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Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rqrs21

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To cite this article: Ciara Everard, Ross Wadey & Karen Howells (2023) Sharing and discussing sports injury narratives with elite athletes: reflecting on member reflections, Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 15:4, 501-515, DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2022.2152083

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2022.2152083

Published online: 28 Nov 2022.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SPORT, EXERCISE AND HEALTH
2023, VOL. 15, NO. 4, 501–515
https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2022.2152083

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Sharing and discussing sports injury narratives with elite athletes: reflecting on member reflections

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ABSTRACT

While the notion of creating and sharing multiple narratives in sport, exercise, and health settings to promote a more diverse landscape is often discussed, the process of, and tensions in doing so are less articulated. Extending a previous study that identified the narrative typologies that scaffold elite athletes' stories of sports injury experiences , the aim of this study was to critically reflect (i.e. introspective, intersubjective), on member reflections with participants to understand how these storylines were received and interpreted. Data was analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Using narrative theory as a theoretical lens , five reflexive themes were identified: (a) confronting the dominant narrative, (b) embracing new materialism, (c) extending boundaries of tellability, (d) linear and polyphonic narratives, and (e) symbolic violence. This study provides evidence of how the process of member reflections can enrich and extend our theoretical understandings and offers considerations about how to shift our social and cultural worlds to become more inclusive and diverse.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 January 2022
Accepted 21 November 2022

KEYWORDS
Athlete; stories; qualitative research; reflexivity; sport injury

Introduction

Storytelling is a fundamental condition of human life, integral to the survival of the human species (Harari 2014). Through the stories we learn to tell ourselves about our lives and our bodies, we construct identities, impose order on our experiences, and make sense of the actions in our lives (Phoenix and Sparkes 2009). Due to the inherent capacity of stories and storytelling, researchers have turned their focus to the interpretation of stories, through narrative inquiry (Brett and Sparkes 2009). Narrative inquiry is premised on the assumption that although we may tell unique stories of our experiences, they are derived from the narrative scripts available within our culture as they help to structure, locate, and underpin our storytelling (Frank 2010). Through a narrative lens (Frank 2010), a story can be viewed as a specific tale an individual or group tells. Meanwhile, a narrative can be understood as a socio-cultural plotline or discourse that individuals rely on to construct their personal stories, as they provide a template that helps connect events by providing an overarching explanation or consequence (Brett and Sparkes 2009). In this sense, although individuals may tell tales of their experiences, they are 'never wholly a personal production' (Frank 2010, p.14) as they are derived from a cultural repertoire of narratives that become assembled into personal stories. However, narratives are not only resources for telling personal stories, but are actors in that they do things on, for, in and with people by teaching them what to pay attention to and how to respond to the events occurring within their lives (Frank 2010).

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Implicit within narrative inquiry is the assumption that the more narratives an individual has access to, the more opportunity and flexibility they have to experience life in diverse and meaningful ways (Brett and Sparkes 2009). Therefore, if one narrative becomes dominant and silences alternative ways of being, difficulties can arise, as individuals are restricted to one storyline within which to frame, express, and understand both their own and others' experiences (Brett and Sparkes 2009). In these instances, Frank (2010) and Brett and Sparkes (2009) argued, that there is a need to increase the accessibility and availability of alternative narratives within an individual's social and cultural world. By doing so, individuals have greater flexibility in making sense of their experiences, marginalised perspectives have a greater voice, and individuals can expand both their own and others' empathy and understanding of diverse personal experiences. Multiple storylines also offer individuals more potential possibilities for re-storying their experiences if the dominant narrative no longer fits their experiences or becomes problematic to live by (Brett and Sparkes 2009). Therefore, our exposure and access to inclusive and diverse narratives are important as the possibilities for living differently and taking care of ourselves and others are enhanced (Brett and Sparkes 2009).

Within the context of elite sport, the *performance narrative* has been identified as the dominant narrative that shapes and constrains athletes' subjective worlds (Douglas and Carless 2006). The performance narrative represents a totalitarian view of 'life is sport and sport is life', whereby sport takes central place in elite athletes' lives to the exclusion of other areas of life and self (Douglas and Carless 2006). Within the performance narrative, winning is prioritised above all else and pain, discipline, and sacrifice are accepted in the quest for success (Douglas and Carless 2006; Williams 2020). Athletes have been shown to go to extreme lengths to align their lives to the performance narrative, including identity foreclosure, compromising education, and continuing to compete and train when injured (Williams 2020). Recently, Barker-Ruchti et al. (2019) indicated how injury often gets integrated into this broader performance narrative, which negates and normalises the injury experience for athletes, by incorporating it as an expected outcome from participation in elite sport. This normalisation has led to repeated calls in the literature to story sports injury experiences to create and offer alternative injury narratives that challenge this dominant performance narrative and expand the narrative repertoire (Barker-Ruchti et al. 2019; Williams 2020).

