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*Event Management*, Vol. 19, pp. 93–107
Printed in the USA. 

1525-9951/15 $60.00 + .00
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3727/152599515X14229071393061
E-ISSN 1943-4308
www.cognizantcommunication.com

# REVIEW OF ESTABLISHED METHODS IN EVENT RESEARCH

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In reviewing 165 of the most prominent event articles, this article provides a timely evaluation of prevalent research methods that have shaped event research in the past 16 years. We adopt critical case sampling and citation analysis approaches to identify 21 journals and the 165 articles. We subsequently analyzed the content of each article to reveal the method(s) used and classified these by journal and by year. To facilitate discussion about the findings, the article initially appraises the character of the event phenomenon and the implications of this for methods selection. This discussion portrays a largely social and contingent character to events that presents specific requirements to researchers seeking to interrogate it. The discussion pinpoints key considerations that should shape event researchers' decisions about their selection of methods. The findings reveal a preponderance of survey-based approaches and also very limited adoption of multiple methods. The findings also indicate a less prominent, but growing, application of subjectivist-oriented approaches, such as interviews, indicating a progressive trend that is discussed as being more favorable to the character of the subject matter. Ultimately we provide six precepts that emerge from this study, to signpost key considerations for event researchers as our discipline moves beyond the early stages of its development toward a more mature phase.

Key words: Event research; Research methods; Survey; Interviews; Focus groups; Observation

## Introduction

Recently, some of the most eminent writers in the events field have charted the increased number, size, scope, and significance of events (Bowdin, Allen, Harris, O'Toole, & McDonnell, 2011; Getz, 2012; Richards, 2013). This "event inflation," as Richards (2013) brands it, unsurprisingly coincides with heightened academic interest in planned events as scholars seek to interpret the event sphere to underpin conceptual development and pedagogy. Consequently, event research flourishes and the "new and immature" face of event research that Getz depicted in the Events Beyond Conference in 2000 (discussed in Mair & Whitfield, 2013) now approaches a more mature phase in its development. Therefore, 13 years after the inauguration of the journal *Event Management* it seems timely to critically appraise the dominant methods that shape the generation of knowledge in published event research.

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A number of writers in recent years have placed a spotlight upon the prevailing themes and topics focused upon by event scholars (Getz, 2009; Mair & Whitfield, 2013). Yet, other than Lee and Back (2005), who looked specifically at convention and meeting research methods from 1990 to 2003, there has been an absence of work that looks at the dominant research methods. Indeed, Mair and Whitfield (2013) conclude by acknowledging the value of future work that focuses on the research methods employed by event scholars. This article responds to the challenge, and through a systematic review of 165 articles it provides an opportunity to reflect upon the prevalent research methods that event scholars have adopted.

Delving into the vast reserve of literature debating research philosophies, methodologies, and methods there is a time-honored argument that the research approach employed by researchers directly shapes the knowledge generated (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Inherent within this argument is the thought-provoking notion that the application of other methods would, quite possibly, reveal different results, leading to the publishing of alternate knowledge. Perhaps this alternate knowledge is subtly different, maybe improved, but equally it could divulge wholly dissimilar outcomes. Consequently, it should be recognized that the wisdom readers glean from research is predisposed to the subtleties of the methods used, which will vary dependent upon variables such as researcher preference, practical constraints, and the specifics of the research question. Disparity of approach is inevitable, but in order to best generate knowledge the overall patchwork of methods that comprise events research should be aligned with the complexion of the subject matter (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). In the case of events that, as described below, are characteristically experiential and multiactor, there is an obvious challenge to ensure methods are fit for purpose so that we can adequately interrogate this phenomenon that we all study.

The rigor of the event knowledge espoused in empirically based research articles is thus reliant upon the application of an appropriate assortment of methods by event researchers. The content of this article therefore provides a reflexive opportunity, for the event researcher community, to critically consider their preferences and the methods that have prevailed in our research area. In our discussion we critically question aspects of the findings that we reveal, not to diminish existing work but to signpost the evolution of event research as we move beyond the early stages and enter a more mature phase. The above narrative provokes a legitimate question about the foremost methods in event research and thus challenges the event community to positively question our own choices as we shape the future of event research.

Before engaging in the core debate an inadvertent, yet noteworthy, finding that emerged from our inquiry was a general absence of transparency in event articles relating to the authors' philosophical and methodological commitments. Walshaw (1995) argues that such a declaration is needed as researchers are inescapably value laden, and by openly declaring their own values they will more transparently reveal the voice of the researched. Inherent in Walshaw's argument is that a researcher's underlying views mean they play a distorting role in the extraction of knowledge. Therefore, more openness relating to the authors' own commitments will provide the reader with a more transparent and critical lens through which to make their own judgments (Alvesson & Willmott, 1988; Johnson, Buehring, Cassell, & Symon, 2006). Although research philosophy is not the focal point of this article it would seem appropriate to concede to Walshaw's (1995) appeal and declare our position.

