methodological and ethical issues providing some examples.

#### **Introduction**

This paper is a bricolage in which I, the bricoleur, <sup>1</sup>bring together a variety of thought, research and praxis and argue for greater engagement of outdoor sport and education with a diversity of social perspectives (Humberstone, Brown and Richards, 2003). I begin by offering the opportunity of engaging with C. Wright Mills’ notion of sociological imagination. I then draw attention to Wagner’s (1993) blank and blind sports in education and highlight these in theoretical perspectives and research in outdoor sport, education and research methodologies. Next I discuss interpretative research approaches which can provide for more inclusive research that reaches out to other disciplines and other perspectives. Finally, I will provide examples of such methodologies adopted in outdoor education research.

#### **Sociological Imagination**

Wagner (1993) referred to the collective ignorance in educational research making reference to ‘blank’ and ‘blind’ spots. He proposed that blank spots are known areas, such as theories and perspectives, which are seen to require further questioning, whilst blind spots are those which are not known or cared about and so are ignored. This ‘ignorance’ that Wagner refers to in educational research has been draw on by Gough (2002) to call for explorations of blank and more particularly blind spots in environmental education. Whilst Rickinson et al's (2004) review of research concerned with outdoor learning suggests a gap, a ‘blank’ spot, in research on groups such as girls and women.

It is through not only scientific research but also creative imagination that ignorance can be addressed or missing perspectives uncovered. For C. Wright Mills writing on ‘The sociological imagination’ in 1959 says ...,

‘The sociological imagination,... in considerable part consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components... There is a playfulness of mind back of such combining as well as a fierce drive to make sense of the world, ....’ (1959, p. 232-233).

This classic text is highly relevant today and for the outdoor field. I would suggest that the ‘outdoor’ field can not afford not to take cognisance of this ‘playfulness’ of research and the capacity to engage with and build upon sociological imagination. It can be argued that much research and writing in outdoor sport and outdoor education has to a greater or lesser extent ignored other broader disciplines, together with the developments in research and writing that have emerged from them. Likewise and importantly, it could also be argued that current educational and sports discourse has ignored or discounted much plausible and credible research emerging from the broad outdoor education field. This is not surprising since the field has tended not to engage with the broader developments in research, sociological and educational ideas, largely but not always, preferring to work somewhat in splendid isolation. Research in outdoor education frequently tends to build on its own developments with little recourse to the world outside which may be shaping current thought and so perspectives on/in outdoor education. However, there are some excellent examples of recent research which does engage with wider concepts. One that springs to mind is a doctorate thesis from Australia concerned with research into extended programmes which included outdoor experiences designed for young people at risk of substance abuse who chose to take up this programme to change their life-styles (Carpenter, 2008). The thesis takes seriously Giddens’ (1984; 1990) theoretical perspective of structuration and embeds the empirical data within a developed reflexive model which acknowledges and synthesises agency (of the participants) and structures (local, environmental and social). This is a sophisticated project of considerable rigour and sensitivity which, in my view, has moved the outdoor experiential field forward tremendously through the utilisation, development and synthesis of a significant social theory.

It moves on from simply looking at group interaction and critiquing of traditional models such as Maslow’s frequently used in group work in outdoor education. The ‘splendid isolation’ of outdoor education theory was tackled well through this thesis building bridges between outdoor education knowledge and social theories and between the participants and the features that both shaped them and they were able to shape.

### **Engagement with other disciplines/theories**

Consequently, engaging with other disciplines and theories can creatively bridge the gap, uncovering new and relevant perspectives. It is imperative that outdoor education engages with discourses as well as its own. We may ask, what can the field of outdoor sport and outdoor education learn from for example sports’ sociologists and their current research/analyses on say consumption, identity and difference? ‘Adventure’ sport is being consumed in greater numbers than ever before and becoming as popular as

traditional sports. We may then ask, what are the connections/links between young people and 'adventure'? (see Humberstone and Nicol, 2005) .

### ***Outdoor Sport-Adventure Sports***

Recent literature on 'high-risk' leisure or adventure activities, identified in the early 1990s by Lyng (1990) in his analysis of 'edgework', such as skydiving, hang-gliding, rock climbing and downhill skiing now include surfing, skate boarding and windsurfing and these largely individual so called 'extreme', 'alternative', or 'new' sport are frequently referred to by sport sociologists as 'life style' or 'extreme' sport (cf. Wheaton, 2004; Rinehart and Sydor, 2003). The diversity between, and within, these adventure sport forms is highlighted by a range of academic and popular debates, concerning their meanings, values, statuses, forms and identities. One major feature running throughout all of these forms and within different analytical frameworks is the conceptualisation and perception of risk-taking, frequently drawing upon the discourse of 'adventure'. The notion of adventure is considered by a number of analysts in a variety of ways.