Answering these calls, a recent study identified six sports injury narratives (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021): *resilience, merry-go-round*, *longevity, pendulum, snowball*, and *more-to-me*. By identifying and foregrounding diverse injury narratives and aligning with narrative inquiry (Frank 2010), the authors proposed that these narratives could be used to broaden injury narrative landscapes and thus expand athletes' opportunities make sense of their injury experiences (Goodson and Gill 2011). However, while this notion of creating and sharing multiple narratives to help cultivate inclusive and diverse narrative landscapes is often discussed and recommended, the process of doing so is less articulated. This limited understanding is surprising, especially given that Frank (2010) depicts that offering more narratives does not necessarily mean that individuals will engage with them. It is important, therefore, that in aiming to broaden narrative landscapes and extend opportunities to frame and interpret human experiences, that narrative researchers not only identify diverse narratives but also understand how individuals engage with them. One methodological tool that can help to provide such insight for narrative researchers we argue is member reflections (Smith and McGannon 2018).

Member reflections are a relational process that involves sharing and discussing research findings *with* participants. Put another way, 'it is a *practical opportunity* to acknowledge and/or explore *with* participants the existence of contradictions and differences in knowing' (Smith and McGannon 2018, 108). In doing so, this co-participatory process and dialogue is argued to have the potential to lead to more robust and intellectually enriched understandings. This relational process of sharing research findings with participants has also been identified as critical in enabling tensions to be uncovered, problematised, and reflected upon, leading to further understanding and theorisation (Francesca, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2020; Smith and McGannon 2018). Member reflections, therefore, might hold

important implications for narrative researchers. To expand, by sharing and discussing findings with participants, it could help generate additional insights into how participants engage with diverse narratives. These insights could be further reflected upon, problematised, theorised (Frank 2010), and used to generate further understandings and considerations regarding the process of shifting social and cultural worlds to become more inclusive and diverse (Goodson and Gill 2011).

Building upon and extending a previous study that identified diverse sport injury narratives (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021), and aligning with calls for narrative researchers to critically interpret how individuals respond to narratives (Smith and Sparkes 2011); this study aims to reflect upon the collaborative process of sharing and discussing injury narratives and further theorise how elite athletes engaged with them. In doing so, we hope to problematise the challenges and tensions of storying and sharing diverse narratives and generate insight into how the member reflections process can offer enriched theoretical understandings and applied considerations for cultivating more inclusive narrative landscapes.

Methods

Philosophical positioning

Informed by narrative theory that proposes that our lives are storied and that the self is narratively constructed (Frank 2013), 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, whereas the construction of knowledge is believed to be subjective and value-laden (Smith and Deemer 2000).

Narrative study

The member reflections presented in this current paper were carried out in a wider study that explored the socio-cultural narratives that circulate in elite sports cultures and influence injured athletes' experiences (viz. Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021). Following university ethical approval from the first author's institution, 15 elite track athletes were interviewed using a life history methodology and timelining on two or three occasions over 18 months. Following completion of the interviews, data were analysed using dialogical narrative analysis (Frank 2010) and six injury narratives were identified:

- Resilience Narrative: Describes a maintenance in well-being and athletic trajectory despite injury setbacks. Within the resilience narrative injury is viewed as a physical problem to be 'fixed', as it follows the plotline of 'yesterday I was healthy, today I am injured but through working hard, I will be healthy and perform again' (3).
- Merry-Go-Round Narrative: Reflects a cyclical plot of highs and lows where chronic and recurring sports injuries continually affected athletes' well-being and sporting careers. Athletes' stories started with 'what could be', shifted to 'what should be', and ended reflecting on 'what could have been' (4).
- Longevity Narrative: A progressive storyline of 'time lost from injury is time gained in the longer term' as athletes aim for a more balanced and long-term view of their health, well-being, and performance (5).
- Pendulum Narrative: Athletes' stories of injuries that alternated between longevity and performance narratives, subject to external (environment) and internal (body self-relationship) influences.
- Snowball Narrative: A downward trajectory of physical and psychological decline following a series of sports injuries. It encapsulates the normalisation of risk-taking behaviours and sporting cultural norms on athletes' physical and mental well-being.

- More to Me Narrative: Athletics and injury are viewed within the broader context of athletes' lives as this storyline embodies the plotline of 'my injuries and sport do not define me as there is more to me' (8).

Procedure

Following completion of the study, thirteen out of the 15 participants engaged in member reflections. This process involved sharing and engaging with the participants the six injury narratives with them. Each narrative was communicated aurally by the first author and involved outlining the plot of each narrative to participants, the temporal phases of each narrative, and the consequences of each narrative on athletes' well-being and sporting careers. We decided to share all six narratives with each participant so as not to categorise or finalise participants, by indicating that their story aligned with a certain narrative, as well as supporting the notion of giving individuals access to multiple injury narratives (Frank 2010). Once the first author shared each narrative, participants were invited with a broad, open-ended question: What is your impression of this narrative? Ideas and issues raised by the participants were followed up with curiosity-driven follow-up questions in the form of probes. To provoke further reflection and dialogue, two closing questions were asked: What narrative(s) grabbed your attention the most? and What narrative(s) do you think are most common or uncommon and why? Interviews took place either in-person, online, or via mobile or telephone interviewing subject to COVID-19 requirements. Each interview lasted between 50 to 120 minutes, was recorded, and transcribed verbatim. To protect participant confidentiality, all identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms were used.

