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Towards a Critical Theory
Of Sport Management

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Introduction

From the outset of this paper we are forthright in stating that there are misconceptions about the use of critical theory in some academic and sport management circles. These misconceptions are apparently pessimistically grounded in radical critiques of academic society. We argue, however, throughout that critical theory should be seen as profoundly optimistic and of use in the future research traditions of sport management. This optimism arises from its promise to provide us with possibilities for transforming existing social orders in ways that reflect conditions of freedom, equality and justice. All are issues, which 'scream out' for further research in our discipline. Throughout this paper it is clearly argued that critical theory is both a philosophy and a process of theorising, which is grounded in an explicit philosophical position and that in the literature a precise definition of critical theory is elusive. However, we also understand that the critical theory approach is different in that it strives both to understand and reveal the workings of the broad political, economic, social, and cultural processes, and to also explore the inner sanctums of human consciousness where the meanings of social life are constructed. This is in contrast to traditional theories, which claim to be objective and neutral, and we argue that as critical theory is manifestly political, there is a priori commitment to take sides with the oppressed and those whose interests are contravened by external sources of domination. This form of approach does not fit well with the existing sport management structures. Critical theorists therefore, flatly reject any notion that theory should guide practice, viewing this approach as yet another form of domination. This perspective of course has implications for future research in sport management. Instead, theorists argue that change comes about as one's awareness of the limitation and constraints upon human potential are clearly perceived. As researchers we realise that this introduction provides a brief sketch of critical theory, which belies the sophistication and complexity of the analysis of the individual and society develop-
oped by critical theorists over the last few decades. As such, in order to grasp a greater understanding of the central themes of critical theory it is necessary to visit its origins.

**The Meaning of Critical Theory**

Critical theory has different meanings for different writers. As a critique it is usually considered to be a critique of modernity and the developments and institutions associated with modern society. As Kellner (1989) notes:

Critical theory has been deeply concerned with the fate of modernity, and has offered systematic and comprehensive theories of the trajectory of modernity, combined with critical diagnoses of some of the latter’s limitations, pathologies and destructive effects – while providing defenses of some of its progressive elements. (p. 3)

In Kellner’s view, critical theory has generally been committed to the idea of modernity and progress, while at the same time noting the ways that features of modernity can create problems for individuals and society. Even Weber’s theory of rationalization of modern society can be regarded as a critical theory. Weber (1978) argued that rationalization was a force that increasingly dominated western and other societies, limiting creativity and the human spirit.

While critical theory can and does initiate new thought in social theory and methodology, it does not necessarily represent a cohesive group of ideas. “It is more accurate to say that critical theorists are united in their objectives: to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices” (Giroux and McLaren, 1989, p. 160). Most critical theorists work from the premise that people inhabit a world of contradictions and imbalances of power and privilege and therefore direct their work towards positive social change. In an individual’s social universe, critical theorists contend that:

... all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others often elides the interconnections among them; and that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression (Kincheloe, & McLaren, 1994 p. 139).

Critical theory is usually more closely associated with a group of theorists call the Frankfurt School. It was German theorists such as Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse and, more recently, Habermas, who are usually identified as establishing and developing a critical theory of modern society. Others such as the Hungarian Marxist Lukacs, and some contemporary North Americans, most notably Calhoun and Kellner, can also be considered critical theorists.

The Frankfurt School, and the so-called critical theory which stemmed from it, explored the human condition from similar starting points. With a renewed focus upon the problem of the
individual, the Frankfurt school was also oriented towards Freudian psychoanalysis, interpreting the problems of neuroses, and psychopathologies. It was at the forefront of research and argued that the failure of a capitalist society to allow the individual free rein and autonomous expression was indeed an important cultural perspective, which was often overlooked by serious researchers. In effect, the Frankfurt School updated Marxism, preserving its belief that all problems to do with society stemmed from the economic sphere, but adding to it the plight of a society shackled to the debilitating effects of technical rationality and an efficient division of labour. In effect, it is these factors, which have provided capitalism with tools of economic and material success, but at the expense of a genuinely democratic society in which all individuals can participate and find themselves fulfilled. The Frankfurt School was particularly committed to a view of the social sciences, which emphasises a comprehensive critique of existing social arrangements.

