Storying Sports Injury Experiences of Elite Track Athletes: A Narrative Analysis

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** Taking a social and cultural perspective, this study extends research in the field of sport injury psychology by storying elite track athletes injury experiences to identify dominant socio-cultural narratives that structure their tales.

**Methods:** Fifteen elite track athletes participated. Data collection spanned 18 months and involved two methods of collection: life-story interviews and timelining. A total of 42 interviews were collected. Dialogical narrative analysis was used to identify the narrative typologies.

**Results:** Six narrative typologies were identified: *Resilience, Merry-Go-Round, Longevity, Pendulum, Snowball, and More-to-Me.*

**Conclusion:** This study extends the sport injury psychology evidence-base by highlighting how socio-cultural practices and processes influenced the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of athletes throughout the full spectrum of injury. By creating and sharing narratives of injury, we can expand the opportunities available to athletes to enable them to make sense of their injury experiences in diverse and meaningful ways.

*Keywords*: *Athletics, culture, elite sport, injury, narratives*

**Storying Sports Injury Experiences of Elite Track Athletes: A Narrative Analysis**

Sports injuries have been identified as a regular occurrence in elite track and field athletes, with two out of three athletes sustaining at least one injury each year (Jacobsson et al., 2013). In elite sport, where athletes’ livelihoods can be dependent upon participation, the impact of sports injuries on well-being, sporting performance, and long-term athletic career potential can be devastating (Rice et al., 2016). To support the safety and welfare of athletes, researchers in the field of sport injury psychology to date have studied the psychological factors and processes that describe and explain the occurrences and experiences of sports injuries (for a recent review, see Brewer, 2020). This voluminous body of research has led to a rigorous evidence base that has informed interventions to help prevent and support injured athletes’ rehabilitation from sports injuries (Brewer, 2020). While this evidence-base has made a major contribution to our understanding of sports injuries, a shortcoming of this field of research is that it remains an individual-focused and single, scientific discipline (Wadey, 2020). Despite repeated calls for sport injury psychology to evolve into an interdisciplinary discourse that forges links and reciprocity with other disciplines (e.g., sport sociology, sport medicine, sport communication, sport physiology, e.g., Brewer et al., 2020), this landscape remains uncharted.

Towards an interdisciplinary agenda, several researchers have recommended that sport injury psychology should strive for a more cultural and relational discourse to provide more critical and nuanced accounts of sports injuries (e.g., Brock & Kleiber, 1994; Wadey, 2020; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2019). Researchers’ interest in cultural and relational thought and practice up until now has been marginal, if not completely eschewed, in sport injury psychology. This shortcoming is surprising, especially given that it is recognised that, “Most aspects of sport, and therefore, sport injuries, are fundamentally as much social and cultural in nature as they are personal” (Wiese-Bjornstal, 2019, p. 18). One form of inquiry that has been recommended to enhance our understanding of how the broader socio-cultural landscape might shape injured athletes’ psychological experiences of injury (Williams, 2020), and that has proven effective in the wider sport psychology literature (Sparkes & Smith, 2005), is *narrative inquiry*. It postulates that humans live storied lives and thus, to make sense of our experiences (e.g., injury), we formulate and share stories (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Through a narrative lens, it is understood that although we might tell unique stories of our experiences, we are provided with insights into the socio-cultural contexts and influences, as we draw upon the narrative scripts available within our cultures to shape our storytelling (Frank, 2013). Thus, the stories that are ‘out there’ and embedded in the social and cultural worlds of athletes will act as narrative resources for them to shape their interpretation of an event (Williams, 2020). However, narratives not only reflect cultural and social influences, but they also generate insights into behaviours (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Put another way, narratives have the capacity to do things, on, for, in, and with people (Frank, 2010). They work *for* us by providing us with a map or a destination to follow and *on* us by teaching us what to pay attention to and how to respond to certain actions (Frank, 2010). Thus, accessing, knowing, and sharing narratives of injury within elite sport, would be a fruitful tool in recasting and expanding our understanding of what frames and guides athletes’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviours towards injury from a psycho-socio-cultural perspective.

Drawing from the broader sociology literature, Frank’s work with narrative inquiry has been influential in theorising how individuals handle the unexpected event of illness (Frank, 2013), which has transferability with how athletes make sense of their injury experiences (Williams, 2020). Frank identified three broad narrative typologies that underpin stories of illness, named restitution, chaos, and quest. Frank proposed that patients commonly follow the Western metanarrative of restitution which follows the plotline of “yesterday I was healthy, today I am ill and tomorrow I will be healthy again” (Frank, 2013, pp. 77). This plotline promotes concrete hope of patients finding a cure for their illness and returning to their former healthy self (Sparkes & Smith, 2005). However, not all illnesses are curable and if an individual faces a terminal illness, the concrete hope available within the restitution narrative is to no avail. Where misalignment occurs between an individual’s life narrative and real-life experiences, narrative wreckage may ensue (Frank, 2013). The chaos narrative, in contrast, is where the storyteller envisages life never getting better. Finally, the quest narrative is where an individual accepts illness and seeks to gain something positive from the experience (Frank, 2013). Within the context of sport psychology, these typologies informed Sparkes and Smith’s (2005) interpretations of the experiences of men who had suffered a spinal cord injury (SCI) through sport. Sparkes and Smith (2005) provided rich, nuanced, and compelling insights into how the experience of living with an SCI was framed by these narrative typologies. Further, they demonstrated how these typologies acted as “dynamos” in either enabling or constraining the type of life the participants could lead following an SCI (Sparkes & Smith, 2005, p. 87). However, these narratives were restricted to SCIs and hence their applicability to other sports injuries may be limited.

This study is original in that it aims to identify narrative typologies of sports injuries within elite athletics. Adopting narrative inquiry will help to extend the sport injury psychology literature by identifying the broader socio-cultural injury narratives that circulate in elite sport cultures and explain how they shape and give meaning to injured athletes’ experiences. Further, as recommended by Wiese-Bjornstal (2009), this study aims to explore athletes’ experiences of injury throughout their career. In doing so, we hope to shift the focus of sports injury beyond being viewed as an isolated incident occurring within a finite timeframe and account for the continuous nature of injuries and their cumulative impact on athletes’ well-being and sporting careers. By exploring experiences of injury in relation to athletes’ career history, narrative inquiry holds the potential to capture the diachronicity of injury experiences by unveiling their historical and developmental dimensions (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Finally, this study aligns with recent calls for the need to story injury experiences within elite sport (Barker- Ruchti et al., 2019; Williams, 2020). Echoing the work of Hyden (1997), Barker-Ruchti et al. demonstrated how because injury has not been storied, it often gets swept up as being part of the broader ‘performance narrative’ which dominates elite sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006). The performance narrative represents a totalitarian view of ‘life is sport and sport is life’, whereby performance outcomes are prioritised, and pain, dedication, and sacrifice are accepted in the quest for success (Douglas & Carless, 2006). The integration of the injury experience into the performance narrative is dangerous, as it negates the experience of injury for the athlete by incorporating injury as an expected outcome for participation in elite sport (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019). However, by narrating the experience of injury, for the first time within elite sport, we can counter this normalization by ‘breathing meaning’ into the diverse ways of experiencing injury that may have been previously silenced or suppressed within elite sport settings.