We embrace a subjectivist perspective, judging that reality is socially constructed, not objectively determined, and therefore multiple realities exist. This stance means the social phenomena we experience, such as an event, are the creation of a social reality from our own perception and cognition—"the 'out there' has no real independent status because in knowing the social world, we create it" (McAuley, Duberley, & Johnson, 2007, p. 32). We share a critical perspective and thus our view is consistent with a belief that research should be designed so as to liberate the views of participants to reveal a richer and more holistic picture (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

This article begins by contemplating the underlying characteristics of the event phenomenon to provide a coherent basis upon which to evaluate the efficacy of research methods employed. The discussion then progresses to consider the implications of these traits for event researchers and their selection of methods. Subsequently, the methodology for

the primary research method used in this study is explained and the results are outlined in narrative and tabular format. The concluding discussion evaluates these findings and, as a contribution to future event research, introduces six precepts to shape future method decisions within event research.

## The Event Phenomenon

It is necessary to ponder the principle characteristics and nuances of our subject matter so as to have a defined context upon which the ensuing discussion of research methods can unfold. For the reasons outlined below, which we summarize as the social and contingent character of events, our research area is not easily decipherable. If we, as researchers, fail to adequately contemplate these factors and reflect them in our research approaches, our outcomes may belie the true complexity of our subject.

The pursuit of a considered and ubiquitous interpretation of events, as a conceptual field of research, is complicated by their ever more extensive and divergent role in society. As indicated by Page and Connell (2012), events play a prevalent role within social, cultural, political, and economic change and as such their application and implication is multifarious. This process has been accelerated in recent years as they have been harnessed for business, or instrumental, purpose by public, private, and third sector organizations. If we then overlay this with the myriad of stakeholders that inhabit events we reveal such an abundant and disparate field that indeed the very term "events" appears deficient and in need of reassessment. Consequently, event scholars are confronted with a sprawling and dynamic subject matter to conceptualize, meaning that the selection of research methods demands a considered and refined approach. Conceivably, it might require a rich blend of methods to best interrogate the multifarious character of the subject.

In spite of the many and varied applications and subsets our disparate field is bound together by a finite number of core traits that, although evolving, endure. These represent the DNA of events and characterize the subject matter that event scholars grapple to understand through the application of their chosen research methods. Established definitions endorse notions of experientiality, congregation, uniqueness, purposefulness, and transience as principal defining qualities (Getz, 2007; Goldblatt, 2005). The below discussion considers these, and further telling factors, so as to provide a coherent basis upon which we then debate the implications for research methods.

Perhaps the foremost feature is that of experientiality, which Getz (2008) places at the center point of event studies. Typically we consider event experience as being the domain of the attendee, increasingly, however, focus upon experience transcends the physical attendee and includes other stakeholders, including: virtual (or secondary) attendees, public authorities, sponsors and partners, and the wider population. Progressive literature, in the marketing domain, has moved beyond a customer-centric focus and toward a stakeholder-centric perspective to adequately reflect the range of actors for whom a product, service, or experience touches (Ramaswamy, 2009). The multiactor character of events coheres with this perspective and consequently a second ubiquitous feature of events is not only the congregation of attendees, but also wider stakeholder groupings, that inhabit events. Given the physicality, resource intensiveness, and visibility of events, the involved and impacted stakeholders are often many and varied. Consequently, as events touch manifold groups, the circumstance and reflections of each stakeholder grouping (and subsets) become integral to a rich understanding of the event phenomenon. Selecting methods that will adequately engage with this diversity of perspectives, sometimes deep rooted, represent a recurring requirement for event research.

The second characteristic of congregation can also be expressed as copresence, which is recognized as an attribute of increased worth in our ever more networked society. There is growing literature in the wider management and marketing spheres that interprets the prized notions of cocreation and coproduction as means of better engaging with stakeholders (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011; Ramaswamy, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The promise of communitas (Getz, 2012) aligns with widely discussed notions of engagement, involvement, and participation that enhances experience and underpins the allure of events (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; E. H. Wood & Masterman, 2007; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). These are elements that are highly desirable for organizers,

funders, and clients in what Richards (2013) refers to as an "attention scarcity" (p. 2). Indeed, he specifically cites copresence as an antidote to this problem of attention, as it has the propensity to generate "emotional energy" that is consistent with attendees being in a state of heightened engagement. Consequently, copresence and associated factors, such as participation, interaction, and engagement, represent key ingredients that underpin the appeal of events. Understanding of event experience and these associated factors emerge as an important research topic; however, their interrogation would require the application of methods that can penetrate beyond the superficial and readily apparent.