The Frankfurt School’s criticism of ‘knowledge of truth’ claims was cast in a broad context within a subjectivist perspective, as Held (1980) describes:

Each of the critical theorists maintained that although all knowledge is historically conditioned, truth claims could be rationally adjudicated independently of immediate social (e.g. class) interests. They defended the possibility of an independent moment of criticism. They also all attempted to justify critical theory on a non-objectivistic and materialistic foundation. The extension and development of the notion of critique, from a concern with the conditions and limits of reason of knowledge (Kant), to a reflection on the emergence of spirit (Hegel), and then to a focus on specific historical forms-capitalism, the exchange process (Marx) — was furthered in the work of the Frankfurt theorists and Habermas. They sought to develop a critical perspective in the discussion of all social practices. (pp. 15-16)

In summary, several features of the Frankfurt school of critical theory are noteworthy in their support of the sport management perspective as they provide an alternate conceptual lens to examine sport management practice. These include the following:

1. Much of the impetus for the development of critical theory came from the problems of positivism as it gained wide currency in the social sciences.

2. Unlike classical Marxism with its stress on economic determinism, critical theory stresses the importance and possibility of individual action.

3. A major focus for critical theory is the critique of technical rationality and its preoccupation with efficiency, instrumentality and means over ends. The anti-positivist stance which is characteristic of the theory derives not so much from being anti-science, but from a recognition that modern-day science has lost its connection with politics and ethics, which checks the excesses of posi-
tivism. In this critique, technical rationality is regarded as the dominant force in the modern world and as one, which must be challenged in the name of emancipation.

4. The study of culture is central to critical theory, for culture provides a focus for understanding and shaping the possibilities of autonomy and independence from technical and practical interests. In particular, critical theory is drawn to the domain of aesthetics because of its capacity to transcend the economic sphere and to produce oppositional forms of cultural production.

However, the form of critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School of the 1930s was justifiably criticised, by Habermas, as pertaining to hybrid German philosophical traditions. Notably, Habermas viewed the Frankfurt School’s critical theory as restrictively rooted in the polarised politics of past decades. He was adamant that critical theory needed to move beyond the Frankfurt School and continue to develop the project of Enlightenment in order to fit within the driving theories of modernity.

Critical theory differs from post-modern approaches to social theory. Postmodern theorists tend to argue that modernity has ended, or that modernity must be rejected in its totality. Postmodernists may even reject social theory and political practice whereas critical theorists tend to theorize extensively and some argue that politics can be used to pursue progress. Critical theorists generally tend to have a comprehensive and overall social theory and an idea of progress and a better world. In contrast, a post-modern approach is more likely to be associated with rejection of comprehensive universal theory.

Habermas and Critical Theory

Jurgen Habermas, the major heir of the Frankfurt school of philosophy, developed an exposition of the ‘interests’ which not only make culture and society possible but also directs our research for knowledge: ‘technical’ interest, ‘practical’ interest and ‘emanicipatory’ interest. The scope of Habermas’s work is immense, ranging from political polemics to intensely theoretical discourses on hermeneutics. Through all his work, Habermas reflects the characteristic distrust critical theory has for positivism or scientism. He regards the growth of science, technology and bureaucratisation as combining state power and capitalist control in a way that provokes crisis: a crisis of legitimation (stemming from the impotence of ‘authorities’): a crisis a motivation (stemming from the powerlessness of the individual): and a crisis of identity (stemming from a lack of sense of collective identity).

According to Rasmussen (1990), Habermas’s dismissal of positivism has a sub-text:

Behind the Hegelian paradigm [of Habermas’s work] lies Kant, the Kant of the first and particularly second critiques. In this view, the problem of democracy is definitely not a problem of
communities or of history: the problem of democracy is essentially one of justification to be explicated by the logic or argumentation. Perhaps the reason for this move lies neither in the texts of Kant nor of Hegel, but in those of Marx. The [Habermasian] task has been to reconstruct the unfinished project of modernity by this wedding of the best of Marxism and democratic theory in such a manner that the problem of democracy, as the problem of language, as the problem of morality, as the problem of law, becomes a problem of justification.