**Methods**

**Philosophical Beliefs & Participant Selection**

This study is underpinned by a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. That is, reality is believed to be multiple, socially constructed, and mind-dependent; the construction of knowledge is believed to be subjective and value-laden (Smith & Deemer, 2000). Following university ethical board approval, a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was chosen (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The selection criteria were twofold: athletes had to be over 18 years of age and had to have competed at an elite level in the sport of athletics (i.e., World or Olympic Level). Elite athletes were chosen due to the specific recent call to study narratives of injury within elite sport (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019).

Fifteen elite track athletes were contacted via email and were presented with an outline of the research project. The sample comprised of nine female and six male athletes from different countries (i.e., United States, Australia, Netherlands, Ireland, United Kingdom) aged between 22-37 years (*M* = 28.3, *SD* = 3.62). To expand on previous narrative studies that focused on a homogenous sample of either career-ending (Brock & Kleiber, 1994) or overuse injuries (Russell & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2015), we aimed to examine athletes who had endured a wide range of sports injuries (e.g., acute, over-use, chronic, chronic recurring, career-ending) throughout their athletics career to enhance the scope of this study. Instead of providing a snapshot view of an injury episode (e.g., acute injuries versus overuse injuries), we wanted to provide a more representative illustration of the wide range of injuries athletes may experience throughout their career, which may explain how they relate to and impact one another over time. Thirteen out of 15 athletes were still competing in elite athletics at the onset of this study, while two athletes had retired from the sport. Three athletes retired from elite athletics throughout the course of this study. Each participant gave informed consent prior to participation. To protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms used.

**Data Collection**

Data collection spanned 18 months and involved two methods of collection: interviews and timelining. First and in line with narrative inquiry, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method to story the participants’ experiences of injury (Cavallerio et al., 2017). All participants were interviewed on at least two occasions, with 13 out of 15 participants interviewed for a third time. Two athletes did not complete the final interview due to their own time limitations. The initial interview involved a short-life history interview (Plummer, 2001) where participants were invited to describe their athletics career and detail any sports injuries they had experienced. This interview was unstructured and involved “giving up control and following participants down their trails” (Riessman, 2008, p. 24), allowing them to tell their own story in their own words. To promote storied data, certain probes were used (e.g., “Can you tell me a story about that? “Can you describe how that happened?).

For the second interview, retrospective timelining (Kolar et al., 2015), was chosen to create a more structured approach and to facilitate conversation around key moments during the athletes’ careers (e.g., career progression, key performances, injuries, adversities, turning points). Timelining has been demonstrated as a useful tool in capturing the temporal nature of participants’ experiences and in further facilitating storied data (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Here, the first author, having listened, transcribed, and reflected on the initial life story interviews, plotted a rough chronological timeline that documented each athlete’s key moments. This timeline was then discussed with participants and further co-constructed as participants added to or expanded on key events in the timeline. For in-person interviews, the timeline was visually present. For online and telephone interviews, the timeline was described and discussed aurally.

The final interview built upon the previous interviews and involved discussing our interpretations with the participants to facilitate further reflection and dialogue, with the aim of adding to the richness of the overall dataset (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This final interview created another opportunity for a reflexive elaboration of the previous two interviews and an exploration of potential storylines, enabling the research team to further discuss, refine and re-define the preliminary findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Altogether a total of 42 interviews were collected, with interviews lasting between 50 and 255 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Initial interviews were predominately conducted face to face (13/15), with subsequent follow-up interviews being conducted in person or via mobile, telephone, or online interviewing, subject to COVID-19 restrictions.

As recommended in the literature, the use of multiple interviews over an extended timeframe enabled the first author to build a rapport with the participants evidenced by openness, emotion, and familiarity (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This relationship was further strengthened by the first author drawing on her own experiences of elite athletics and prior injuries. While an ‘insider’ status helped to facilitate an open and trusting relationship with participants, having ‘shared experiences’ created its own unique challenges (Berger, 2015). These included the potential of imposing one’s own values, beliefs, or perceptions on the participants, or occluding certain information by taking similarities for granted (Berger, 2015). Having an ‘insider’ status can also affect the power dynamics between the participant and the researcher (Berger, 2015). In some cases, the participant's knowledge of the first author’s injury experiences created a dynamic of comparison (i.e., both upwards and downwards). In other cases, this knowledge was used by participants to deflect from their own injury experiences or to reinforce their own beliefs concerning injury and elite sport (e.g., “You know what it’s like”, “We’ve all run through pain, you’ve done the same”). Noting, reflecting, and discussing these challenges with other research members after initial interviews, was pertinent in finding ways to overcome such challenges in follow-up interviews and in accounting for how the first author’s positioning assisted and hindered the co-construction of meanings (Finlay, 2002).

**Data Analysis**

The participants’ stories were analysed through the lens of dialogical narrative analysis (DNA). As Frank (2010) contends, DNA examines, “what is told in the story, the story’s content and what happens as a result of telling the story” (p.71-72). Analysis was carried out by the first author in regular discussion with the co-authors, who continued to act as critical friends in debating, challenging, and exploring possible insights and interpretations arising from the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Making sense of the data through DNA was an iterative and cyclic process and began alongside data collection and continued throughout the writing up stage. The first step involved transcribing the interviews verbatim, followed by immersion in the data by reading and re-reading the qualitative dataset. The transcripts, timelines, and field notes were then marked up with conceptual comments, which involved identifying stories, what was being told in each story, and how it was being told (Frank, 2010). Finally, the effects of telling the story were considered in light of a set of dialogical questions. This process involved identifying resource questions (i.e., what narrative structures do they draw on to shape their subjectivity), connection questions (i.e., whom does the story connect the storyteller to), identity questions (i.e., how does the story give them a sense of who they are), function questions (i.e., how do the participants stories shape their actions), with a final consideration attributed to how participants were “holding their own” in the story (Frank, 2010, p. 77). Once the analysis was concluded we structured the results around typologies of stories, defined as, “the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories” (Frank, 2013, p. 75). Building typologies enabled the identification of the types of narratives surrounding injury in elite athletics and the consequences of these narratives on athletes and their athletic careers. Multiple draft writing was used throughout analysis to build, refine, and label these typologies.