A third characteristic is indicated by Richards (2013), who pinpoints the reordering of time and space, which triggers the uniqueness and transience of events to which various scholars have referred (e.g., Goldblatt, 2005). It is, predominantly, within these parameters that experiences are initiated. The word "predominantly" is purposefully used to recognize that although event experience occurs primarily within the time and space parameters of the event, the growing integration of events with other activities means that the pre- and postevent stages often become influential and inseparable elements of the participant and stakeholder experience. The growing body of literature around the experience economy and experience design highlights the purposeful creation, or facilitation, of experience (Berridge, 2007; Kale, Pentecost, & Zlatevska, 2010; Nelson, 2009). Richards (2013) explains this as the "manipulation of attention," (p. 3), which as the events industry matures will inevitability lead to an enhanced sophistication around the creation of events. Consequently, a fourth characteristic of events is an intentionality of design, of the event setting, program, and so forth. It should be noted that the precise intent will likely vary between stakeholders and as such the design is often subject to constant negotiation. Event creation has thus become a more nuanced and refined process and one that is at the heart of our subject matter, particularly given the burgeoning educational interest in events. Interrogating and interpreting the process and dynamics that underpin proficient event creation is consequently an important research agenda and, again, demands considered selection of methods as it is not simplistic or easily identifiable.

Literature portrays a growing purposefulness that steers events, with this strategic application of events increasingly recognized in the literature (Crowther, 2010). Events are often envisioned to achieve multiple outcomes that can create challenges and complications that contrast with the relative simplicity of events in bygone times. The present-day attendee, Generation Y for example, is portrayed as an ever more experience hungry and demanding consumer of events. Sponsors and partners increasingly require outcomes, often beyond the essence of the event, and clients, funders, and hosts want demonstrable return for their investment. Hence, the emerging language from writers in the subset of conferences and meetings, for example, articulates events chiefly with an outcome orientation (Hamso, 2012; Vanneste, 2008). The heightened expectation of stakeholders places a resounding emphasis on outcomes in what can be portrayed as an increasingly sophisticated and competitive eventscape. Indeed, the eclectic nature of outcomes, triggered by an event, span: personal, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and political. These outcomes are interrelated yet dissimilar in makeup and require different research instruments to understand them. As an example, proficient methods to interrogate personal experiential outcomes of attendees would probably be a blunt instrument in determining economic impact at a macrolevel.

Consequently, this diversity and disparity of outcomes triggered by events is an influential characteristic in determining the research methods event scholars employ. Event impacts can occur, or at least commence, within the time and space parameters of the event (e.g., a hedonistic state for an attendee). Alternately they can occur well beyond the event (e.g., we use the term legacy to articulate related outcomes many years postevent). Often these consequences are many and varied and cannot be disaggregated from other influencing factors, which compounds the difficulty of adequately evaluating events. Hamso (2012) discusses this challenge in the context of conference attendance, and many more writers, such as Preuss (2007), grapple with the topical issue of capturing the return on investment of mega-event. Events produce multiple experiences and consequences that can often be difficult

to fathom, which presents another telling characteristic that challenges scholars when considering which research methods to adopt.

## Research Methods

The entangled characteristics, reasoned above, comprise what can be referred to as the social and contingent makeup of events. As indicated, these features combine to pose a challenge to event researchers who seek to ably interpret the subject matter and expose, what Empson (cited in M. Wood, 2005) labels the flexible and illusive nature of knowledge and truth. Rising to this challenge commences with the selection and application of suitable research methods, a decision that is influenced by a range of considerations, some of which are reasoned below.

Aubrey (2004) believes that the methods selected by researchers reveal their methodological beliefs and general views about how the world works. In contrast, Gorard and Taylor (2004) contend that in selecting their methods scholars should disregard their philosophical position and respond to the practicalities of their subject matter. A third view is that the everyday circumstance of scholars producing event-oriented research may often heavily influence their methods selection, perhaps marginalizing philosophical preferences (Coule, 2013). The "game of research" is inevitably fraught with compromise, which arguably will dilute the veracity of our contributions, whether the constraint is time, monies, access to data, or simply a pressure to cohere with the "way things are done." From the perspective of Coule (2013) it would be fanciful to suppose that methods selection is entirely, or even chiefly, the outcome of philosophical judgments or complexion of the subject matter. Yet there is a strong argument that incoherence between the subject matter and the research approach can detract from the findings achieved and ultimately the knowledge generated. This view is held by Crotty (1998), who argues that researchers should have an internal logic that unifies different aspects of their research approach. He advises that inconsistencies between philosophical beliefs, character of the subject matter, and the eventual methods applied can render research defective. We as event researchers are thus challenged to reflect on the dominant factors that determine our approach and the implication this has upon the findings that we publish.

As an illustration of the decisions made in this article, while embracing a more "critical" research philosophy, we decided to employ a quantitative research approach. Ostensibly this presents a mismatch between method and philosophy. However, if we look at the work of Willmott (1997), he asserts that critical research is not mutually exclusive in terms of method. Indeed, Willmott argues that virtually any research tool or method of data analysis can be utilized (quantitative or qualitative) so long as the researcher is aware of the purpose of the knowledge produced. We have a heightened consciousness of what we are trying to achieve and by making this purpose implicit in our thought process and explicit to the reader we achieve coherence to our research approach. In doing so we bridge the views of both Aubrey (2004) and Gorard and Taylor (2004) in that we are consistent with our philosophical leanings but also take a pragmatic approach given the nature of our research study.