These member reflection interviews informed the construction of the finalised narratives (viz. Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021). However, we also reflected upon how the process of sharing these injury narratives with participants led to additional tensions and challenges of engaging participants with them. These conversations and debates were further reflected upon by engaging in reflexivity (i.e. reflexive journaling) which is an active process that involves reflection, examination, scrutiny, and interrogation of the research process including the subjectivity of the researcher, the research participants, the data produced, and the context of the research itself (Renganathan 2009). To contextualise this process of reflexivity, it is important to acknowledge that I, the first author, had competed in elite athletics for over 10 years and encountered several injuries throughout that timeframe. These experiences coupled with my knowledge as a physiotherapist working within sport positioned me as an 'insider' (Berger 2015), which impacted the dialogue between myself and the participants (Smith and Deemer 2000). Given this insider status, my research philosophy (i.e. interpretivism), and that member reflections are a collaborative process, it was decided to utilise both introspective reflexivity (i.e. a process of using self-understanding for interpretations and general insight; Finlay 2002), and intersubjective reflexivity (i.e. a process of reflecting on the researcher concerning the participants; Finlay 2002). These processes of introspective and intersubjective reflexivity (Finlay 2002) were developed using a research journal, to help situate my own identities, with myself ultimately becoming a site of analysis and the subject of critique (McGannon and Metz 2010). To illustrate, I used this reflexive journal to help 'see' myself within the member reflections encounters by questioning my reactions to situations; to explore my own biases and assumptions, and to acknowledge viewpoints outside of my own (e.g. questioning my assumption that the performance narrative is oppressive). Moreover, I used it to consider how my experiences and background may frame how I interpret situations (e.g. how my physiotherapist background may influence my understanding of the merry-go-round) by questioning what do I know, why do I know it, and how do I know it? (McGannon and Metz 2010). To further develop these reflexive processes, I shared these reflections, the transcribed interviews, and my interpretations of the data with my co-authors on a regular basis who provided a theoretical sounding board by posing challenging

questions to me and encouraging reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations (Smith and McGannon 2018).

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the dataset (i.e. reflexive journal and member reflections transcripts) (Braun and Clarke 2020). An RTA was chosen as it enabled us to analyse the data deductively (i.e. using the pre-existing narratives as a lens through which to interpret the data; Braun and Clarke 2022), inductively (e.g. participants' responses to the diverse injury narratives), reflexively, and theoretically. The use of this method of analysis also enabled us to elicit an enriched understanding into how and why interpersonal tensions, reactions, and responses to the diverse injury narratives may have occurred by interrogating and unpacking both their semantic and latent meanings (Braun and Clarke 2020, 2022). The first step of a RTA involved the first author familiarising herself with the data through immersion, which involved reading and re-reading the dataset. Initial codes were then created which aimed to capture significant meanings of the dataset relevant to the research question (i.e. how elite athletes engage with diverse injury narratives). To this end, data from the member reflections transcripts were highlighted and coded (e.g. 'rejecting the snowball narrative'). The first author's reflexivity journal was further consulted to explore and code her experiences of storying and sharing these narratives with participants, (e.g. 'feeling vulnerable', 'feeling side-lined'). Following this stage, initial codes were collated to form overarching themes. This process also involved drawing upon theory to build analytical depth (e.g. tellability; Norrick 2005), further reflexivity on the first author's reflections using critical friends' discussions (Smith and McGannon 2018), and further data immersion to re-create the 'context' and feel of the data. The themes were then further reviewed, collapsed, and refined by comparing them against the coded extracts and sending written drafts to members of the research team for alternative interpretations and review. Given the theoretical underpinnings of these themes (i.e. from pre-existing narratives and narrative theory), they were named to reflect these theoretical concepts. To provide a coherent, rich, and nuanced account of the overall story, each theme was constructed around any interpersonal tensions that emerged from participants' responses to one narrative, and interpersonal tensions that emerged, in the context of the other narratives presented. Five reflexive themes were identified.

Results

Confronting the dominant narrative

The resilience narrative is reflective of the dominant restitution narrative of health (Frank 2013) and promotes the idea that 'working hard' will return athletes to their pre-injury state. It is the dominant injury storyline within elite sport, promoted as the story athletes should live by and should tell about injury (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021). However, this narrative does not always fit injured athletes' experiences (e.g. when injury can't be fixed), which reinforces the need for a multiplicity of storylines (Frank 2013). Yet, during the member reflections, the dominance of the resilience narrative was reiterated, with the participants validating the notion that this was the 'right' and 'only' way to approach injury. This dominance was further articulated in the participants' reactions to alternative injury narratives, as I witnessed and noted how quickly and easily, they were silenced and marginalised. For example, the following reflexive notes provide insight into an exchange with one participant who embodied the resilience narrative:

> The participant today displayed a cold demeanour, portraying injuries as being 'no big deal … my problem to deal with on my own and who cares, it's not the end of the world'. When presented with injury narratives that differed from his own experiences, such as the merry-go-round, he responded in an unempathetic fashion, 'I think that's quite a common attitude to injury within athletics … I guess the injury just becomes a mental block and they keep finding excuses for stuff … I know a load of athletes who say, "my body let me down", but really

> did they do the rehab? Eventually, after discussing all six storylines, he concluded by saying, "in my opinion, the resilience narrative is the best one as it is the most logical steps towards getting better . . . I'd hope that I could put myself in that category and I'd also hope that other people would want to be like that too". Challenging him on how not all injured athletes' experiences fit that storyline, he immediately became defensive and deflected towards my own injury experiences, posing several challenging and closed-ended questions to me. For example, 'do you think you wasted time after *your* injuries? Do you think if *you* had done more, it would have helped you more these past few years?'

Feeling the heat rise within my body, and quickly averting my gaze, I scrambled to respond and not react to his interrogation. I tried to contextualise my injury experiences for him, but I found it difficult to convey such a complex and emotional experience within the same narrow parameters that he afforded for his own injuries. I had also allowed him to speak about his injury experiences, in his own words, and in the context of his full life history. Yet, I did not feel that he allowed me the same freedom and capacity to articulate my own injury experiences. Eventually, I succumbed to the assumption that I had not worked hard enough to overcome my injury, thereby failing to return to my previous standards of performance and defaulting to structuring my injury story around the dominant resilience narrative. Reflecting upon this encounter myself and with my co-authors, I became increasingly aware of how the resilience narrative had dominated and shaped our conversation; the exchange had allowed his type of injury story to breathe and create the contours within which I had to express my own and others' injury experiences.

The above encounter provides a window into the challenging and confrontational nature of everyday interactions whereby resisting and contesting these dominant narratives occurs (Phoenix and Sparkes 2009). It aligns with previous research which reports how athletes are often silenced by dominant narrative scripts and report needing to 'play the part of the athlete' (Carless and Douglas 2013, 704), which involves manipulating their personal story to fit the dominant cultural script (Carless and Douglas 2013; McGannon, Staden, and McMahon 2021). Reflections generated from the above encounter, also provide evidence of how 'notoriously evidence resistance' dominant narratives can be. Not only do they absorb opposition, but they can also prevent it from rising in the first place (Nelson 2001, 201). Drawing upon narrative theory (Frank 2013) to contextualise these findings, we offer some interpretations. First, dominant narratives such as the resilience narrative are totalitarian and so can stifle alternative dialogue by creating the conditions that restrict the capacity for an alternative storyline to emerge (Douglas and Carless 2006). Athletes embodying dominant narratives can also possess a sense of self that is contingent on this all-encompassing perspective and so when questioned, they can quickly become defensive or deflect to protect their own identities (Douglas and Carless 2006). Inherent within that deflection is that those who tell alternative stories risk being ostracised from a community; hence they are easily silenced or suppressed (Douglas and Carless 2009). Within the context of the above encounter, the capacity of a dominant perspective to dictate also resided in the 'high-degree of rhetoric finessing' (Bamberg 2004, 363) required to articulate a counter-story. After reflecting alone and with my co-authors I recognised that I had not claimed authorship over my injury story yet and thus my ability to voice it was limited.

By bringing these tensions to the fore, and theoretically interpreting them, we can begin to problematise how we may counteract the challenges of making alternative perspectives heard. For example, the above encounter raises awareness of the importance of both researchers, athletes, and supporting networks recognising how their own 'stories, lives, and actions may be hidden, normalised, and naturalised by a dominant narrative script'. (Douglas 2014, 240) Indeed, it is imperative that we collectively reflect upon our own storylines, to ensure that we do not serve to perpetuate an 'impoverished narrative thread' (Carless and Douglas 2013, 396), by either defaulting to reiterating dominant discourses or scaffolding dialogical encounters so that it limits the capacity for another storyline to emerge. Furthermore, as counter-narratives only come into being with the stories they resist, the above encounter foregrounds the need to provide athletes with the opportunity and space to 'rhetorically finesse' (Bamberg 2004, 363) their alternative injury stories and thus claim ownership over their embodiment of counter-narratives. Indeed, insights generated from the above

reflections extend our understandings of how we may begin to offer relational resistance to the capacity of dominant injury narratives in negating, trivialising, and marginalising storytellers of a different perspective (Douglas and Carless 2009).

Embracing new materialism

In stark contrast to the dominant resilience narrative, with its cold, detached, and staccato rhythm, the merry-go-round storyline is taut with pain and anguish, ripe with emotions, and brimming with complexity and nuance (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021). When presenting this narrative to the participants whose injury experiences represented the 'constant ups and downs' of this narrative's shifting plotlines, feelings of embarrassment, shame, and frustration were observed to 'bubble' to the surface. These feelings stemmed from participants' reflection on the lack of credibility and understanding that their injury experiences received by those within their sporting network. Simon reported:

> It was just so frustrating, one day the Achilles would be fine and the next day I could barely walk. So, your coach is just looking at you like this doesn't add up. Because I was injured for so long, people assumed that I hadn't been doing the rehab, which I had, but it just wasn't fixing it . . . so a lot of times I would just play the injury down and do the training session, which is not a sensible thing to do but felt easier than letting people down.