**Methodological Rigour**

Guided by a relativist position for judging the rigour of qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), the authors invite researchers to consider several quality indicators: credibility, generalization, rigour, sincerity, and significance of this research. The first strategy to support these indicators involved author self-reflexivity, where the first author used a reflexive journal to account for her positioning within the research and how it may have influenced the data collection and analysis. Interpretations of the data were also presented to the research team regularly who acted as critical friends in debating, challenging, and offering alternative perspectives (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These strategies increased the rigour, credibility, and sincerity of the research by identifying and explicating the potential or actual effects of personal, contextual, and circumstantial aspects on the process and findings of the study (Finlay, 2002). Thick descriptions (i.e., detailed quotations) were also included to enhance the naturalistic generalizability and transferability of the data by providing readers with evidence to decipher what is similar and different to their own situations (Smith, 2018). Finally, member reflections were used, where the first author provided the participants with an overview of the preliminary narrative typologies identified. These typologies were then discussed, and any potential gaps or contradictions in the findings or complementary insights were explored (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member reflections also helped evaluate the significance of the research, as participants reported that the findings resonated with them, captured their experiences, and had the potential to support the safety and welfare of athletes.

**Results and Discussion**

**Resilience Narrative**

The resilience narrative describes maintenance in well-being and athletic trajectory despite injury setbacks. The resilience narrative was akin to ‘robust resilience’ depicted by Fletcher and Sarkar (2016), whereby an individual’s protective qualities shield them from the adverse impact of injury, allowing them to focus on recovery. Athletes embodying the resiliencenarrative viewed injury as a physical problem to be “fixed” before returning to their pre-injury state of physical health and athletic performance. The resilience narrative is characteristic of the restitution narrative of health (Frank, 2013), and the exercise as restitution narrative (Papathomas et al.,2015), both of which project concrete hope for recovery following illness or injury. While in the restitution, and the exercise as restitution, narrative individuals focus on finding a cure for their illness or injury either through medical science or exercise, respectively. In the resilience narrative, athletes focus on a context-specific form of “working hard” to return to their pre-injury state. This context-specific form of “working hard” involved the athletes seeking out appointments (e.g., scans), engaging in effortful rehabilitation to ‘fix’ the injury, as well as cross-training to account for any deficits in fitness. The resilience narrative of injury, therefore, reads as “Yesterday I was healthy, today I am injured, but through working hard, I will be healthy and perform again”.

Athletes whose stories resonated with the resilience narrative depicted injury as being “no big deal” or “part of the sport” (cf. Hughes & Coakley 1991). Athletes’ well-being and commitment to their sport were maintained by the internalisation of a predominant message involving “control the controllables”. Athletes saw no benefit in revisiting the mistakes of the past or worrying about the future, instead their main concern involved focusing on what it was they could do in the present moment to best direct their future. John reports:

It’s about making a plan and committing yourself to it. If you’re focused on that, then I don’t see what there is to be negative about. Even the injury I got before the (championships), I never thought badly. I was like hopefully it will be fine, if not, then it’s done and there’s nothing I can do. I can’t turn back the time to that training session (injury onset) and worrying about it won’t help, so why do that?

Athletes also articulated the idea that success in sport is measured by effort. This idea has been conceptualised as “effort stories” (Carless & Douglas, 2012, p. 391), which are reminiscent of the performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006). However, in the effort stories, process is prioritised over outcome, which lends itself to a more controllable and sustainable narrative, as once athletes are ‘trying their best’, their sense of self is maintained. Amanda reports, “I try my best to make it better and if I think I’ve worked my hardest, then not many people would think I haven’t, so it’s not that I wouldn’t care, I just wouldn’t be down on myself”.

The final message athletes promoted was the idea that they could work harder whilst injured. This idea maintained their motivation and commitment, as athletes rationalised that their absence from training and any potential deficits in performance could be mitigated by accumulating gains in other ways (e.g., getting aerobically stronger through increased cross-training, getting physically stronger through investing more time into their athletic development). Getting fitter and stronger in other ways, empowered athletes into believing that, when they returned to competition, they would maintain their performance trajectory. Furthermore, working hard is a valued commodity within elite athletics (Dohlsten et al., 2020), and hence it enabled the athletes to accrue social capital maintaining their sense of value, worth, and connectedness within this community.

Within the elite athletics culture, the resilience narrative appeared to be the ‘gold standard’ response to injury and athletes reported being indoctrinated into this narrative by either a coach, parents, and/or an institutional setting during the formative stages of their career. This indoctrination reflects the “social constitutive process of narrative interpellation” whereby individuals are “hailed” or “called upon” to acknowledge or act on a particular identity (Smith, 2013, p.112). Amanda describes this type of interpellation as she reports:

I developed a pride in working hard. Other athletes would come aqua jogging with me and would be like ‘oh my god you look like you’re going to die’ because they would be going for a little paddle and I would be doing, what I thought was normal, what Maria (former elite athlete) told us about how hard you had to aqua jog. I remember hearing about (other elite athletes) cross-training and being like, ‘yeah that sounds about right, that adds up to what I saw with Maria’, but then, a lot of my peers I didn’t really get why they would be defeatist about injury . . . I guess it was probably a very formative influence with Maria because she was injured a lot, but she told us you will always have injuries, but you can work twice as hard when injured.

The example above highlights how the stories that interpellated an individual (“She told us you will always have injuries, but you can work twice as hard”) become that individual’s narrative habitus. A narrative habitus (Frank, 2010) refers to a disposition to recognise something as familiar (“I thought that adds up to what I’ve seen”) and simultaneously to find something else strange or obscure (“I didn’t really get why they would be defeatist about it”). As the resilience narrative was the story athletes were called upon to tell, by internalising this narrative while also rejecting any narrative involving “victimising” or “wallowing” about injury, they were offered a gateway into the elite athletics community, reaffirmed their sense of self when injured and maintained their sense of connection and acceptance within this ecosystem.