(113)

Through his critique of late capitalism, Habermas goes beyond Marx’s analysis of the crisis tendencies of ‘classical’ capitalism. Habermas identifies one aspect of contemporary culture as its reliance on the technocratic/bureaucratic expert who thrives on efficiency, which derives from the technique’s relentless quest for a controlled environment, all this in close alliance with what are perceived as marketplace imperatives of technology’s peculiar view of rationality and effectiveness, of progress and even of meaning. Habermas calls this form of rationality ‘instrumental rationality’. He argues that the all-pervasive inner logic of instrumental rationality has even begun to take over other areas of human culture. Throughout his theories he argues that, the criterion of instrumentality is applied to more and more relationships, replacing reflective or communicative modes as the dominant mode of human interaction with the world. Instrumentality thus, derives from ‘the technical interest’, which is evidence of the basic human need to control and manage the environment. According to the Habermasian critique, this cultural change has transformed human institutions. In particular, it has provoked a crisis in politics, and a crisis for the state so that the scope of politics becomes basically reduced to a question of who can run the economy best, which he describes as a matter of technical decision-making. Sport management has become enmeshed in this crisis and is now an object of this same pragmatic, technical decision-making: a prisoner of technocratic values. These values are also the values of the marketplace and managerialism: competition, efficiency, utility, performance indicators, practicability, and profitability.

In his more recent work Habermas’ methodological approach is derived from his “theory of social evolution”. This is abstract and complex, but can be understood by reference of three key interrelated variables. These are what he calls a “life-world”, “systems” and “language decentration” (cf. Giddens, 1979; Habermas, (1981a/1984; 1981b/1987). The life-world is, to Habermas, a type of cultural space that gives meaning and nature to societal life. Whilst separate and distinct from the more tangible (technical) visible “system” it is the social reality, which gives these systems meaning and attempts to guide their behaviour through “steering mechanisms”. In terms of our profession, sport systems become the “self-regulating action contexts which co-ordinate actions around specific mechanisms or media, such as money or power” (Thompson, 1983, p. 285). They are, in this sense,
distinct elements whilst at the same time intended to be the tangible expression of the cultural life-world. In this instance the management of sport. We argue, like Habermas language decentration traces the way individuals develop their language skills, which to Habermas, enables the differentiation of the life-world and systems and the development of both.

Habermas separates two historical learning processes and forms of rationality. He argues for the systematic improvement of the lifeworld through an expanded conception of rationality focusing on the creation and re-creation of patterns of meaning. The lifeworld can be regarded as fully rational - rather than instrumentalized or strategized - to the extent that it permits interactions that are guided by communicatively achieved understanding rather than by imperatives from the system world.

This works for us as communicatively achieved understanding is dependent on undistorted communication, the presence of free discussion based on goodwill, argumentation and dialogue. In the management sense all perspectives valued by the good leader. On the basis of undistorted rational discussion it is assumed that consensus can be reached regarding both present and desirable states. Undistorted communication in the context of sport management can provide the basis for the ‘highest’ form of rationality, namely communicative rationality.

Communicative rationality denotes a way of responding to (questioning, testing and, possibly, accepting) the validity of different claims within the workforce. Communicative action thus allows for the exploration of every statement on a basis of the following (universal) and widely used management criteria: comprehensibility, sincerity, truthfulness and legitimacy. Communicative action is therefore an important aspect of social interaction in society, an important aspect of sport management practice, which are also found in other social institutions and in daily life. Communication in the area of sport and the ideal speech situation, which enables communicative rationality is in turn pervaded by it, and exists under the following conditions: ‘the structure of communication itself produces no constraints if and only if, for all possible participants, there is a symmetrical distribution of chances to choose and to apply the speech-act’ (Habermas, cited by Hesse 1982, p. 113). This philosophy is juxtaposed to the manner in which we currently approach sport management practices.

The impact of the work of Habermas has been felt both directly and indirectly by sport management theorists. Critical theory recognises than an emancipated society is one in which human beings actively control their own destinies, through a heightened understanding of the circumstances in which they live. After all sport is an important part of our culture and in this context critical theory encourages self-criticism and continuing critique of sport management through a praxis method, which implies emancipation from ideological dogmatism and the transformation of authoritarian systems.
through democratic communication processes.

The End of Critical Theory?