This lack of recognition and understanding of injury experiences that are cyclical, repetitive, and ongoing in nature is well documented in the literature (McGannon, Staden, and McMahon 2021; Russell and Wiese-Bjornstal 2015). Indeed, athletes who incur overuse, chronic, or repetitive strain injuries are often reported to experience a mental health toll far greater than those who experience acute injuries due to their ambiguity, invisibility, and persistent nature (Russell and Wiese-Bjornstal 2017). Against this backdrop, and from reflecting upon participants' reactions to this merry-go-round narrative, I began to contemplate if an understanding of the physiological nature of these athletes' injuries (i.e. chronic and recurring tendinopathies) was necessary to help create a space for these injury experiences to be validated and accepted. For example, drawing upon my physiotherapy background and the extensive physiological literature on chronic tendinopathies, I was aware that rehabilitation is unlikely to 'fix' the injury but will at best *manage* symptoms (i.e. pain, swelling, function) (Cardoso et al. 2019). The nature of pain can be unpredictable due to chronic pain sensitisation and despite the efforts of several leading researchers in the field, 'tendon pain remains an enigma . . . It is baffling for clinicians and scientists alike. It is difficult to understand why it is so persistent and why it comes and goes with little reason'. (Rio et al. 2014, 9)

Reflecting upon these inherent physiological components with my co-authors, we began to consider if a material appreciation could extend our representation of this injury narrative. For example, we concluded the merry-go-round storyline by depicting how athletes were confined by the actions of their past, perpetually entrapped by the 'what could have been' plotline (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021, 5). Yet, now we re-considered, how these athletes were not only confined by the linguistics (e.g. 'what could have been') they employed but by the materiality of their bodies, which may have also restricted their ability to experience injury differently (Smith and Monforte 2020). This realisation was further provoked by reflections on these participants' reactions to alternative injury narratives such as longevity. Gemma reported, 'that was the mentality I had when I was injured, if I can miss out now, I'll get it back at the end. But in my case, my body did just kind of give up on me'. Although counter-narratives are often offered as a panacea to confining storylines, this response made us question, even if counter-narratives are made culturally available, are they always materially accessible? Athletes' responses to the longevity narrative also incited feelings of guilt and apprehension. By depicting these injury storylines without accounting for material factors, were we further negating their injury experiences and compounding the shame and pain they felt by inferring that they could experience injury differently, as Liam responded:

> In terms of the nature of the injury and what I did to the body, the damage was done. Time-travel, yes, I would have approached it like that longevity one from the start. But I only know those things now having been through them.

These concerns identified by reflecting upon participants' responses, led to a reconsideration of this merry-go-round storyline. However, 'injecting' this narrative with a biological understanding of injury was not without its epistemological and ontological concerns. As we believe that knowledge is constructed and fallible (Smith and Deemer 2000), we questioned, do we really know the 'true' nature and realities incurred from these participants' injuries? Are all chronic tendinopathies unrecoverable and so alternative ways of experiencing injury are foreclosed? However, accounting for the need for a materialised sensitivity to this storyline and addressing these onto-epistemological concerns, fortunately, at the time of writing, new theoretical concepts were being integrated into narrative inquiry, named *new materialism* (Smith and Monforte 2020). New materialism aims to address the critique of constructivism having an excessive focus on human meaning-making without accounting for material factors by shifting the analytical focus from stories and narratives to assemblages, whereby narratives and the material world are given the same ontological status (Smith and Monforte 2020). New materialism aims to deconstruct the language/reality dichotomy by operating from neither a post-positivism nor social constructivism viewpoint but instead cutting through this divide by adopting a *flat* ontology and proposing that the sociocultural world and the material world are mutually articulated forces that maintain a symbiotic relationship (Monforte 2018). Under the rubric of new materialism, the material body is viewed not in terms of what it is (i.e. its nature) but how it acts (i.e. its agentic capacity). Therefore, it avoids simplistic essentialist ideas of the human body, whilst allowing for a consideration of the capacity of the body to coalesce with stories to coproduce certain injury experiences (Monforte 2018).

Embracing the concepts of new materialism allowed us to further problematise and theorise over how we could extend our theoretical understanding of this merry-go-round narrative in new, exciting, and thought-provoking directions. For example, as new materialism foregrounds the body, placing it in the same ontological plane as the stories we tell about our experiences, it could generate a more nuanced understanding of how athletes' bodies act to trigger the various 'peaks and troughs' of this storyline and co-create the periods of uncertainty and chaos depicted within this narrative. Creating this contextualised understanding might cultivate greater empathy towards these athletes' injury experiences by accounting for not only the social and cultural influences but how their material bodies and rehabilitative environments may have also co-constructed these experiences. Furthermore, raising our awareness of the performative capacities of material forces could create new opportunities for athletes to re-frame their injury experiences. For example, by adopting a new materialism lens, we could observe how the following participant's depiction of her 'spikes' (i.e. training shoes), could be perpetuating the 'ups and downs' of the merry-go-round cycle, as Kayleigh reports, 'I would almost shudder when I saw them. I knew that once I wore them, the Achilles would flare up again'. By altering these material objects or encouraging athletes to story and potentially re-story their experiences around them, it is likely to extend the opportunities available to athletes to experience injury in diverse and multiple ways. Indeed, by breathing new conceptual life into this narrative, it could help create new understandings that offer athletes new opportunities to voice their experiences and thus create new possibilities to move beyond this storyline's confining experiences. Accordingly, these reflections and theoretical interpretations provide more generalised insights into how certain narratives may require a materialised sensitivity (Smith and Monforte 2020) to enhance the possibilities for individuals to make sense of the experiences they contain and to evoke the validation, empathy, and understanding that they warrant within an individual's social and cultural world.