As events are inherently experiential, and those individuals and groups experiencing them are many and varied, the question of whether a researcher perceives an objectivist or subjectivist position becomes important. As Olson (1995) contends, a pivotal question fundamental to event inquiry is whether there is one knowable reality or multiple realities that are shaped and designed by individuals. The adoption of a more deterministic perspective, consistent with an objectivist view, would perhaps lead a researcher studying attendee experience to undertake a largely quantitative survey-based study. This method would seek normative findings, which arguably would delimit the range and depth of responses and ultimately the richness of knowledge gained. Alternatively, a more subjectivist view would be allied with the implication in Getz's (2007) core framework, that the many actors associated with a given event will perceive the event differentially given their antecedents and decision making. This thinking is similar to Johnson et al.'s (2006) contention that human beings, unlike nonsentient objects in the natural world, have an internal subjective logic that is intersubjective as it is reproduced through social interaction. Consequently, event experience is conditional, triggering numerous perceptions of

actuality within any given event. The inherently experiential character of events makes the pursuit of a singular knowable reality problematical and perhaps inappropriate. As such a subjectivist perspective may adopt a detailed interview-based, or ethnographic-based, approach through which to reveal richness of responses that will likely expose a "thicker" picture that is deeper and more diverse. Yet this may not provide the clarity and coherence of response that some consider necessary.

If the researcher accepts the contingent, rather than absolute, nature of truth, as in the case of the subjectivist position, then in Veal's (2006) view there is the opportunity to reveal deeper descriptive analysis and interpretive understanding. This is consistent with the view that a hunt for knowledge is best achieved through highly participative and inductive research methods, embracing many concerned voices (Gill & Johnson, 2010). This position aligns with the character of our subject matter given that many voices occupy a given event, as such popular methods might include in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observation. Other scholars favor a view that a singular truth objectively exists (Meckler & Baillie, 2003) and importantly that the pursuit of this truth enables perceived certainty and consequently allows prediction and control (Gill & Johnson, 2010), which is viewed a worthy outcome. By accepting that an objective reality exists independently of the actor's consciousness, a positivistic view would claim to be able to access this "objective" truth through quantifiable measures of an event phenomenon (Gill & Johnson, 2010; Myer, 1997). An objectivist stance is not confined entirely to quantitative methods; the approach has morphed with the addition of qualitative positivism (Prasad & Prasad, 2002) or neo-empiricism. This might include a highly structured interview or a survey with some, but restricted, qualitative response. Researchers adopting a subjectivist position would, typically, refute the underlying premise of positivistic approaches, considering them deficient and providing a "thin" portrayal when enquiring about the event phenomenon. Accepting of the "falsehood" of normative inquiry, they would instead call for methods that contribute to a deeper and broader understanding. Investing in methods that enable researchers to make sense of the world, rather than constantly make discoveries about it.

Given the complexity that surrounds event outcomes scholars may sympathize with Johnson and Duberley's (2000) view that the pursuit of truth is fallacious. Proponents of this position tend to adopt a pragmatic approach to research, accepting that findings will inescapably be deficient, but defend their virtue by arguing that they nevertheless make the world less insecure (James, cited in Powell, 2002). From this perspective researchers would embrace richer and more varied research methods to try and uncover the less observable factors that must be explained (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), believing that the easily measurable is often far too superficial. This engagement with wider methods links with the view of Getz (2007), who argued that, given the makeup of the subject matter, the event research community must embrace "phenomenological approaches, including hermeneutics, direct and participant observation, in-depth interviews, and experiential sampling" (p. 422).

This argument coheres with the view of Holloway, Brown, and Shipway (2010) who, in their advocacy of ethnography, made the case for the adoption of wider and more varied methods in event research. These views reflect the established argument, made by Easterby Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe (1991), that identifies the risk of exclusively using overly crude and mechanistic approaches to research and neglecting the consciousness and self-awareness in the human makeup, which, they argue, triggers a subjectivity of response. A more interpretive understanding would be gained by researchers embracing a plurality of methods to generate a more holistic understanding. Therein, the diversity of perspectives that inhabit any given event can best be gleaned through a wider interplay of methods rather than a monism of singular instruments.

This discussion provides an insight into the underlying considerations that underlie event scholar's decisions about which methods they employ. Across the event research community many factors will combine to shape the methods employed, and a range of standpoints will be couched within published articles that we read. Such diversity of outlook and approach is desirable, particularly given the character of the event subject matter, as reasoned in the previous section. Having engaged in the above discussion the focus now shifts to examine the primary research that we undertook in examining 165 of the

most prominent event-related articles of the last 16 years.

## Methodology

In identifying and analyzing influential event articles, and to ascertain the research method employed, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy known as "critical case sample" (Saunders, Thornhill, & Lewis, 2009). This approach enabled the selection of cases based on their importance to the field of study (Patton, 2002). The critical case sample approach seeks to establish "if it happens here, does it everywhere"; therefore, a broad range of journals are selected. We selected journals at two levels of analysis to ensure a more meaningful sample. Firstly, six journals (see Table 1) were selected based on their prescribed remit to focus upon "event-specific" research, which was specified in the detail outlined in the journals' aims and scope. However we were mindful that although these journals are predominant within the field of event research they are, importantly, not the only source of published event management-based research.