Over the years Habermas has raised the stakes for critical theorizing and has brought its fundamental epistemological problem into the open in a paradox of self-grounding. In order to be “critical” such theories must be relatively external to the ideas and institutions which currently prevail; they cannot share too much of the conceptual framework of the objects of critique in order to count as ‘critical’. But equally critical theory cannot entirely sever its links to this framework since it emerges as its radical self-reflection. (For Horkheimer and Adorno the ‘framework’ in question was the enlightenment tradition.) Critical theorizing must also attach itself imminently to ideas and institutions in order to express a “not-yet-realized” and counterfactual potential within them, otherwise it remains merely utopian. We are not arguing here that the discipline of sport management is utopian but it does have some utilitarian principles. It is this dialectical tension in sport management research between the possible and the actual, between validity and facticity, which lies at the heart of all political theorizing but which is particularly acute for critical theory. Connerton (1980) expresses the difficulty for critical theory in terms of its need to appeal to, and on behalf of a “critical public sphere which is never firmly localized” (p.137). The same can be said for sport management where it is yet to be placed into the critical public sphere thereby being condemned for its absence.

Critical theory has always been self-conscious of its status as mere argument, of certain remoteness from the practices on the ‘far side of discourse’. Sport management has itself a remote nature existing on the outskirts of the management profession and by its very nature is still in its infancy in terms of theorizing and methodological development. This is reflected in critical theory where Habermas has developed and refined the theory of communicative action, his status as a critical theorist in its classic sense has become more problematic especially as the grounding process appealed to abstract communicative principles. Abstract principles that are difficult for the layperson to comprehend, hence the one of the central difficulties of critical theory research.

Hoy and McCarthy (1994) took a sustained critique of the Habermasian project. Their point of departure consists of two questions: What is ‘critical’ about critical theory? And must one have a ‘theory’ in order to be critical? Against Habermas, they argued that universalism contributes nothing whatsoever to the ‘critical’ force of critical theory. Relatedly, they are highly sceptical of the idea that criticism needs theory at all. For Hoy and McCarthy, Habermas’s universal pragmatics (critical theory) comes out much the worse for its encounter with Foucault’s genealogy (critical history). Similar objections are marshalled from a hermeneutic perspective against the abstract theoreticism and
homogenizing universalism of Habermas’s project.

Whereas the primary concern of Hoy and McCarthy (1994) was to initiate an academic debate, Bronner’s (1994) aim was to save critical theory from academic normalization. His work is a forceful reminder that traditional theorists have only interpreted the world, but the point for the critical theorist, is to change it. It is our intention to place the notion of change clearly in the sport management spectrum.

The most frequent, and perhaps potent, accusation made against critical theory is the charge that it is biased toward the negative; that it does not move beyond the identification of gaps, contradictions and incompleteness. However, as Henry Giroux (1983) points out, “The conflict and contradiction in various cultural spheres is as much a source of opportunity for transcendence as the general or overall form of such spheres may be a cause for critique” (p. 55). While the identification of contradictions is traditionally involved in any kind of methodological critique, the dialectical nature of critical theory provides opportunities for this identification of contradictions to initiate sociological change and move beyond existing states of development. Critical theorists and researchers speak to contradictions between theory and known experience by stating:

As contradictions are revealed, new constructive thinking and new constructive action are required to transcend the contradictory state of affairs . . . In the dialectical approach, the elements are regarded as mutually constitutive, not separate and distinct. Contradiction can thus be distinguished from the paradox: to speak of a contradiction is to imply that a new resolution can be achieved, while to speak of a paradox is to suggest that two incompatible ideas remain inertly opposed to one another. (Giroux, 1983, p.36)

Critical theorists therefore attempt to reposition themselves to see the world from the perspectives of those who are not dominant and direct their work towards positive social change.

**Critical Theory in Organisation and Management Research**

As mentioned previously, researchers in organization and management studies came to critical theory writings relatively late, with critical theory emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Benson, 1977; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Frost, 1980; Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Fischer & Sirianni, 1984). However, part of the reason critical theorists have now found fertile ground in management studies is the decline and disillusionment of what is broadly referred to as modernist assumptions by both organizational theorists and practitioners. There is no reason why sport management cannot embrace the concepts in the same way as mainstream management theorists have taken to the theory. For example, Parker (2002) suggests that a Habermasian interpretation of the organisational change process can be highlighted by an examination of Laughlin’s (1991) typology of organisational change. Laughlin’s (1991) suggested
that an organisation will change only when disturbed, kicked, or forced into doing something. Once the organisation undergoes an environmental disturbance the type of change can either be morphostasis (first order) or morphogenesis (second order) change.