From the history of climbing perspective, Lewis (2000, 2004) argues that Western men's (it has been largely men)<sup>2</sup> search for adventure is partly a consequence of society's ever increasing rationalization and bureaucratization which over 100 years ago Weber visualised as an 'iron cage' within which individuals feel trapped. Becker's (2003) analysis draws upon theoretical perspectives generally outside of the outdoor world.

His analysis draws upon anthropological and sociological discourse to explore this quest for adventure:

The command of an instrumental rationality has led to cognitive and emotional structures of self-discipline and self-control. At the same time and parallel to it a need begins to grow, that justice must also be done in those areas of subjectivity which instrumental rationale has suppressed more and more in the process of civilisation. Individuals consequently look for situations from which they expect that their structural conditions would allow the experience of an authentic subjectivity. In this context, the adventurous contests with the sublime; this side of nature takes over an important function in the way individuals manage their feelings. ... Since this adventurous search for authenticity is not only hard but also perilous... individuals willingly buy the products of outdoor and culture industries. However, they don't use these implements to go out for adventures, but as aesthetic signs which allow them to present an identity which seems to be authentic and up to date. (Becker, 2003, p. 91)

Furthermore, Becker argues that not only the signs of adventure are bought into but also sometimes the actual experience itself. Consumer expectations equate the buying of the packaged adventure with the experiencing of authenticity but frequently without consideration of the bodily expression and practice needed for knowledgeable, skillful participation. Commercial ventures frequently sell their operations in a manner which is particularly attractive to relative novices without the necessary individual knowledge, skill and experience with devastating results (cf Palmer, 2004).

The preceding discussion points to the ambiguities around notions, images and practices of adventure and adventure sport. It highlights some educational and social discourses in the consumption of adventure, although discourses associated with personal and social development, the aesthetic and human-nature relations have not been considered here. However, Humberstone, (2009) examines adventure and risk as culturally specific and locally understood through examining the relationship between globalization, the local and adventure. Globalisation and the search for the sublime in the outdoors lead us to on to considering environment aspects of outdoor sport and outdoor education.

I now turn to engagement with other social theories and show how dominant research paradigms may vary historically from disciplines to discipline beginning. I begin briefly with environment and sustainability, areas which are frequently ignored in outdoor sport and education.

### **Social theory(ies), Research & Outdoor Education**

Colouring in the blank spot 'Green', Nicol (2003) addresses some of the theorising in respect of the relationship between outdoor education and environmental and sustainability education. Nicol (2003) challenges taken- for- granted assumptions through the presentation of an alternative frame of understanding (epistemology) which favours diversity in thought and theory. Nicol and Higgins (2005) draw attention to the relation of outdoor education as 'In' or 'Part of' the environment raising important issues around educating for sustainability that have been much neglected in outdoor sport and education and which his paper can not do justice.

Research approaches are continually in debate in social sciences and are relevant to outdoor education in exploring and uncovering various missing perspectives. Social research has gone through a diversity of different stages or world views frequently challenging the accepted norms of dominant research communities. Denzin and Lincoln (1998 ) talk of moving beyond the 'sixth moment' in qualitative research. However, Sparkes (2002), a sports sociologist, argues that Denzin and Lincoln's locating of 'moments' in research characterise the historical development of North American qualitative literature. He argues they do not generalise well across disciplines. Thus research in sport in UK is at a different 'moment'. Currently, the sport and exercise discipline in UK, previously a discipline which largely adopted a positivistic and quantitative approach to research has now an enthusiastic branch which is working within an interpretative paradigm and utilising qualitative research.

So what is the 'moment' of outdoor sport and education research currently? Where does outdoor education and outdoor sport stand in the 'moments' of qualitative research? I would suggest it ranges from second moment (1980)s which was concerned more with adopting positivistic criteria for 'validating' research to the fourth with its crises of representation and legitimation, and the fifth more participatory and situated research. The latter 'moments' of research referred to emphasise the partial nature of knowledge and the challenge to 'universal' truth claims.

### ***'Standpoint' research***

Standpoint research challenges the notion that there is one 'truth' claim and argues there are partial truths that can be uncovered ( See Humberstone, 2004). It is through interpretation that these different understandings can be uncovered. Interpretative research requires the researcher to relinquish positivistic notions of 'objectivity' in the research process through adopting an interpretive stance. The researcher no longer becomes the adjudicator for competing worldviews but the interpreter speaking for and with the community and its environment. Research is recognised as being situated and contextualised. Reflexivity in research is crucial, as are ethical considerations.