Wider journals needed to be interrogated, particularly as the journal ranking system is not currently favorable to the dedicated event journals and many scholars understandably seek to publish elsewhere. It was considered that in addition to augmenting the sample gained from the event-specific journals, these ranked journals may also present alternative or emerging trends or indeed counterflows of method selection. Consequently, the second level of analysis saw a further 15 journals being selected from the ABS 2010 Academic Journal Quality Guide, with the selected journals drawn from the "Tourism and Hospitality Category." This category promised journals (which are detailed in Table 1) more closely aligned with events and consequently providing a better return of articles than more obscure fields. The rationale for the additional inclusion of the *Journal of Sport Tourism* was not only because

Table 1
Number of Articles Reviewed by Journal

| | No. of Articles Analyzed |
|---|---|
| Event-Based Journal Title | |
| *Event Management* | 26 |
| *International Journal of Event and Festival Management* | 8 |
| *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism* | 28 |
| *International Journal of Event Management Research* | 11 |
| *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure & Events* | 10 |
| *Journal of Sport & Tourism* | 26 |
| **Total** | **108** |
| ABS Ranked Journal (reviewed between 2003 and 2013) | |
| *Annals of Tourism Research* | 4 |
| *Tourism Management* | 12 |
| *Journal of Travel Research* | 3 |
| *International Journal of Hospitality Management* | 5 |
| *International Journal of Tourism Research* | 4 |
| *Current Issues in Tourism* | 5 |
| *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* | 3 |
| *Leisure Studies* | 2 |
| *Tourism Economics* | 7 |
| *Tourism Analysis* | 3 |
| *Tourism Geographies* | 3 |
| *Tourism and Hospitality: Planning and Development* | 1 |
| *Tourist Studies* | * |
| *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* | * |
| *Journal of Leisure Research* | 5 |
| **Total** | **57** |
| **Total journal articles reviewed** | **165** |

*No articles met criteria.

of synergetic nature of sports, tourism, and events, but also because the journal was the only sports-based journal that was ranked by the McKercher, Law, and Lam (2006) study.

Subsequently, articles were selected from the listed journals using sample citation analysis, as this process allows the identification of articles that have had the greatest impact on the event research community (Meho, 2007; Moed, 2005). This impact is measured by examining the amount of times published research articles are cited or referenced elsewhere (Mahdi, D'Este, & Neely, 2008). For this purpose Google Scholar was utilized to compute the most cited articles within the selected journals as it provides comprehensive coverage of not only management-based journals, but social sciences as well (Harzing & Van Der Wal, 2008). For the event-specific journals, the two top citations from each year of the journals' inception were selected. For the ABS-rated journals, the approach was slightly modified, due to the broader focus of the journals, to only include those articles that explicitly contain the term "event" or "events" in the title (Meho, 2007). Additionally, and given the ad hoc occurrence of event-related articles, the criteria of two articles from each year was relaxed to ensure a reasonable quantity of articles was identified. Hence, there are inevitable variations in the ABS sample between year and also journal type. From this process a total of 165 articles were selected for the sample of journals with Table 1 detailing journal titles and the number of articles selected by journal. The sample size is consistent with similar studies such as Honggen and Smith (2006), who reviewed 76 tourism-related articles.

Once identified, systematic textual analysis was undertaken with the content of each article reviewed to identify the research methods employed (Weber, 1990). These methods were classified using the explicit statements in the articles, typically in the methodology section, that denoted the type of method(s) they had applied. Once these had been identified and recorded we categorized the methods into the four broad types of research method: survey based, in-depth interview, observations, and focus groups. This categorization is consistent with the classifications used in many influential research texts (such as Saunders et al., 2009; Silverman, 2011; Veal, 2006). The grouping of the methods employed by the "critical case" sample identified by the researchers can be seen in Table 2.

## Results

The aim of this article was to examine a range of event journal articles to ascertain the methods they employed to generate their empirical data. Of the 165 articles reviewed, 108 (65%) were from event-specific journals, and 57 (35%) were from ABS-rated journals (see Table 1). Initially we analyzed the articles published in ABS-ranked journals separately to those in bespoke event journals, before aggregating them in the results table (Table 3). This initial analysis showed a fairly uniform picture across both journal types, yet there were some noteworthy discrepancies and these are identified in the discussion below.

Within this study, the principle objective was to establish the types of research methods that were being employed, any notable bias toward particular methods, and other trends and "counterflows." From the analysis it is clear that the survey/questionnaire is the predominant research method employed in event-based studies, with the event-specific journals employing the method 82 times

Table 2
Categorization of Methods

| Survey | Interviews | Observations | Focus Groups |
|---|---|---|---|
| Postal survey | Unstructured interviews | Participant observations | Focus group |
| Questionnaire | Semistructured interviews | Netnography | Workshops |
| Self-completion questionnaire | In-depth interviews | Observations | Expert panels |
| On-line/web questionnaire | Face-to-face interviews | Mystery shopper | |
| Structured questionnaires | Phone interviews | | |
| Intercept survey | | | |
| Self-administered questionnaire | | | |