According to Laughlin (1991,) with first order change, an environmental disturbance is met by rebuttal or reorientation. In both cases, the fundamental values or beliefs of the organisation do not change. In a sport management context this opinion is supported by the work of Skinner, Stewart and Edwards (1999) who applied Laughlin's model to gain an understanding of the changes that have occurred in rugby union in Australia over the last 30 years. Skinner et al. suggested that rebuttal in rugby union occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to a general increase in the commercialisation of sport in Australia. The response of rugby union administrators in Australia to the general commercialisation of sport was to externalise these forces. As a result, these forces had no major impact on the stability and fundamental amateur principles by which rugby union was managed.

Reorientation, according Skinner et al. (1999), arose as a consequence of the emergence of trust payments for rugby union players in the early 1990s and their subsequent impact on the management of the sport. The development of this structure to accumulate, monitor, and devolve financial rewards to representative players was a clear indication that rugby union administrators in Australia were adapting internally to a changing environment. However, the arrangement had little effect on the values of the majority of players and administrators and therefore, the cultural principles that underpinned the sport of rugby union in Australia remained intact.

It is in his analysis of second order change that Laughlin (1991) draws heavily on some aspects of Habermas’s (1981a/1984; 1981b/1987) critical theory about the various ways organisations change, and can be changed. Specifically Laughlin adopts Habermas’ model of societal development at a micro-organisational level. The model is abstract and complex, and makes reference to three key interrelated variables. As previously discussed in greater detail, these are what Habermas calls a “life-world”, “systems” and “language decentration” (Giddens, 1979; Habermas, 1981a/1984; 1981b/1987). Through the application of Habermas’s model of societal development Laughlin (1991) distinguished between two types of second order change. Colonisation is differentiated from evolutionary change by the degree of undistorted communication that exists in determining the organisational change process. Colonisation is forced on the organisation by an initial environmental disturbance. As a consequence of the change however, organisational members may not agree upon the new values and beliefs that have been suggested to guide the organisation in the future. This type of change is consequently seen as potentially regressive.
According to Skinner et al. (1999), colonisation was forced upon rugby union administrators in Australia in 1995 as a consequence of two simultaneous environmental disturbances. First, the Super League/Australian Rugby League conflict, and second, after a prolonged battle between the rebel WRC organisation, and the Australian Rugby Football Union, New Zealand Rugby Football Union, and the South African Rugby Football Union over control of the game, a pay-TV deal with News Limited was agreed upon and massive sums of money were injected into the game, the majority of which was to be controlled by the players. As a consequence rugby union officials had to look to other revenue sources in order to maintain a viable organisation. This created a financial crisis for rugby union and resulted in a shift in cultural values and the formalisation of roles and accountability that would guide the future management of rugby union in Australia.

On the other hand, evolutionary change embodies an open and free discourse about where the organisation is going (Laughlin, 1991). It is seen to be the most desirable form of change as it is the outcome of agreed major shifts in organisational interpretive schemes. Change of this description assumes that environmental disturbances lead to new interpretive schemes being chosen and accepted by all organisational participants freely and without coercion. This leads to a common organisational vision based upon shared values. Through this explanation of the evolutionary change process Laughlin established two points that need to be taken into account. First, change of this nature may take years to complete. Second, it is only through undistorted rational discussion that consensus can be reached regarding both present and desirable states of organisational change.

Skinner et al. (1999) suggest that rugby union in Australia is currently undergoing an evolutionary change process. They note that the environmental disturbances of 1995 were, in the first instance opposed, but the strength of the disturbance forced the rugby union administrators to change the way the sport was managed. However, Skinner et al. suggest that the process didn’t end there, as the impetus created an environment within rugby union circles that resulted in rational discussion about the rugby union’s new purpose. The change process, in Laughlin’s (1991) terms, became more evolutionary. There was a general consensus about the direction change should take, an approach that supports the Habermasian (1981a/1984; 1981b/1987) critical theoretical interpretation of organisational change. That is, evolutionary change can only happen dialogically, there needs to be dialogue that exposes the nature and purpose of the organisation, dialogue that exposes new possibilities for change, and dialogue that exposes the process of change.