Extending boundaries of tellability

The realities of 'lifting the veil' on the darker side of elite sport were exposed during participants' responses to the snowball narrative (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021). Several researchers have

called for the need to showcase stories that expose the material consequences of athletes abiding by the dominant performance narrative and sport ethic (i.e. pushing their limits, striving for distinction; Hughes and Coakley 1991; McGannon, Staden, and McMahon 2021), such as those embedded within the snowball narrative (i.e. stories of physical and psychological decline). By doing so, researchers theorise that it can help resist these dominant cultural norms and values including 'playing through pain' or 'sacrificing one's body for sport' by invoking discussion regarding their problematic nature and their implications on athletes' physical and mental well-being (McGannon, Staden, and McMahon 2021). However, when presented with the snowball narrative most athletes immediately foreclosed any further discussion by instantly distancing themselves from this storyline, exemplified in Sarah's response, 'no, I don't resonate with that at all, it sounds like an addict'. Nevertheless, when prompted further (e.g. do you know anyone else whose experiences may resonate with this storyline?), they offered insight into this cultural script and the behaviours it promotes, indicating that it was indeed a storyline not too far beyond the realm of their awareness. John reported:

> It's like that horrible question: Would you win a gold medal at the Olympics if it meant that you were going to spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair, most athletes would say 'Yes' to that, which is bad . . . I mean the sport just isn't worth that, surely?

Their reaction stirred a deep curiosity within me: Why were athletes so unwilling to discuss this storyline? Why did they feel the need to instantly reject and distance themselves from it? After all, athletes embodying the snowball narrative epitomise the revered sport ethic (Hughes and Coakley 1991); they pushed the boundaries of their physical and mental capabilities and although surpassing these limits incited their demise, they can leave the sport knowing that they gave it their all, surely fulfilling their sporting ethical duties. Why then did it invoke such a reaction in the participants? Was I articulating their fears? Does it highlight the darker side of sport that athletes do not wish to consider? Discussing these issues further with my co-authors coupled with reading around the concept of tellability, helped to situate and problematise these concerns.

Tellability refers to a gradient dimension of narrative negotiated by the teller and the listener in particular local contexts (Ochs and Capps 2001). The lower boundary of tellability refers to that which is sufficient to warrant listener interest and the upper boundary is where the story can become no longer tellable, as it upsets listeners by going beyond that which is deemed appropriate or acceptable to hear (Norrick 2005). Eakin (2004, 3) discussed the precarious balance that life writers often find themselves in-between 'not telling the truth' and 'telling too much truth'. When a story's tellability moves towards this upper boundary, then individuals can become quick in dismissing their identification with it, as it becomes unwelcome and difficult to hear (Eakin 2004).

Considering the participants' reactions coupled with these issues of upper boundary tellability (Norrick 2005), we began to consider our portrayal of this storyline. This contemplation was further provoked by a conversation with a participant whose injury experiences, I felt, in ways had since reflected this snowball narrative. Yet, when presented with this narrative, he instantly rejected any affiliation with it. I then gently reminded him of a media article in which he spoke about neglecting his physical health and pushing things too far, leading to a string of injuries and underperformances from which he had only just recovered. Confronted with this information, he expressed being extremely angry that the article had 'pinned' him to 'that story', criticising the media for exaggerating his issues to make a point, which deflected from his own messaging that neglecting physical health 'can be subtle and can happen to anyone'. This member reflection remained with me as I debated with my co-authors how 'best' to portray the snowball narrative. I had explained to athletes that this narrative was graded; the extent of the demise was dependent on the extent to which athletes let things snowball. Nevertheless, the examples we had of athletes embodying and exemplifying this storyline were in some ways, extreme cases. Were we too exaggerating the issue to make a point? Were we telling 'too much truth' (Eakin 2004,3) and would a more subtle portrayal of this narrative help maintain it within the boundaries of tellability so that it would be heard?