### ***Interpretative research and outdoor education and outdoor sport***

How then does interpretative research in outdoor education and sport manage these developments and respond to such questions as what are the 'ways of finding things out' that can address such issues as inter-subjectivity, the invisibility of women's and other's diversity of lived experiences and the unequal power relations in society, outdoor education/sport and research ?

How might this research engage with social theory? There is a plethora of text on research methodology and methods which can guide the researcher through different methods. Methods used for interpretative research include various forms of interviews and participant observations, auto/biographies and auto/ethnographies, textual examination and those more usually used in positivistic or quantitative research such as questionnaires and surveys.

The methodological or philosophical perspective of the researcher, along with the research question determines the choice of research method or technique, reflecting a particular 'moment' of research. Briefly and simplistically, the philosophical underpinnings of different paradigms of research are as follows:

Positivism: in which the research is perceived to be value neutral; ethics are important but often 'imposed'. This is represented in the second 'moment'.

Interpretative research: such as ethnography, in which values and ethics are integral to research. This is represented in the fourth and fifth 'moments'.

Critical social science research: This is as interpretative research but the focus is on creating change and empowering participants. This is represented by the fifth to seventh moments.

Epistemological questions include what is the nature of knowledge? Different 'moments' of research may have differing epistemological understandings. Such questions about the nature of knowledge are posed by critical researchers of various standpoints who recognise issues of power in society and research. Critical research synthesises empirical data from participants (ie their understanding of the world) with chosen theories.

One approach to synthesising and engaging with theories is highlighted in the interpretative/ethnographic model below.

## The Interpretative/Ethnographic Research Cycle

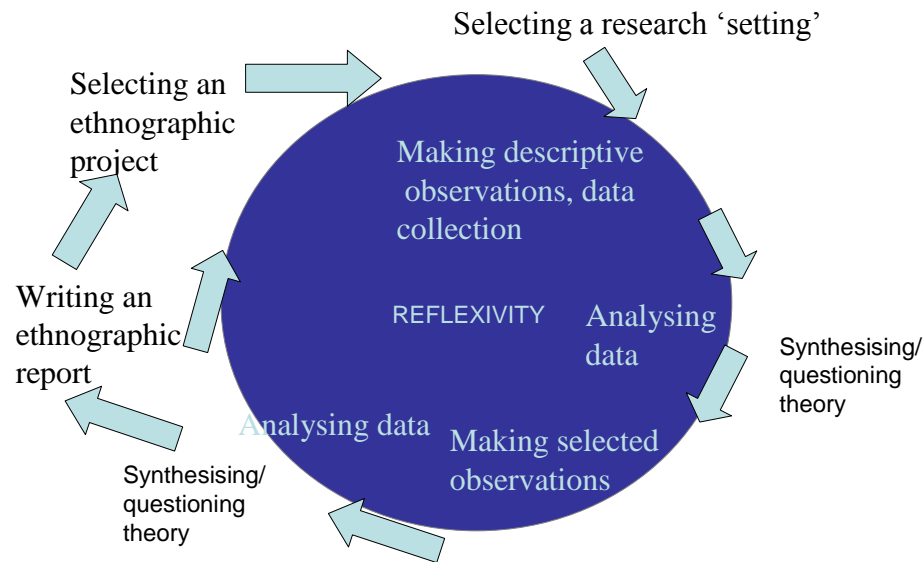


Figure. 1 The Interpretative/Ethnographic Research Cycle Model

This model gives an insight into the processes by which theories may be synthesised in the research process. This requires reading literature from a variety of other disciplines. The research process is cyclical and not linear and reflexivity and ethical considerations are central.

Interpretative/Ethnography tendencies are as follows:

- exploring nature of phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses
- work with 'unstructured' data that is non-coded, not closed set of analytic categories
- investigation of small number of cases in detail
- analysis involves explicit interpretation of meaning, product mainly descriptions and explanation, quantification minimal
- values and ethics central to ethnographic research