Table 3
Breakdown of Methods Employed by Critical Cases

| | Total Articles Reviewed | Total Amount of Methods Employed | Survey Based | In-depth Interview | Observations | Focus Group | Articles That Used Multiple Methods |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Event specific | 108 | 128 | 64% | 24% | 6% | 6% | 19 (18%) |
| ABS rated | 57 | 62 | 70% | 24% | 6% | – | 6 (11%) |
| **Total** | **165** | **190** | **66%** | **24%** | **7%** | **3%** | **25 (15%)** |

(64% of total methods) and ABS-rated journals using this method a total of 43 times (70% of total methods). Overall, surveys represent 66% of all methods employed and were utilized in 76% of all articles reviewed, with in-depth interviews representing the other substantial method, totaling 24% of all methods and occurring in 28% of all articles.

Table 4 highlights a breakdown year by year of methods and also indicates the frequency of multiple methods on a year by year basis. This pattern of multiple methods is erratic and fails to show any consistent upturn or downturn over the period. Overall, a total of 25 (15%) of the articles made use of a multimethod approach. There was a difference between event-specific journals where 19 articles (18%) used a multimethod approach, whereas 6 articles (11%) within ABS-rated journals made use of more than one method within a given study.

Across the 16-year period that we examined, survey-based approaches and in-depth interviews made up 90% of the total amount of methods employed, combining to consistently total between 81% and 100% of all methods in any given year. Importantly, the proportionate balance between them fluctuates, which is discussed below. There was a considerably smaller proportion of articles making use of the focus group and observation methods; notably, the focus group approach, since 2007, only occurs once in the subsequent 113 articles reviewed. Contrasting with this apparent relegation of focus groups is an increased popularity of observational methods. Prior to 2007, and in the 66 articles reviewed, observation did not occur in any article. Subsequently, there has been a notable uplift and, although the method remains marginal, and ad hoc, its increased application is discernible.

Table 4
Research Method Utilization by Year and by Type

| | Articles Reviewed by Year | Survey | Interview | Observation | Focus Group | Articles That Used Multiple Methods |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2013 | 6 | 86% | 14% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| 2012 | 19 | 64% | 23% | 14% | 0% | 16% |
| 2011 | 21 | 60% | 32% | 8% | 0% | 19% |
| 2010 | 19 | 62% | 33% | 5% | 0% | 5% |
| 2009 | 12 | 69% | 19% | 13% | 0% | 17% |
| 2008 | 13 | 50% | 31% | 13% | 6% | 38% |
| 2007 | 9 | 50% | 33% | 17% | 0% | 22% |
| 2006 | 14 | 71% | 29% | 0% | 0% | 7% |
| 2005 | 11 | 62% | 23% | 0% | 15% | 45% |
| 2004 | 9 | 67% | 22% | 0% | 11% | 0% |
| 2003 | 8 | 88% | 0% | 0% | 13% | 0% |
| 2002 | 6 | 71% | 14% | 0% | 14% | 17% |
| 2001 | 5 | 67% | 17% | 0% | 17% | 0% |
| 2000 | 6 | 83% | 17% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| 1999 | 2 | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| 1998 | 2 | 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| 1997 | 3 | 75% | 25% | 0% | 0% | 33% |
| **Totals** | **165** | **125** | **46** | **12** | **7** | **25** |

Table 5
Method Utilization Aggregated Over Time

| | Survey | Interview | Observation | Focus Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1997–1999 | 89% | 11% | 0% | 0% |
| 2000–2004 | 75% | 14% | 0% | 11% |
| 2005–2008 | 61% | 27% | 8% | 4% |
| 2009–2013 | 64% | 28% | 8% | 0% |

In order to better analyze the information in Table 4, and to highlight any notable developments in the usage of research methods, the data were aggregated into longer time periods (see Table 5). From the period 1997–2000, when 92% of the methods employed by the articles were surveys, there has been a fairly consistent decline in the supremacy of surveys, leading to a situation in 2010–2013 where 64% of the methods employed were survey based. During this time the occurrence of in-depth interviews conversely increased, with a steady upturn in their proportional use from 8% in 1997–2000 to 28% in 2010–2013. The sample of 165 articles we reviewed does indicate a noteworthy reduction in the domination of survey-based approaches. This leads to a more balanced range of methods used in event research, albeit with a strong predominance of surveys and in-depth interviews.

## Discussion and Analysis

The finding that 64% of the methods utilized are, predominantly, quantitative survey-based methods indicates a high frequency of positivistic-oriented, or normative-oriented, methods in event research. This result is perhaps not surprising as it is entirely consistent with the views of writers such as Buchanan and Huczynski (2004), who suggest that despite widespread skepticism "most published organizational behavioral research is still rooted in a positivist tradition" (p. 22). Interpretivist and critical writers would consider this unsatisfactory, contending that the search for normative answers, while convenient, diminishes the pursuit of understanding and meaning by presenting an overly simplified and generalized portrayal. Much of the progressive literature, as shown in the Research Methods section, extols the shift toward liberation of wider methods and competing perspectives, as providing a healthy antidote to overreliance upon normative enquiry.