It is clear that approaches such as the one undertaken by Skinner et al. (1999) highlight how critical theory can be applied to organisation and management research. Sport management researchers therefore need to build on such ap-
proaches and further embrace the critical sport management research that is occurring in sport sociology.

For example, recently Sugden & Tomlinson (2002) released an edited collection of attempts at ‘critical approaches’ entitled: Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport. The unifying theme of their approach is to “seek to make sense of power relations through an informed critical gaze, and, a commitment to qualitative empirical research and its interpretation through a range of theoretical arguments” (p.x). Furthermore, the editors express a desire to “[reconnect] the academic analysis of sport and leisure to a wider policy agenda and the processes of social change and political reform” (p.x). Critical of the ‘standpoint epistemology’ which characterises postmodern and post-structuralist work on the basis of “the pitfalls of cultural relativism” (p. 16), they subscribe to a quest for “sociological truth” (p. 18). The marginalized discourses they seek to advocate, they insist, “must themselves by re-evaluated through the metalanguage of social science” (p. 17). However, in the genre of critical theory it is not entirely clear that their approach is critical, nevertheless it is a recent attempt to reconceptualise sport.

We believe that sport management researchers wishing to explore the possibilities of research located within critical theory perspectives should be encouraged to take the view that the interpretations, values and interests of the participants are central to the research process. Truths are grasped, not by eliminating subjectivity, but through the intersubjectivity of subject and object, as meaning through dialogue emerges. In this way participants and researchers are recognized as part of the social world that they study. The researcher may take a facilitative role, allowing the participants to define the research problem or, alternatively, develop a research design that acknowledges an intimate relationship between the researcher and participants. Participative and collaborative research designs, such as action research and critical ethnography are seen to allow an empowering and emancipatory role for this type of research research. These two types of methods will now be discussed to illustrate their application in sport management research.

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography constitutes an alternative to traditional ethnographic research. Critical ethnography is aligned with critical theory as exemplified by Habermas and the Frankfurt School, and Carr and Kemmis (1986) where there is focus on emancipation from social oppression. Simon and Dippo (1986) argue that for work to be critical it must meet three fundamental requirements:

1. The work must employ an organising problematic that defines one’s data and analytical procedures in a way consistent with its project;
2. The work must be situated, in part, with a public sphere that allows it to become the starting point for the cri-
tique and transformation of the conditions of oppression and inequitable moral and social regulations; and

3. The work must address the limits of its own claims to be a consideration of how, as a form of social practice, it too is constituted and regulated through historical relations of power and existing material conditions (p. 197).

An example of a critical ethnographic approach to the hegemonic practices that exclude women undertaking leadership roles within sporting organizations is one conducted by Edwards, Skinner and O'Keefe (2000). The voices of women sport managers have long been ignored and marginalised in the literature. In an analysis of their leadership experience Edwards et al., conducted a critical ethnography of the dominant practices and political discourses that exist within sporting organizations that can restrict and inhibit the potential for women sport managers to manage effectively.

In the context of the research by Edwards et al., (2000), empowerment of the marginalised (such as women) was not a product of the work of the researchers who, as the 'transformative intellectuals', assisted participants to realise the falsity of their views, and to adopt the use of the researchers' critical discourse or that of a new shared reality. Rather, empowerment involved the research participants in an exploration of the politics of production of their knowledge. Having women sport managers examine the political nature of their sport organizations the possibility for enhanced insights into the hegemonic practices that existed was achieved.

**Action Research**

The intellectual origins of action research can be traced back through Schwab's (1999) concept of practical reasoning. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, Schon's (1983) reflective practitioner, and to Lewin who coined the term 'action research' (Kemmis, 1995). However, the history of action research over the last 50 years is complex containing many strands, emphases, nuances and variations between national and operational contexts.

Recent developments in action research have been strongly influenced by Habermas. Habermas (1971) saw three kinds of cognitive interests inherent in the way in which knowledge is constituted, which for Habermas meant that knowing could not be a dis-interested act. These cognitive interests are: (a) Technical — which corresponds to the adaptation of knowledge to 'technical dispositions, i.e. the empirical-analytical sciences; (b) Practical — which corresponds to the adaptations of knowledge 'to the arrangements of practical life'; (c) Emancipatory — which corresponds to the adaptation of knowledge to 'emancipation from naturalist constraint', (Habermas, 1971). The influence of Habermas can be seen in the terminology. The new generation of action research distinguishes three types of ac-
tion research: (1) emancipatory, (2) practical, and (3) technical (MacTaggart, 1991), which will now be briefly outlined.