### ***Reflexivity, reflection and ethics***

Reflexivity is central to interpretative research. Reflection indicates an internalised process of thought whilst reflexivity describes actions which are generated from and through reflection. Structural reflexivity is understood to be where you/me (agents) reflect on social or organisational structures around us. Self reflexivity is understood to be where you/me (agents) reflect on ourselves; it is deliberate reflection. In interpretative research, the researcher can not be erased from the research process. He/she must be explicit about his/her actions in the research process. Giddens (1976, p. 17) points to significance of reflexivity, which for him is synonymous with self awareness in all

aspects of human conduct. Being a man or a woman is central to our social lives and inner selves and impacts upon how we make sense of reflexivity in research. Reflexivity is more action orientated than passive. Alevsson and Skoldberg (2000, p. 248) propose that there is 'a duality ...in which the act of reflection, is also a process of exploring ways of seeing, which contribute to the action as resulting from the layers of reflection'. Reflection and reflexivity mutually affect one another. Carpenter (2008) shows the significance of reflexivity and engagement with broader theories in her research concerned with exploring extended outdoor programmes with young people who choose to change their damaging life-styles. Through the development of a sophisticated model based upon Giddens' concept of structuration, the ways in which developing critical consciousness through reflexivity increases agency (the ability to act) and empowers are highlighted through different levels. Burrige et al (2007) utilise a similar theoretical model in investigating praxis in teacher education.

Fetterman's (1998, p.146) statements on ethics are important for outdoor education. He states that, 'Ethics guide the first and last steps of an ethnography. Ethnographers stand at ethical crossroads throughout their research. This fact of ethnographic life sharpens the senses and ultimately refines and enhances the quality of the endeavour'. This applies to all interpretative research. Further, in interpretative/ethnographic research ethics are situational and contextual. Some common ethical considerations in interpretative research include; not harming participants; deception; invasion of privacy; confidentiality and anonymity and informed consent (cf Mauther, Birch, Jessop and Miller, 2002).

### **Examples of interpretative research**

Finally, I briefly provide here two further examples of recent interpretative research that bring together a variety of perspectives, drawing on concepts and theories which are not generally drawn upon in outdoor education and which utilised the interpretative/ethnographic methodological approach (figure1).

A blind spot identified by Gough (2002) in environmental education is its heterosexist nature and this was explored for outdoor practitioners in UK by Barnfield and Humberstone, (2008). Life-history interviews were undertaken with lesbian and gay outdoor practitioners, three women and four men aged between 22-40 yrs. Analysis of the interviews were undertaken. It was found that for these outdoor educators, the outdoor industry is perceived as a heterosexist work place. Homophobic bullying was evident to varying degrees and the interviewees adopted different coping strategies to manage their working lives and identities in different situations, from being in the 'closet' to 'coming out' (Barnfield & Humberstone, 2008). This research utilised interpretative research and drew upon literature and research in other fields such as sport and education to synthesise the interviewees' responses with theoretical concepts. This research responded to the question, what is uncovered when outdoor education is explored through 'spectacles' (theories) that frame and bring into focus this 'blind' spot? It raises important issues for praxis in outdoor education and sport such as, 'what are the ways that homophobic bullying, misunderstanding and ignorance, in the pedagogic process, can be challenged?

Stan's (2008) ethnographic research uncovers teaching and learning approaches, utilising social learning theories from educational research and interaction theory. She poses critical questions, 'regarding the effectiveness of the outdoor learning process when a position of power is adopted,' and asks, 'whose experience is it, the pupils or the facilitators?' Despite the fact that outdoor learning occurs mostly within the context of the social group, how power is played out between participants has been largely ignored in the literature. Stan (2008, 2009) utilises the ethnographic methodology identified in figure 1 to explore the outdoor learning process for primary aged school children at an outdoor centre. The research highlights the centrality of social interaction and the consequential significance of the social nature of the learning experience. The research explores group interactions between primary school children taking part in outdoor activities, and offers a fine-grained look at the outdoor learning experience drawing upon educational theories such as interactionism and social learning.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This bricolage has highlighted ways in which 'playfulness' in outdoor sport and outdoor education research enables the engagement with broader diverse frameworks through interpretative research to bridge across and engage with diverse disciplines and provide for a understandings of sport and outdoor education.

### **Notes**

1. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p. 3) draw attention to the bricoleur in research. 'The bricoleur produces a bricolage that is a pieced together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation', resulting in an emergent design.
2. Research indicates that this is the case. There has been significant research from feminist and pro-feminist perspectives attempting to understand and analyzing the male (historical) dominance in outdoor sport and outdoor education. For example, Pedersen-Gurholt 2008 looks at the Norwegian *friluftsliv* and ideals of becoming an 'educated man'. Humberstone and Pedersen (2001) looks at the differences and similarities to do with Gender, Class and Outdoor Traditions in UK and Norway. Humberstone (2000) highlights women's perspectives from a number of countries. Warren (1996) explores women's voices in USA.

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