These issues were further complicated as one of the main participants (i.e. Ben) whose stories of injury reflected this snowball narrative was unavailable for member reflections, despite several attempts made. Therefore, I was left reconsidering were these athletes' experiences represented? Navigating issues of interpretative authority is murky water, especially for a neophyte researcher. Seeking refuge I returned to the data, reflexivity journal, critical friends, and the multiple texts that helped to crystallise thinking around this narrative. Reading Ben's story for the umpteenth time, I was reminded of his internalisation of these sporting cultural norms (Hughes and Coakley 1991), and the extent to which he had let his physical and psychological health decline, which he himself depicted clearly. Yet, I was also acutely aware that it was between the fissures of the stock responses to which he clung very tightly, it was underneath the silences, it was in his hidden gestures, his tone of voice, and his sequencing of phrases, that this narrative was also created. As narrative theorists, all aspects of textual discourse are taken seriously, all have inherent meaning, and so are interpreted freely (Josselson 2011). However, how could he possibly know that and if he were presented with this storyline, would he reject it with the same veracity as the other participants? Would he too be angry that we had colonised his experiences and funnelled them into 'that story' (cf. Caddick, Cooper, and Smith 2019)?

Against the backdrop of navigating these contentious issues, the words of Francesca, Wadey, and Wagstaff (2020) provided some clarity. They contested the need of researchers to stand up for the purpose that they claim for the research and highlighted how, 'If we argue that we hope for our research to promote change, raise awareness, and provoke discussion, then we need to be ready to face both the positive and the negative consequences of our aims'. (Francesca, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2020, 56). Reflecting upon our contextual challenges, we agreed that our role as narrative researchers was to share these untold stories, to shed light on those experiences that are too often silenced and suppressed, swept under the proverbial rug of 'this is sport'. These member reflections helped identify the conditions that negate the telling of 'untold' stories (i.e. the upper boundaries of tellability; Norrick 2005), which we hoped to challenge

This theme has enabled us to recognise the importance of not diluting athletes' stories to make them more accessible but instead extending the boundaries of what people are willing to listen to by making these stories heard (Brett and Sparkes 2008). First, so those experiencing this snowball narrative have the opportunity for narrative repair by believing that their experiences are deemed worthy of hearing and so they become willing to share them (Brett and Sparkes 2008). Second, and aligning with current research (McGannon, Staden, and McMahon 2021), to warn against the inherent dangers that a storyline, like the snowball narrative, can incur and thus invoke problematisation and discussion so that one's devastating ending could prevent another's beginning (Frank 2010). By reflecting upon and further theorising participants' reactions to this storyline, we hope to have provided critical and nuanced insights regarding the challenges narrative researchers may face in storying and sharing 'untellable' injury stories, that showcase the negative implications of internalising dominant cultural scripts. By identifying these issues and bringing them to the fore, we can enrich our theoretical understanding of how we may give presence to these marginalised perspectives, and resist dominant cultural norms, by affording these 'untold' injury stories the opportunity to breathe (Frank 2010).

Linear and polyphonic narratives

Counter-narratives are advocated as a means of liberating and emancipating agency by resisting dominant perspectives (Bamberg 2004) and offering individuals alternative ways of storying their experiences, should the needs and conditions arise (Brett and Sparkes 2009). Cautioning this outlook, researchers warn against giving counter-narratives too much credence, as individuals may not engage with them (Frank 2010). Making sense of the events in our lives is after all 'a fluid process which involves taking on board certain stories while allowing other competing stories to float in the river of not for me'. (Frank 2006, 424) For several participants, the longevity narrative, which presents

a countervailing perspective to athletes' health, well-being, and performance potential, was viewed as 'not for me'.

Central to athletes' rejection of this competing storyline was the predilection of those competing within elite sport to adopt a performance narrative, which is at odds with the longevity narrative (Douglas and Carless 2006). The performance narrative lionises the idea that prioritising performance outcomes and epitomising the sport ethic (Hughes and Coakley 1991), by taking risks and challenging limits is the *only* way of achieving success within elite sport. The strongest countervailing argument against the longevity narrative took the form of this domineering performance perspective. Laura reported:

> I just think if you're too cautious you're not going to be able to compete with the best. I'd prefer to take the risk, rather than take more days off and stay in one piece, but then find I can't compete with the best ones anyway.

The entrenched nature of this performance narrative creates a stifling context for other ways of approaching both injuries and training to emerge. In attempting to 'de-stabilise, devalue, and decolonise' master narratives, Nelson (2001, 167) highlights how we must point out the inconvenient truths of these dominant perspectives and put more counter-narratives into circulation. Accordingly, I challenged the above participant; gently reminding her of the various injuries she had endured because of her embodiment of this perspective and referencing other elite athletes adopting this longevity approach. Yet, master narratives possess the twin capacity to deprive opportunity and infiltrate consciousness as individuals may come to internalise them as part of their identity (Nelson 2001). This was exemplified in Laura's response:

> I mean it is an outlook I would love to have on things, but there is the athlete you wish you could be and the one you are. Sadly, as much as I like to think I've changed having gone through all the injuries, I just don't think I have. I would still push through things, even though I would be thinking 'oh last time I did this I got injured'. The (performance group) are like that though, and they do still run well. But I'd still be more reckless than cautious. I think that's just how I am and I'm probably just going to keep going like that, to be honest.