Although the resilience narrative of injury is often the accepted storyline and the one promulgated within elite cultures, our findings highlighted how in certain circumstances, it may not always take care of the athlete. For example, some athlete’s reported experiencing burnout because of excessive cross-training or reported how their “tunnel-vision focus” on “fixing” the injury and returning to sport prevented them from taking a broader perspective and addressing some of the wider issues relating to their injury (e.g., nutrition, fatigue). Indeed, the overt focus on restoration in this narrative is a dangerous story to live by as it precludes itself to only one foreseeable outcome (i.e., to return one’s body to its pre-injury state through working hard). Therefore, if athletes are unable to find a solution to fix the problem or if working hard no longer provides a narrative blueprint back to their pre-injury state, well-being, and the motivation to sustain this narrative are threatened. Jack reports:

With bone, it’s easy, six weeks to heal. If you tear a muscle, you have three phases of recovery. But neural stuff, explain to me how this wasn’t a thing and now it is a thing? It was all so overwhelming. I was looking for that magic bullet answer and that’s what the surgery was. I was trying to control the controllable, fix this one thing and then we will be ‘back on the horse’. But when that didn’t work, I just couldn’t see a way out and my willpower left to do it how I had done it before had gone. . . the fire just went out.

The precarious nature of this accepted storyline accentuates the need for a multiplicity of stories in relation to injury. Creating more narratives offers athletes the flexibility and opportunity to re-frame their experiences, especially when the dominant narrative no longer fits their experience, does not take care of them, or is problematic to live by (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

**Merry-Go-Round Narrative**

The merry-go-round narrative reflects a cyclical plot of highs and lows where chronic and recurring sports injuries continually affected athletes’ well-being and ultimately their sporting careers. Against the backdrop of this undulating cycle, athletes’ body-self relationship, motivation, and commitment to the sport gradually deteriorated over time. This narrative encompassed a dynamic and temporal plotline as athletes’ stories started with “what could be” shifted to “what should be” and ended reflecting on “what could have been”. Trapped in a purposeless cycle of injury and rehabilitation, the merry-go-round narrative reflects the relegation of athletes to the confinement of the rehabilitative netherworld and the tumultuous journey it incurs. Gemma reports:

It was just that constant cycle, get injured, do your rehab, work back to the track and it could be a few weeks, or a few months and you would be right back at the beginning again. Every time, I had to pick myself back up and go back through that cycle again and every time it was just chipping away at my motivation and love for the sport.

During the initial phases of this merry-go-round, any temporary upsets (e.g., injury setbacks/missing competition) from injury or re-injury were offset by temporary uplifts (e.g., returning to competition/seeing progress in rehab). Athletes’ sense of purpose and motivation were maintained by the prospect of their future goals and “what could be”. One athlete reported how the temporary uplifts provided her with “flashes of hope” that she was still “on track” to achieve her penultimate goal of competing at the Olympic Games. This “false hope” or “naïve optimism” reported by athletes, negated any injury impact, as they believed they could still achieve their future goals, despite injury setbacks.

However, as athletes continued to ride this ‘merry-go-round’ the impact of these injury and re-injury cycles on their well-being and progression within the sport began to reveal itself. Locked into this revolving door of rehabilitation, with no relevant performance indicators; athletes began to draw upward comparisons with other athletes. These comparisons created tension between their current reality and where they felt they “should be”. Sarah reports, “Our training was the same up until then (injury onset), but her trajectory kept rising while mine was crumbling. Every time I would see a result from her, it was like, ‘that’s where I should be’”. Attempting to prove where they “should be”, some athletes reported becoming consumed by performance objectives (Douglas & Carless, 2006), resulting in cheating, and rushing rehabilitation to pursue a sporting goal. This mentality was influenced and reinforced by athletes’ coaches (e.g., “When are you going to stop pussyfooting around on the grass and get back to the track?”) and their national governing bodies who promoted risk-taking behaviours (cf. Nixon, 1992), further perpetuating these injury cycles. Ana reports:

They are just a business, and they just want you running. If they think if there is any chance that you might be able to get one performance in, then they are always going to look for some quick fix solution to get you back on your feet as soon as possible. That’s why they let me rush into the championships.

These injury cycles were further compounded by a decline in athletes’ body self-relationship, resonating with what Sparkes (1998) depicted as the “demise of the disciplined body” (p. 654). The disciplined body was characteristic of the body portrayed in high-performance sport and is one that “defines itself in actions of self-regimentation” with its’, “gravest crisis” being “loss of control” (Frank, 2013, p. 41). Over time, this crisis was experienced by participants who reported a growing trepidation over never being able to predict or control what their body was going to do. Whereas once the body was forgotten in its state of seamless functioning, once injured it became an oppositional force (Sparkes, 1998), leaving athletes feeling trapped in a body they no longer recognised. Kayleigh reports, “I never had to think about my body before, but then it was, am I going to get through this training session, or will I be going home with ice? I no longer controlled my body, it controlled me”.

Consequently, some athletes distanced themselves from their injuries (Leder,1990), employing mechanical terms to label their body (e.g., it, broken, fixed), which only sought to further increase the disconnect between them and their physical self. Other athletes began to identify as ‘the injured athlete’ acquiescing to a body where injuries were the “norm” and “something they had come to expect”. Confined by a “body that has let them down”, it created a self-fulfilling prophecy where athletes felt powerless to effect change. Gradually, they withdrew their engagement in rehabilitation and other health-related behaviours, further perpetuating the cycle. Sarah reports, “It seemed no matter what I did I was still in pain, so eventually I just began to run through it (injury)”.

Over time, the cumulative impact of these repetitive cycles began to take its toll. Athletes reported how like a “war of attrition”, their motivation and commitment to the sport was gradually worn down. The latter stages of this merry-go-round were characterised by a jaded exasperation (e.g., “here we go again”), and a sense of fatigue in handling future adversities (e.g., “I couldn’t be bothered to go through the whole ups and downs again”). Furthermore, athletes reported a lack of understanding and empathy from peers, institutions, and coaches (e.g., “He (coach) would almost roll his eyes, like what’s wrong with you now?”), as well as questions over the credibility of their injury experiences (e.g., “I would get messages basically asking was I making it up. . . you start to feel like ‘the boy who cried wolf’”) which increased feelings of low self-worth and isolation. Kayleigh reports, “I just avoided being around the track and that question, are you still injured then? People only care when you are relevant but when you’re no longer relevant you’re just cast aside”. As the highs became few and far between and the lows more significant and pronounced, athletes were left questioning their sense of purpose within the sport. Liam reports:

I remember being on a training session and I was like what am I doing with my life? What is the point of this? I’m losing money, I’ve had my funding cut, I’ve had my contract cut, two years in a row. All these negative thoughts and I just stopped and burst into tears in the middle of the session. It was a mental breakdown; I’m telling you because I couldn’t control it. I knew my mind had gone. I was exhausted physically, I was malnourished, mentally I was ill. I was just done.