**Emancipatory Action Research**

MacTaggart (1991) defines emancipatory action research in two ways. First, as “[involving] a group of practitioners accepting responsibility for its ‘own emancipation’ from the dictates of irrationality, injustice, alienation and unfulfilment”. Second, as “the activity of a self-leading group aimed at developing new practices and/or changing the constraints with a shared radical consciousness” (p. 30).

**Practical Action Research**

In a practical action research project the aim is the ultimate autonomy of the profession practitioners themselves to conceive and implement projects on their own. To be critically informed self-reflecting practitioners.

**Technical Action Research**

Technical action research consists of a researcher who within the context of a topic of interest will either construct and define a problem or have a problem defined by a client. The researcher will then formulate the methodology to be used and conduct the research. The data gathered would then be interpreted and analysed by the researcher, who will then write up the research, which will add to existing knowledge by outlining the new practices to be implemented (Kemmis, 1995).

Another form of action research — Participatory Action Research (PAR) — should also be highlighted. PAR seems to encompass facets of technical, practical and emancipatory action research. That is, first it is usually defined as being participatory yet the degree of participation and equality are not set. Second, there is usually a degree of facilitation, and third, the problem may be defined by the researcher (MacTaggart, 1989).

An emancipatory action research design can be highlighted through the work of Edwards (2002). Edwards was concerned with mapping the social and discursive practices of a series of sport management environments to develop an understanding of how these practices were productive and regulative forms of social actions. His task was to understand how sport managers produce, and are produced by such practices. In doing so, he argues that what is available and legitimate to sport managers is not arbitrary but socially regulated, both in terms of the immediate content of the work environment, as well as socially and historically. The workplace practices to which sport managers are exposed therefore influence and limit their positioning within the workplace context.

The work of Edwards (2002) supports the views of Carr and Kemmis (1986) who suggest that emancipatory action research should focus on:

- bridging the gap between theory and practice;
- the epistemological understanding that the practitioners possess valid knowledge;
• participation and equality of those involved within the situation;
• practitioners critically reflecting on their own practices;
• the empowerment of the practitioners;
• democratically chosen actions are implemented;
• communication, which implies dialogues between participants; and
• a cyclic process of ‘planning, action, observation and reflection’.

Approaches such as Edwards’ (2002) emancipatory action research project therefore provide an alternative to traditional forms of research designed to improve sport management practices within their environment.

By extending their research activities to include critical theory, sport management academics may be brought into more direct contact with their colleagues in practice. This should enable them to establish whether sport management is a profession whose members commonly have access to opportunities to exercise a considerable degree of power and influence, or, as is possibly the case, a profession in which most individuals are simply doing a job under conditions over which they have little or no control. It will also allow critical sport management researchers to learn of the reservations which their colleagues in practice have about the work they are involved in and the particular aspects of their professional lives which they find the most distressing or oppressive.

For the critical sport management researcher, impact on practice is an issue to be addressed throughout the research rather than after the study is completed. Therefore, for the critical theory paradigm, the question is not “does research affect practice?” but “does this research empower participants to change their lives?” The primary focus is on impact in the specific setting in which the research was conducted. However, critical theorists do choose to publish their work with the intention that it has a broader impact. The hope is not that the results can be directly applied in other settings but that reading the study will inspire others to critically examine their own circumstances. The research dissemination process seeks to provide ‘consciousness-raising’ experiences for the reader.

**Conclusion**

In sport management we have engaged in self-examination, introspection and, most often, self-criticism. We have looked to find ways in which we might gain ‘improved standards of practice’ and we have largely treated questions of practice as technical questions to be answered empirically. Improvements have been seen to lie in manipulation of various factors within the institution of sport management itself, factors such as sport management education and practice.

Within sport management we have extolled the virtues of solid research and formal theoretical base. We have developed expertise in research, education and administration and have begun to talk about, although seldom acknowledg-
edged in any real way, expert sport management practice. We have, how-
ever, given little attention to questions of explanation - what is it that we are really doing as sport managers, why is it that we and others act in the ways that we do, how did the state of affairs that we experience come to exist, are there other possibilities in the ways that we can understand and act in our worlds?