Perhaps the marginalized status of methods aligned with the subjectivist position, such as interviews, focus groups, an observation, is rooted in what Creswell (2005) considers to be the constant need for interpretivist research to seek positivist acceptance in order to achieve validity. Implicit within Creswell's view is that the use of quantifiable data continues to be perceived to have more rigor, and as a result researchers will often favor it. Set in this context it is explicable that the formative years of event research has steered toward survey-based methods and perhaps, arguably, a predominance of these methods has been influential in helping to establish events as a defensible academic and research area.

This study suggests a shifting picture in event research as it matures beyond its early years, with in-depth interviews progressing to 28% of all methods during the period 2010–2013 period, increasing appreciably from other figures shown in Tables 4 and 5. This growth correlates with a similarly stark decline in the proportion of survey-based methods over the same period. This development is perhaps consistent with more recent thinking, which suggests a move away from the instinctive assumption that quantitative equals reliable. For example, the noteworthy work of Johnson et al. (2006) provides augmented evaluation criteria through which to judge the integrity of research, with the addition of measures such as authenticity and genuineness. This view was latterly embraced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who abandoned what they called "naive realism" in favor of "multiple constructed realities" (p. 293). The inference being that published event research would benefit through a greater harnessing of heterogeneous methods inspired by divergent philosophical positions, a proposition that coheres with the discussion in the earlier sections of this article that evaluated the make-up of events and implication for methods selection. Certainly the overall picture evidenced by this study does not represent an unequivocal embracing of heterogeneous methods, not least because the third and fourth most popular instruments—focus groups and observation—only represent up to 10% of all methods employed. However, the trend, demonstrated

clearly by Table 5, does indicate a recalibration of methods employed in event research and also a growing acceptance of interpretive approaches.

From a critical perspective the employment of quantitative methods is constructively embraced, but with the significant caveat that they should be one part of a multifaceted approach, particularly given the contingent character of events reasoned earlier in this article. Consequently, and in light of the discussion in previous sections, the finding that 25 of the 165 articles used more than one method is considered inapt. Therein, the considerable bias towards studies that rely on one method only, usually surveys, represents a monism that is unhealthy for the progressive development of the research area, a point also alluded to by Ali-Knight and Chambers (2006). As discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), we seek thicker approaches, but also a plurality of methods both collectively and within given studies. This is an argument also advocated by other writers, such as Ritchie and Lewis (2003), who contend that the detail required to interpret a subject is best obtained through the application of a multiplicity of perspective, and methods, to permit an extensive and holistic examination.

It is therefore argued that the application of multiple and creative methods would feasibly generate richer and more complete knowledge consistent with the personality of events reasoned and discussed in previous sections of this article. Furthermore, and in the view of Silverman (2007, cited in Watson, 2011), the embracing of more and varied interpretive methods would enable the untangling of what they refer to as the impenetrable façade. The modest uptake of alternate interpretative tools, such as observation and focus group, are lamentable as they offer worthwhile lenses through which the event phenomenon could be more ably scrutinized and understood.

A conclusion of this study is that event research needs to move beyond, as argued by Gorard and Taylor (2004), the perennial adoption of rigid methods. The past picture represents the early stage in the development of event research as scholars sought to frame and establish this fledgling area. Within this context the supremacy of positivist methods is explicable. As the subject area matures the conditions change, and we see a progressive trend that is evidenced by a decreased preoccupation with survey-based methods abates. Gorard and Taylor (2004) go on to call for a plurality of methods within a given study, a view supported by many commentators who advocate the paradigmatic position of mixed methods as a pragmatic approach (Rorty, 1999; Tashakkori & Tedlie, 2006). When considering the character of events an argument can be constructed that a proliferation of interpretive methods, as indicated in the above, would positively aid analysis of the events phenomenon given its inherently social and contingent makeup that is reasoned earlier in this article. Yet this investigation does not show any emergent trend towards the use of multiple methods within a given study.

## Precepts for the Future

Having engaged in the above discussion it leads to an opportunity to advocate some principles that can sustain event research as it moves beyond its fledgling stage and, as stated in the introduction, moves towards a more mature status. The following six suggestions emerge from the literature interrogated and the primary research undertaken.

1. **Embrace a plurality of methods**. Despite the decline there continues to be a predominance of objectivist, survey-based methods in event research. As a research community we should positively question this with a view to moving towards an ever more heterogeneous picture, not just between objectivist and subjectivist but also between subjectivist methods. A positive aspiration is for more interpretivist approaches, such as observation and focus groups, to more fully infiltrate event research.
2. **Adopt multiple methods within a single study**. The façade of events demands the adoption of different research instruments to reveal a more holistic picture. Requiring interplay of methods will triangulate findings, but more importantly reveal alternate perspectives and deeper information. Furthermore, and as argued by Getz (2010), there is an imperative to engage with longitudinal case study research to enable our findings to support, contradict, or generate theory.
3. **Liberate multiple stakeholder voices**. Events are a multifarious context; therefore, the repeated pursuit of perspectives from singular groupings

ultimately provides a narrow and deficient picture. Numerous conceptions will exist around a given event setting and many voices can become marginalized through the repetition of dominant methods. The contingent character of events commands such an approach to reveal a richness and breadth of knowledge.