Unable to see a viable future in the sport, athletes became nostalgic about their past and “what could have been”, which was laden with feelings of “unfulfilled potential” and being “robbed” or “cheated” of an athletic career. Although a termination from elite sport might temporarily liberate the athlete, the regressive nature of this storyline confines them to the actions of their past, and so they remain, perpetually entrapped by the prospect of “what could have been”. Gemma highlights, “It will always be that thing of what could have been. If it weren’t for those injuries, where would I be now, and I’ll always think that even when I’m 50”.

**Longevity Narrative**

The longevity narrative is progressive (i.e., bad to good; cf. Gergen & Gergen 1986), the storyline shifts from a decrease to an increase in wellbeing and athletic trajectory over time, following multiple sports injuries. It bears resemblance to the progressive redemptive narrative, whereby one “progressively overcomes challenges to arrive at some better place further down the line” (Papathomas et al., 2015, p. 7). The redemptive element of this narrative highlights how the “bad is redeemed, salvaged or mitigated or made better in light of the ensuing good” (McAdams et al., 2001, p. 474). In the case of the longevity narrative, *time*, a precious commodity within elite sport (Dohlsten et al., 2020) is integral to this notion of progressive redemption, as it follows the plotline of “Time lost from injury is time gained in the longer term”. Indeed, athletes embodying the longevity narrative viewed their multiple injuries and their associated absence from sport not as time lost, but as an opportunity to “press the reset button” and make necessary changes to help prolong their athletics career. Lucy reports:

Ultimately the injuries were a blessing in disguise as it means that I have much more longevity as a senior athlete. They gave me respite in the middle of a ten-year career and that break I got has fuelled and equipped me for longer. Without that break, and what I learned from it, I wouldn’t be the athlete I am now.

Athletes embodying the longevity narrative reported experiencing a cycle of injuries from between one-to-five years. These injuries were reported to have occurred because of downgrading injury, running in and through pain, and/or rushing to get back to achieve a performance objective. These behaviours reflect an internalisation of the performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006) and the culture of risk (Nixon, 1992). However, over time, athletes reported shifting away from short-term performance objectives towards a more long-term and balanced view of their health, well-being, and performance. For some athletes, this shift in perspective occurred after having endured years of injury, whilst for others, it was related to change in their environment or coaching set-up. Lucy reports:

It was years of running in constant pain, but with (previous coach), it was all about performance, instant gratification, and just patching things up to get me to the next championship. His ethos was high performance and solely that, and not necessarily with an ethos of longevity. Whereas with (current coach), it has been about building an athlete for the future. He has thought me that it’s not always about the next championship, with him it’s like we need to be strong and healthy and ready to run for years, not just one summer at a time.

This change in perspective was reflective of an embodiment of the longevity narrative which promotes the idea of enduring short-term losses from injury for longer term gains in performance and health. The longevity narrative encompasses a broader cultural training philosophy of ‘train smart not hard’ (Stulberg & Magness, 2017), where athletes aim to prioritise consistency over intensity in training. This ‘training smart’ perspective appears to be gathering momentum within elite sport settings (Bargoria et al., 2020), and presents a countervailing storyline to elements of the sport ethic (i.e., pushing the limits and striving for distinction; Hughes & Coakley, 1991) that have dominated elite sport training practices and the literature surrounding it for decades. The following statement reflects the emergence of this cultural shift and underscores the personal and social capacity for evolution and change within elite sport cultures. Tom reports:

There is always that group of athletes that were running in the 80s or 90s that say, ‘all you athletes now are weak, and you don’t train as hard as we did’. But we are trying to ‘train smart not hard’, that’s the mentality and it’s a difference in mentality. So, it might look like we are weak in that respect, but I think it is the layer that we have built on top of training hard. Training hard is also ‘one flavour’, whereas training smart has ‘multiple flavours’ and different things work for different people, so we are still figuring it out.

By internalising the longevity narrative which embodies this ‘training smart’ philosophy, athletes were empowered to disengage from viewing their body in mechanistic (i.e., the body as a machine) terms and create a more compassionate body-self relationship. Tom reports:

You have to accept you’re not superman. Everyone wants to think that they are the one athlete who can train hard and get away with it, but then you get injured, miss a week or two, and you realise that consistency is much more important. You’re not invincible. I know you see those stupid memes online about pushing yourself but it’s bullshit! The body can’t do that all year round.

By accepting that they are not “superman” or “invincible”, athletes embodying the longevity narrative accepted their fragility and sought to use it (cf. Frank 2013). Understanding that “the body can’t do that all year round”, they aimed to work within the remit of what the body could do and engaged in behaviours that sought to promote and endure their physical health. For example, athletes reported confronting injury issues and not letting them fester, incorporating injury prevention strategies into their training, taking days off when necessary to allow their body time to recover from training, and when faced with an injury, allowing it to heal fully, before returning to sport. These behaviours were promoted and reinforced by athletes’ coaches and peers and enabled them to cultivate a symbiotic relationship with their bodies, meaning that time *lost* was in fact time *gained*. By learning to “respect their body and give it what it needs” they were reimbursed by having less time off due to injury or re-injury leading to longer healthier careers and greater long-term performance potential. This coincides with recent research highlighting how attending to health risks is one of the key success factors for high achieving track athletes (Bargoria et al., 2020).

Adopting a more long-term and balanced view of their health and performance also enabled athletes’ embodying the longevity narrative to re-story their previous injuries as a “blessing in disguise” or an “opportunity”. While some athletes indicated how their previous injuries enhanced their sustainability within the sport by enabling them to develop a more holistic perspective (cf. Dohlsten et al., 2020), others were more sport specific. Adam reports:

Those injuries will give me longevity because I was able to work out by the age of 25 how to rehab almost every injury. An athlete who’s been through injuries, knows how to come back from it, whereas some athletes didn’t develop those good practices, and if it happens later in their career, it derails them, and they end up just retiring.

As Adam indicates, the longevity narrative will not only help athletes make sense of their previous or current injury experiences but guide their future actions too. Athletes embodying this longevity narrative have a *guiding story to live by* (cf. Papathomas et al., 2015), which enables them to progressively overcome future adversities and hence extend their life cycle as elite athletes. Extending this life cycle, not only redeems any previous time lost through injury but simultaneously affords athletes more time to reap the benefits of the progressive gains in their personal and sporting development. An elite athlete’s career is often reported to be relatively short-lived and filled with fragility and uncertainty (Barker et al., 2014). Therefore, a narrative that aims to extend one’s career and allow for the harvest of accumulative gains in personal and sporting development, could certainly serve as a useful storyline both in overcoming injury and enhancing sustainability within the precarious world of elite athletics.