Much of this is symptomatic of the dominant technical rationality that pervades our existence. Such rationality is not itself questioned; nor are the practices and relationships which such a rationality perpetuates, and by which it is maintained. Although many of us have begun to find virtue in political awareness we have largely limited our concerns to technical manipulation of, and within, existing structures without addressing in any real way the legitimacy of these structures and relationships.

We hear sport managers talk about professionalisation, the control of practice the development of a distinct body of knowledge and so on. Indeed, we have identified professionalisation, autonomy, and control of practice as perhaps the key issues facing us today. Yet, in relation to the discourse of professionalisation in sport management change is generally seen as needing to occur within sport management itself, in isolation from any real consideration of wider institutional structures.

Critical theory encourages us to focus on sport management as a personally and socially constructed activity. We are asked to examine our understandings of and in the institution of sport management in terms of the ways in which such understandings, and hence practice itself, may have been, and be, shaped by social and political factors that are external to the act of sport management itself.

As sport managers, we can begin to critically engage in critical examinations of our worlds by asking such questions as:

• To what extent does what we “know” personally of — and believe about our sport management worlds — reflective of the ways we would wish to conceive our practice?
• To what extent are our actions shaped by forces external to ourselves and to sport management?
• To what extent are our sport management understandings beliefs, experiences, practices contradictory?
• To what extent is what we believe (or say we believe, or would wish to believe) about practice supported by present institutional structures and relationships?
• Whose interests do the present state of affairs serve? How did it come to be this way? How is it perpetuated? In what way do we ourselves contribute to the maintenance of the status quo?
• What is the nature of the discourses that we presently engage in? To what extent are these discourses politicised and to what extent do they simply serve to mystify and maintain existing, unjust relations of power and domination?
• What other possibilities are there for us in the reconstruction of our sport management worlds?

Critical theory then, in its concern with the ways in which human being are not only shaped by the circumstances of their own existence but actually shape them promises to move sport management theory beyond a socio-historical determinism. This move is away from the reification of social constructions; away from the portrayal of existing social orders relationships and practices as 'natural' 'inevitable', 'immutable' - the only 'logical' way of ordering our existence.

Critical theorists alert us to the notion that knowledge and human beings' construct forms of social existence and hence that they are interested, that is they serve particular, identifiable human interest (Habermas, 1971). They also alert us to the possibility that the very means of interpretation and communication may be dominated by particular groupings in a given social order. As such the interests of dominant groupings may be maintained at the expense of the interests of others not only by direct coercion but also by the force of intellectual and moral leadership.

Critical theory exposes to us our power to shape rather than simply be shaped by our social forms of existence. It is concerned with exploring the tension between the given (what exists, or what we understand to exist) and the possible, that is between the ways in which our life worlds are presently constructed and the ways that they could be constructed. Critical theorising then promises us the opportunity to come to a cognitive understanding of our worlds particularly our social existence, and in so doing move beyond the dominant social order, to reconstruct our worlds in just and liberating ways.

In sport management, a critical praxis can facilitate freedom for sport managers to question what is knowledge, how we know and who provides the evidence. Habermas (1971) contended that critical theory helps to uncover what ought to be done in order to create and to support self-reflection. Without critical reflection, patterns of communication and socialization are reproduced and inevitably determine the theoretical and research traditions that are perpetuated without being challenged.

By analysing how and why embedded assumptions guide theory development, research and practice, sport managers can begin to describe and explain oppressive effects. Habermas (1981a/1984) contends that researchers have a responsibility to identify constraining circumstances in society and to assist in liberation from oppressive structures. Determination can be made as to whether goals can be achieved through critical praxis and self-reflection. The process of critical reflection is praxis, because the ends and the means are directed toward transformation. Critical approaches promise us the possibility of examining our sport management worlds in terms of moral and political as well as simply technical concerns. In accepting the political, interested nature of our activities we are provided with the
conceptual tools to theorise our practice, and to reconstruct it. We believe that such theorising is long overdue.

It would be accurate to suggest that critical theory has not been a dominant mode of research in sport management. However, the impact of critical theory is increasing and critical theory research has appeared in sport management journals and has been presented at sport management conferences (Chalip, 1996; Frisby & Crawford, 1994; Skinner et al, 1999), as such, it would appear that critical theory is a fertile ground for sport management research.

References


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