4. **Reveal the subjective character of events**. Commit to methods that provide the opportunity to reveal thicker information by providing respondents with an apposite research setting. Given the consciousness and self-awareness in the human makeup, respondents can be instinctively guarded and selective as to the picture they present to the researcher; therefore, it takes adept methods to generate meaningful findings.
5. **Use surveys only when they are fit for purpose**. Surveys make, and will continue to make, a valuable contribution to event research, particularly in serving the many studies preoccupied with topics, such as economic impact. Yet in many other contexts, given the peculiarities of events, they are a comparatively blunt instrument, given the need to reveal rich and deeper insight. We would expect to see a continued realignment in the proportion of surveys, interviews, and other subjectivist approaches.
6. **Transparency of philosophical viewpoint**. We discussed in the introduction the dearth of information in articles pertaining to the authors' philosophical views on research and how these underpin their studies. In line with the pleas by the writers discussed in the introductory section it would be a positive advancement for event researchers to reason their research designs, and in doing so develop more of a critical consciousness. This step change required extends beyond article authors and includes journal editors and reviewers. Such a progression would increase the legitimacy of research undertaken by the event research community.

## Limitations and Research Agenda

It is clear that if more journals and articles were added to this study that the research would be more generalizable, and we acknowledge the fact that the conclusions drawn from this study are inevitably constrained by the sampling approach and sample size. We are not arguing that our sample is representative of the entire body of event-based research; rather, it provides a snapshot of the trend of research methods employed. In using the critical case approach and citation analysis our sampling approach was very much the opposite of random as we purposefully sought the most heavily cited articles. In reviewing the majority of the most reputable journals we have provided a representation of the methods used in event literature in the recent past. Had we randomly analyzed published event articles we may have found that those not so popularly cited signify a different pattern of methods. Supporting this possibility is a report from the Association of Business Schools (Harvey, Kelly, Morris, & Rowlinsom, 2010), who suggest that articles using survey-based approaches tend to be more heavily cited than other methods, which would indicate an induced bias in our methodological approach. Future, corresponding research, should adopt a different sampling approach to provide a more holistic picture, which would ascertain whether our sampling technique did introduce a bias toward traditional survey-based methods.

In researching literature to inform this article it revealed a relative lack of contributions looking at the combined topics of event research and research methods. As the area matures this must be rectified with more thinking developed around opportune methods for event research. As a social phenomenon events present challenges to the researcher but, previous sections show, events have other oddities that further complicate the researcher challenge. Similar to the evolution of tourism research (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004), focus needs to be given to heighten the consciousness of event researchers around the methods they wield.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion has appraised event research during what have been early yet prosperous years. During this time planned events have become an established research and teaching area. There is a lot to be positive about with past research making a valid and considerable contribution, but equally there is a need for the area to mature through a budding reflexivity, and critical consciousness, among the research community. This article has sought to

provide a timely space for reflection, to heighten scholars thinking in this area, and raise the profile of the importance of employing fitting research approaches. In the spirit of this article, readers should construe their own analysis from the findings and discussion, remaining mindful of the inevitably value-laden disposition of the researchers.

The article has depicted the peculiarity of the event phenomenon that we study, portraying its inherently social and contingent character. Multiple realities can be readily considered to exist around a given event occurrence and certainly between different events. These factors, in addition to the inherently experiential character of events, make the pursuit of a singular knowable reality problematical and perhaps incongruous. The thrust of the discussion in the previous sections is towards the embracing of a multiplicity of methods with a particular preference toward those that will reveal a richer and more holistic picture (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). The analysis of 165 published event articles indicates that the current situation is not consistent with this aspiration, revealing a predominance of surveys, peripheral use of multiple methods, and a limited uptake of subjectivist-oriented approaches. Positively, closer examination reveals a progressive trend whereby the domination of surveys is diminishing somewhat and in-depth interview approach is becoming much more popularly embraced.

Consequently, we present six precepts that should occupy the thinking of event scholars when designing their empirical work. We caution this with candid recognition of the external forces, in the shape of time, access, and external pressures, that so often pervert a more purist approach to research. Nevertheless, we suggest that, as event research moves into this more mature phase, there is a requirement for advancement toward a more balanced and enlightened approach to research. Survey-based methods while sometimes suitable are, at other times, a rudimentary approach that is not fit for purpose given the peculiarities of the event subject matter.

In conclusion, the authors reflect that enquiry into the prevailing methods in event research reveals a burgeoning and progressive picture that must evolve through alignment with the character of the subject matter. For an emerging academic area, the discoveries identified in this article are predictable, and understandable, given the myriad of causal factors, indeed similar trends were witnessed in the fledgling advances of tourism research (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004). We recognize that discussion of research approach provokes reaction as it is value laden; we would therefore welcome healthy riposte perhaps from scholars espousing a positivistic position. Whether you agree, disagree, or wholly object, we hope to have roused a timely discussion for colleagues in the event research community.

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