**Pendulum Narrative**

The pendulum narrative describes athletes’ stories of injuries that alternated between longevity and performance narratives. This alternation in storylines created perturbations in their well-being and was subject to external (environment) and internal (body self-relationship) influences. The pendulum narrative is littered with stories of contradictions and ambiguity, placing this narrative typology within a liminal space, where individuals “are neither one thing or another or maybe both” (Turner, 1967 p. 96). According to Frank (2013), narratives should not be thought to be mutually exclusive, instead, their ability to coexist depends on the narrative’s degree of stability. The lower the stability, the higher the possibility the storyteller switches from one story to another (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012), while figuring out their own self-story as was exemplified by the participants embodying the pendulum narrative.

For athletes whose stories of injury hung on this pendulum narrative, they highlighted how their personal story historically had a strong alignment with the performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Athletes reported how their previous embodiment of the performance narrative helped frame their formative years of elite athletics, developed their sense of self, and provided them with a pathway towards a viable future. Over time, however, the occurrence of injuries, underperformance, or other sporting adversities, led them to question their embodiment of this performance narrative, as Samantha reports:

After the injury, I went away and trained with different groups, just to get some reflection on myself. Some feedback I got was ‘you want it too much’. That was a good one, but a hard one too, because you get told, work hard, that’s how you get success. But, putting too much work in, giving it 100%, that’s not right either. So that was a bit of an oxymoron to me, a bit contradictory.

Although Samantha begins to question her attachment to some of the beliefs (e.g., “putting too much work in” “giving it 100%”) that underpin the performance narrative, she remains sceptical of an alternative approach. Despite changing her training environment where athletes focus on training ‘smart’ and not ‘hard’ and prioritise their long-term health and performance potential (i.e., longevity narrative), she is still reluctant to depart completely from what she once knew (i.e., performance narrative). As she is faced with a counter-narrative she reports being “torn between the two” and worrying that she is “gone too far the other way”. These sentiments were reinforced by Tom who reports, “I certainly believe in training smart, but I don’t want to turn training smart into training soft”. This dichotomous thinking (training hard versus smart) regarding training is further reflected in the athlete’s approach to injury (performance versus health), and the inner conflicts become more amplified when a goal is at stake. Samantha reports:

Every time, after I’ve been injured, I would have been like ‘oh I don’t want to do that again’. But then you’re in the mix of it again and there’s this goal that you want to achieve and you’re just toying with yourself. Sometimes you’re just so close and you think you can manage a pain; you think your body can override it, but then it just can’t . . . The sports hard, so when you get this little bit of something you can cling onto (sporting goal), that you think you can achieve, it can take over . . . and it’s just trying to remind yourself of what’s important, being smarter I guess, but it’s hard.

These internal battles that Samantha experiences are reminiscent of what Shohet (2007), referred to as an authentic narrative as opposed to a coherent narrative practice. When exploring the narratives of eating disorders, Shohet depicts how those fully recovered reflect a coherent narrative where the plotline follows an orderly and temporal progression, gained through internalising popular master narratives. However, those struggling to recover reflect an authentic narrative, where the plotline is indeterminate, as the individual is more questioning of any explanatory model and affords authenticity at the expense of self-continuity, as they ponder the nature of their experiences. It is this authentic narrative construction that creates these inner conflicts for Samantha, placing her in a torturously confused state as she debates both narratives, neither of which can provide her with an understanding she is happy with (Papthomas & Lavallee, 2012).

In a bid to ‘strike a balance’ between these opposing narratives, athletes embodying the pendulum narrative reported drawing on their body awareness and those around them to help guide their decision-making around injuries and training. Jessica highlighted how, “no one can feel what you feel and it's knowing that as an athlete and reminding yourself of that”, while Tom reported drawing on his coach to hold himself “accountable at both ends”. Over time, athletes described becoming more comfortable and confident with decision-making, finding their own middle ground, as Samantha reports:

I was proud of myself because with this injury every day involved those decisions, am I going to push through today or am I going to back off? When you’ve had a lot of injuries you start to doubt your judgement because it hasn’t quite worked out. But I do have good judgement, it just needed some tweaks and the right people to make it work.

For athletes whose stories reflect the pendulum narrative, they remain in this space between narratives of longevity and performance, sometimes overlapping at either end, sometimes remaining in between. Although the uncertainty of lived experience is often difficult to describe in a story, the pendulum narrative aims to encompass this ‘unsayable’ aspect (McAdams et al., 2013), by capturing this experience of liminality. Optimizing sporting performance while maximising long-term health and performance potential is a contradictory term in elite sport (Baker et al., 2014). For athletes embodying the pendulum narrative, it was grappling with this circulating contradiction, or their previous internalisation of a narrative (i.e., performance) which ultimately failed them which resulted in their hesitation towards adopting a new narrative (i.e., longevity). Although adopting a longevity narrative may have created a more coherent and stable personal story, the infidelity of this narrative to the athletes’ past experiences could also heighten their sense of discomfort in departing completely from the narrative (i.e., performance narrative) that once anchored them. While counter-narratives such as longevity can be useful in initiating reflection (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), our findings highlight how athletes also need more opportunities for narrative construction and reconstruction. Providing narrative opportunities can help make the ‘unsayable’ heard (McAdams et al., 2013) empowering athletes to create their own narrative path in their own time (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012).

**Snowball Narrative**

The snowball narrative depicts a downward trajectory of physical and psychological decline following a series of sports injuries. Athletes embodying the snowball narrative reported how their injuries initially had only minor or inconsequential effects on their well-being. Yet, over time, repeated injuries, or a progressive decline in the nature of their injuries led to greater implications to their well-being. The snowball narrative bears resemblance to the narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004), the prevailing master narrative in relation to aging, which depicts aging as an inevitable downward trajectory of accumulating deficits and diminishing reserves, “representing nothing more than denouncement” (Randall & McKim, 2008, p.4).

For the snowball narrative, we example a group of athletes whose downward spiral of physical and psychological decline stemmed from being socialised into a culture whereby, accepting risks and playing through pain was normalised and deemed necessary to achieve one’s potential (Howe, 2004). Jack acknowledges this indoctrination as he reports:

In that culture and that set-up, injuries were seen as absolutely normal and going to happen, and if you wanted to be an elite athlete then you had to accept that that could happen . . . They were almost seen as a badge of honour in some cases because they just meant you were working hard. If you want to be any good at something then you have to take risks with your body, if you can’t, you’re not going to be an elite athlete, it’s kind of a catch 22, you got to be able to push the limits.

