**WHAT IS RESEARCH? (Lecture 2) Dated: 28-10-2017**

 Introduce the concept of ‘research’.

■ Discuss some of the reasons why we undertake research.

■ Outline the different types of research.

■ Describe how to approach the reading of research articles.

Research – ‘Any honest attempt to study a problem systematically or to add to man’s knowledge of a problem may be regarded as research.’ (Theodorson and Theodorson 1969 cited in Reber 1995, p.663)

The aim, as far as I can see, is the same in all sciences. Put simply and cursorily, the aim is to make known something previously unknown to human beings. It is to advance human knowledge, to make it more certain or better fitting . . . the aim is, as I have said, discovery. (Elias 1986, p.20)

**INTRODUCTION**

Imagine that you are competing in a major sporting event. How are you going to approach this occasion? There will be two basic ways you can do so. First, you can simply not worry, and hope everything goes well on the day, and hope that whatever tactics you come up with are successful. Alternatively you can spend time training specifically for the event, by learning appropriate strategies and tactics, finding out the strengths and weaknesses of your opposition, finding out how others have fared against them in the past, and coming up with a detailed game plan based on the evidence that you collect. It is likely that the second method will give you the best chance of succeeding, and that the first option will leave you at best under prepared, leaving the result of the competition down to luck (at least on your side . . . it is likely that your opponents will have chosen the second alternative!).

**Now consider the following questions about sport:**

■ Why do we participate in sport?

■ What influences us in the types of sport that we choose to play or watch?

■ How important is sport in social or economic terms?

These are just some of the questions that a student, sports manager, administrator, coach or sports enthusiast may be interested in. Again, these and other such questions about sport may be answered in two ways. The first way is through guesswork, personal opinion, and unreliable evidence and so on. Obviously this is not a satisfactory means to suggest answers upon which to base provision, policies, strategies, recommendations and so on. The second way they may be answered is through a logical, systematic approach, designed to maximise your chances of success, or, in other words, through undertaking research. Research implies ‘a careful and systematic means of solving problems’ (Thomas and Nelson 2001, p.3). It is the lifeblood of any academic discipline, and is the fundamental basis for our knowledge about sport. As Daniel Wann (1997) suggests: ‘Quality research is the lifeblood of any scientific discipline. Without it, disciplines would decline, failing to advance past their current limits and understanding’.

In an area such as sport, which – despite its enormous social, economic, cultural and political significance – has emerged relatively recently as an area of academic interest, research is vital. Our knowledge about sport is substantial. We do know, for example, that most individuals are socialised into sport through their parents, schools, peers and the mass media. We know that sport performs a number of social functions, for example socio-emotional, political or integrative. We know that sport is big business, and that the money involved in both consumer and corporate spending on sport is increasing year on year. We know this because these are just some of the wide range of questions that have formed the basis for research projects in sport. Even a brief examination of some of the recent issues of research-based journals such as the Sociology of Sport Journal, or the Journal of Sport Management will provide an illustration of the variety and scale of sport research that has been, and is currently being, undertaken.

**WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘RESEARCH’?**

Before embarking on the various methods and techniques of research, it is important to spend a bit more time considering what we actually mean by the term ‘research’. A brief examination of different research methods we will soon demonstrate the variety of different definitions of research, each definition correct in its own way.

Rather than spend time debating the merits of others’ definitions, we shall use a relatively simple definition of our own at this stage, suggesting that:

Research is a systematic process of discovery and advancement of human knowledge.

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH**

These include the following:

**1** Research is generated by a specific research question, hypothesis or problem.

**2** Research follows a specific plan or procedure – the research process.

**3** Research aims at increasing understanding by interpreting facts and reaching conclusions based on those facts.

**4** Research requires reasoned argument to support conclusions.

**5** Research is reiterative – it is based on previous knowledge, which it aims to advance, but it may also develop further research questions.

Research is, therefore, more than simply searching for facts. As we suggested earlier, research is a systematic investigation to answer a question. Many people associate research simply with methods of data collection such as interviews and questionnaire surveys. Data collection is just one part of a wider process, however, and other stages are equally important. Five important stages can be identified:

**1**. The stage before data collection, where the researcher decides upon the research question, the aim of the research, the research objectives and the theoretical framework that underlies the research.

**2**. The stage of designing how to collect the data to answer the question, or the research design.

**3**. The actual data collection stage, where the data is collected by one or more research methods.

**4**. The analysis of the data – with reference to the theoretical framework adopted – to answer the question.

**5.** The reporting of the research to communicate the findings to others.

These are all part of what can be termed the research process. The research process refers to the various parts of the overall process that guides a research project.

Much of our knowledge about sport is based upon research carried out by others. By undertaking systematic investigation into certain areas, we have increased our knowledge about sport dramatically in recent years. The ways in which knowledge can be advanced by research are outlined by Hussey and Hussey (1997), who summarise the different purposes of research as follows:

■ To investigate some existing situation or problem.

■ To provide solutions to a problem.

■ To explore and analyse more general issues.

■ To construct or create a new procedure or system.

■ To explain a new phenomenon.

■ To generate new knowledge.

■ A combination of two or more of any of the above.

Each of these can be fruitfully applied to many different aspects of sport. A further – and equally valid – purpose of research is to allow you to engage with some aspect of sport that interests you, so that you can add to existing knowledge as a personal achievement. Carrying out research into a specific area is one of the best ways to develop your own understanding of a particular area of interest.

**THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH**

Four general types exist, these being referred to as exploratory, descriptive, explanatory and predictive.

■ **Exploratory research**.

Exploratory research takes place where there is little or no prior knowledge of a phenomenon. Thus, there is a need for an initial exploration before more specific research can be undertaken. This type of research looks for clues about the phenomenon, attempts to gain some familiarity with the appropriate concepts and looks for patterns or ideas emerging from the data without any preconceived ideas or explanation. A researcher undertaking an investigation into the effects of the Internet upon sports organisations, for example, may well be undertaking exploratory research, as there are unlikely to be any well-established theoretical models available. Exploratory research is generally followed up by further research that tests any ideas or hypotheses generated.

**Descriptive research**.

Descriptive research describes a particular phenomenon, focusing upon the issue of what is happening, rather than why it is happening. Thus, research to find out how many people attended the 2002 Winter Olympics, and whether more males than females attended, would be 6 what is research? an example of descriptive research. There is no attempt to explain the results obtained.

**Explanatory research**.

This type of research is involved in explaining why something happens, and assessing causal relationships between variables. Thus, a researcher interested in why more males attended the 2002 Winter Olympics would be undertaking explanatory research. Explanatory research requires some sort of theoretical framework so that explanation may be deduced from the data (theoretical and conceptual framework.

**Predictive research**.

Predictive research forecasts future phenomena, based on the interpretations suggested by explanatory research. Thus, the findings from the explanatory research cited above may be used to predict gender differences in attendance during the 2006 Winter Olympics.