Athletes’ reification of these cultural norms caused them to become embroiled in a ‘fog’ leading to their long-term acceptance of pain and injury (Howe, 2004). As overriding pain served as a social indicator of their athletic commitment and ensured that they were on course to achieve their potential within the sport (Atkinson, 2020), athletes embodying the snowball narrative regularly engaged in risk-taking behaviour such as over-training and competing whilst injured. Over time, as their injuries progressively deteriorated, they aspired to maintain their ability to override or push through pain, by engaging in behaviours that served to distance themselves from their body. Ben reports, “with pain you try and control it, pain never bothered me, I ran my whole career in pain, with pain you can tap out, you can zone out, you can do your massage and mobility afterwards”. However, this reinforcement of mind-body dualism triggered a decline in their body self-relationship, ultimately propelling athlete’s bodies into a state of physical demise that they could no longer ignore, in Ben’s case, a loss of power down his legs. Although Ben reports the incident occurring over-night, the following excerpt highlights how despite disconnecting from his pain, this ‘snowball effect’ of injury may have continued to gather momentum in the background,

Interviewer: You said that you were used to pain?

Ben: Always. At that time of my career, I was wearing two boots at night for my Achilles, it took me 30 minutes to get down the stairs in the morning, an hour and a half to warm up for my morning run, but I could manage it with massage, mobility, core, but when the power stopped, I couldn’t manage that.

Interviewer: You say it happened overnight; can you just talk around that?

Ben: Literally overnight, the next day I tried to do a stride and I couldn’t, just overnight.

Interviewer: Okay and when you were sleeping in boots and it was taking ages to warm up, how long was your body in that condition before this happened?

Ben: Three years (finishes abruptly).

Unfortunately, as Leder (1990) highlights, it is the body’s own tendency towards concealment that allows for the possibility of its neglect or depreciation. Although athletes’ earlier acceptance of pain and injury may have had a minimal impact or even maintained their well-being within the sport. Over time, the physical deterioration that inevitably occurred because of their risk-taking behaviours coincided with a deterioration in their mental well-being. For Jack, despite fighting against his injuries for years, he eventually acquiesces to a narrative of decline, depicting a storyline of accumulating deficits and diminishing reserves as he reports:

You just go from, I never would have doubted myself, but then you start to doubt yourself, you start to doubt your team and you start to just get in on yourself. You’re just carrying a weight on your shoulder and even the running isn’t a release anymore because your hip is this and your ankle is that and everything you do is just work, work, work. So yeah, I guess the writing was on the wall.

Jack’s statement “the writing was on the wall” perhaps reflects his experience of what Freeman (2000), terms narrative foreclosure, which relates to a premature conviction that one’s life story is effectively over. On the one hand, the lack of narrative resources available within these athlete’s subcultures may have constricted their possibility for self-renewal (Griffin & Phoenix, 2014), within the sport, thereby reinforcing the need for a multiplicity of stories to help reframe and re-create one’s experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). However, as powerful as counter stories are, they can also trick us into believing that resisting the dominant narratives and their prevailing fatalistic endings is easy, when in fact one’s body may place its own limitations on what can be resisted and how (Frank, 2010). Unfortunately, for athletes embodying the snowball narrative, they may in fact be too far gone, and self-renewal within elite sport no longer possible. By making stories that reflect the snowball narrative available to service providers, they could warn against the inherent and often invisible dangers that a storyline like this might incur, thus preventing future athletes from snowballing beyond the point of no return, as Ben advises:

Listen to your body and get a good team of people around you. Weigh up each decision well at the start, because one bad decision early on can snowball into more bad decisions that are harder to get back from, so measure twice and cut once even on the little things and then you won’t have to deal with it afterward.

**More to Me Narrative**

The more to me narrative represents athletes who viewed athletics and injury within the broader context of their life and drew on their multiple roles and identities as a means of buffering the negative implications that an injury might present. The more to menarrative embodies the plotline of “My injuries and sport do not define me as there is more to me”. It has close ties with the discovery and relational narratives, where a multidimensional life is promoted and sense of self, identity, and mental well-being are not solely contingent on athletic performance (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Possessing a life where sport has a role but is not the sole focus of one’s existence is often trivialised and silenced within elite sport in the pursuit of a more performance-orientated narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013). However, the ability for athletes embodying the more to me narrative to draw on other aspects of their lives, enabled them to maintain a coherent sense of self and psychological well-being that remained undisrupted by even major or career-ending injuries, as Sarah reports:

I just don’t think my life would have been any different had I been injured or not been injured, made the Olympics or not. It was important to me and it was devastating at the time, but I would much rather have health and family and friends, so in the grand scheme of things, it’s not that big of a deal. I think that’s why I feel quite positive about it all.

Athletes drew upon this more to me narrative in diverse ways, as this storyline meant different things for different people. For some athletes, it signified gaining short-term perspective on their injury experiences by viewing them as opportunities to focus on life outside of athletics. For other athletes, who experienced longer-term injuries, their internalisation of this storyline enabled them to maintain a coherent and consistent sense of self despite injury, as their other roles were still maintained or even enhanced. Finally, for athletes who experienced narrative wreckage (Frank, 2013), where severe or career-ending injuries dislocated them from their previous embodiment of the performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006), the more to me storyline facilitated them in re-constructing and re-framing their experiences of injury. By embodying the more to me plotline, they came to view their injuries as creating opportunities for them to expand themselves beyond the athlete role. Overall, the more to me storyline provided athletes with a sustainable narrative thread enabling them to maintain or regain a coherent sense of well-being and identity irrespective of their injury experiences. Sarah reports:

I just think about from my pride it doesn’t matter; I’m not going to be on my deathbed thinking I can’t get over this (injury). Running is an extra, and if it doesn’t work out then it was just a bonus anyway. As long as I can still have friends, family, and a career, I will always see my life as being a success.

Some athletes described being socialised into this narrative from an early age by either a parent or family member, as Jane reports, “My parents believed that you might always be injured and so you might never reach your potential in sport. So, they encouraged me to have other things in my life and develop other interests and hobbies alongside running”. Other athletes reported shifting towards this perspective towards the latter stages or the end of their athletics career. For athletes who migrated towards this understanding, it appeared to be prompted by either their own awareness of the short-term nature of an athletics career or paralleled a broader cultural movement towards these alternative narratives. Samantha reports:

Maybe it is because I’m getting older, but I definitely feel like there is a big push now around being ‘more than just an athlete’. Whereas before, I don’t really feel like that was promoted. There is definitely a shift now and it’s like you might actually perform better if you have other things in your life. So, I feel like I can give more space and time to develop those things. To be honest, I was a bit annoyed I hadn’t done it before, but then again, I didn’t really feel like that was something I could do.

Although an increased cultural awareness and acceptance of developing oneself beyond sport appears to be emerging (English Institute of Sport, 2019), this is a storyline that remains laced with tension within elite settings. For example, some athletes inferred how this storyline is imbued with negative connotations as it is often promoted once athletes are approaching the end of their athletics careers, is sometimes depicted as a ‘coping mechanism’ for dealing with injury or is offered only when athletes are no longer able to compete due to injury. Furthermore, for athletes who embodied this narrative earlier in their career, they reported feeling increasing pressure to conform to the dominant resilience narrative of injury. Jane reports:

Over the years, everything had become so professional that I felt like the enjoyment was kind of squeezed out of it. Although I was quite relaxed about things, I then felt bad about it afterwards. Usually, when I’m injured, I just focus on other areas of my life but then it became this thing of, well could you have come back quicker if you’d had cross-trained more or done more. I started to think am I just not strong enough or just not cut out to deal with these things.

Considering the above, we would encourage future researchers and practitioners to create a space for these alternative storylines by increasing their acceptance throughout all stages of the athlete socialisation process (cf. Coker-Cranney et al., 2020). Our findings add to the collective body of research that points to the notion that promoting a multidimensional self and a sustainable narrative that continues despite fluctuations in form and fitness, is conducive to the long-term development and well-being of elite athletes (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Further, our findings are also consistent with recent sustainability research within elite athletics, where athletes reported how having a balanced life would enable them to cope with the unpredictable nature of elite sport and in turn assist them in achieving their sporting goals (Dohlsten et al., 2020). By celebrating these stories throughout all stages of an athlete’s career and reducing the stigma attached to the prioritisation of a life outside of elite sport, athletes may be better placed to manage the disruptions induced by injury, reduce the emotional toll of injury, and be better equipped to navigate both through and beyond the tumultuous world of elite sport.

**Conclusion**

This original and rigorous study aimed to explore how the broader socio-cultural narratives that circulate within elite sport settings shape injured athletes’ experiences. From analysing life-story interviews of 15 elite track athletes, we uncovered six injury narrative typologies: Resilience, Merry-Go-Round, Longevity, Pendulum, Snowball, and More to Me. We provided novel insights into how athletes’ experiences of injury, well-being, and athletics careers were influenced by the types of stories they told and the narratives they embodied. In doing so, our study extends the sport injury psychology evidence-base by highlighting how socio-cultural practices and processes (e.g., culture of risk, sport ethic, performance narrative) influenced the thoughts, feeling, and behaviours of athletes throughout the full spectrum of injury, from prevention to rehabilitation, return to sport to retirement and beyond.

Our findings also identified the emergence of some additional socio-cultural sporting practices and values (i.e., training smart, coach’s prioritisation of long-term athlete development, athletes increased awareness and acceptance of developing oneself beyond sport) and highlighted their implications in influencing alternative injury scripts (i.e., longevity, more to me). Although these emerging socio-cultural trends have been identified and spoken about in the mainstream media (English Institute of Sport, 2019; Stulberg & Magnus, 2017), academic examination has been limited, perhaps reflecting their contemporary nature. We would encourage future researchers to explore and story these emerging socio-cultural trends. In doing so, it would not only enrich our understanding of these alternative injury scripts but increase their accessibility as “any one story only has meaning in relation to others” (Frank, 2010, p.54). Furthermore, as Carless and Douglas (2012) suggest, if we, as researchers continue to only listen for and research certain types of stories, then we too “contribute to an impoverished narrative thread” which limits athletes’ future possibilities (p. 396).

In line with enriching athletes’ future possibilities, the narrative typologies identified in this study have several applied implications. First, our findings highlighted how athletes need access to a multiplicity of stories, especially when their current narrative is no longer taking care of them (e.g., resilience) or is problematic to live by (e.g., snowball). By equipping service providers with alternative injury narratives, we could help expand their own injury narrative repertoire so that they could extend that understanding to their athletes. Coaches and service providers are often limited in terms of their own collection of elite injury storylines, and hence either reinforce the culture of risk or propagate their own injury practices (Cavallerio et al., 2016; Nixon, 1992). However, by educating coaches and service providers on alternative injury scripts, it could serve to broaden both their own and in turn their athletes’ potential narratives, thereby offering athletes more opportunities and flexibility to make sense of their injury experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Second, by exposing service providers to certain narratives (e.g., the different temporal phases of the merry-go-round, or the inherent dangers of the snowball narrative), they may be able to anticipate some of the challenges of these storylines. Therefore, intervention strategies can be put in place *before* rather than after problems occur (Brock & Kleiber, 1994; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Such adaptations may reduce the uptake of risk-taking behaviour and better support athletes in managing the disruptions and the personal trauma associated with injury (Williams, 2020).

By storying the diverse meanings of sports injury that exist in an elite sport setting, we have created a space for new perspectives of injury to be heard. These perspectives may counter some of the silences imposed by the dominant perceptions of injury that suppress injured athletes’ experiences by depicting injury as being ‘part and parcel’ of elite sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Nixon, 1992). Practitioners can use these narratives as educational ‘tools’ to help injured athletes (and others) make sense of their experiences (Williams, 2020). By engaging with narratives and discussing them with others, they hold pedagogic potential by offering dialogical encounters of learning and transformation (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Building and expanding upon this study, future researchers would do well to push the boundaries of or breathe new conceptual life into our narrative analysis. For example, narrative analysis has been criticised for maintaining an excessive focus on human meaning-making while neglecting the significance of materiality and the non-human world (Feely, 2020). To address this critique, Smith and Monforte (2020) have encouraged the consideration of new materialism. That is, shifting the analytical focus from stories and narratives to assemblages, whereby narratives and the material world are given the same ontological status. For example, how do injured athletes’ material world (e.g., bodies, rehabilitative environments, sporting equipment) coalesce with the narrative typologies presented here? Furthermore, other dualisms are collapsed in new materialism (e.g., human/environment, reason/emotion, mind/matter). Therefore, the conventional view of sport injury, that has dominated the literature, of the social, psychological, and biological (cf. Brewer et al., 2002) as separate domains of reality is abandoned. This invitation from Smith and Monforte (2020) provides an exciting and novel trajectory of future research in this field and has the potential to lead to a more transdisciplinary rather than multi or interdisciplinary discourse.

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