Although I was frustrated that I was met with such resistance to this longevity narrative, it was this very resistance that prompted me to explore further. Reflecting upon this encounter with my co-authors, we began to consider what does this performance narrative *give* athletes and why do they cling to it with such certainty and in such an all-encompassing manner, especially after it has led them into periods of burn-out, injury, and underperformances as this participant herself had noted? Aside from the value placed upon the performance narrative (Douglas and Carless 2006, 2009), some of the answers to the above may reside in these narratives' contrasting structures (Ezzy 2000). The performance narrative, for example, represents a linear narrative structure whereby there is an over-simplification of the plot orientated towards a singular outcome in the future, assumed to be under the control of actions in the present (Ezzy 2000). It is perhaps this simplicity which gives rise to its collective pull, as Amanda reported, 'working hard is the one thing you have control of, so it's easy to latch onto. You want the simplest option, try hard and push through, instead of having patience and being rational about it'. Alternatively, a polyphonic narrative embraces uncertainty and the finite nature of the human condition in controlling the outcomes of the future (Ezzy 2000). For example, the longevity narrative is subjective, deciphered on a case-by-case basis and by an athlete's body which is fluid and dynamic. This may render it more intangible to some. John who embodies the longevity narrative reported, 'I guess if you're used to crunching numbers and recording weekly mileage then it would be difficult to take a step back and listen to your body . . . but we all know, your body doesn't respond to exact numbers'. Paradoxically, while linear narratives may appear more certain, they are far more precarious as they invest heavily in one particular future, when the future itself is quite unpredictable (Ezzy 2000).

Reflecting upon these contrasting structures and participants' reactions to the inherent ambiguities of the longevity narrative, we considered how this counter-narrative could become more accessible to the elite community. Could we make it more definable by developing athletes'

subjective awareness of their bodies so that they have the 'tools' to decipher the boundaries of this 'training smart' and longevity perspective more clearly. To exemplify, Joan who embodies the longevity narrative reported:

> I've just developed a sense of what works well for my body, so even this current injury, I knew I could have run through it, but equally I didn't want it to turn into something worse that it originally was, so I stopped running and got it checked out . . . the people around me also have the same approach so that helps, we would take days off or cross-train instead if we felt we were putting ourselves at risk of injury, we're older now so know how to listen to our bodies more.

By sharing personal stories of their bodies, injuries, and training athletes may learn to develop the ability to connect what is disparate, as 'stories offer a sense of subjectivity' 'an awareness of what is interior, expressed in signs that are exterior'. (Frank 2006, 422) Second, the more stories available that characterise the concepts embedded within the longevity narrative, the more accessible it will become. This is because for a narrative to become locatable, it needs to break into a person's narrative habitus, that is, their inner library of stories (Frank 2010). This inner library reflects the sum of stories an individual accumulates that influences their predisposition to hear certain storylines (Frank 2010). However, predispositions can change and are not final. If enough new stories break into our inner libraries, we can reshape our accumulation of stories and thus our predispositions to hear certain stories can change over time gradually and incrementally (Frank 2010). Through what Frank (2010) terms – narrative ambush – we could also render a counter-narrative more culturally digestible by collecting and amplifying stories of its nature, for example by sharing them in evocative and compelling formats. In doing so, it may inspire individuals to create new sections within their inner libraries (Smith 2013).

These contextual and theoretical insights unfold towards more general understandings for narrative researchers, that to increase the opportunities and possibilities for multiple and diverse perspectives to be heard, it is vital we not only create and share alternative storylines but harness the capacity of stories that exemplify these counternarratives to both ambush and alter predispositions (Smith 2013). Accordingly, as the above example demonstrates, as researchers and practitioners, we must remain cognisant that connecting athletes with counternarratives is likely to require multiple and evocative stories over time, to gradually stretch their narrative habitus to becoming receptive to hearing them (Phoenix and Sparkes 2009). However, by doing so, athletes may come to alter their predispositions and begin to view a counternarrative as one that they can take 'on board'. (Frank 2006, p.424)

Symbolic violence

As dominant narratives within elite sport, I have readily depicted the performance and resilience narrative as oppressive and constraining, limiting individuals' experiences to those that may become problem saturated (Douglas and Carless 2006). Nonetheless, while conducting these reflections and aiming to create the conditions for a multiplicity of perspectives, I became mindful of how these storylines may also enable certain individuals. Aside from the domineering orientation of these narratives, I began to consider these storylines in and of themselves and appreciate how like any cultural script, they are Janus-faced (i.e. two contrasting aspects), in that they serve to limit or liberate their storyteller, depending on the conditions and contexts in which they are applied. While de-colonising their domineering status is certainly a fruitful task, negating them completely may deprive individuals of the opportunity to draw upon narratives that their needs and conditions may necessitate (Brett and Sparkes 2009).

My reflections upon these dominant discourses came to fruition during my encounter with a participant named Samantha. Her experiences of injury reflected the pendulum narrative, where athletes alternate between a performance and a longevity storyline as they try to make sense of their own injury experiences (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021). Her responses to this narrative incited

conversations regarding the difficulties in finding an approach that best fits her own experiences and the importance to her in maintaining elements of the performance narrative to ensure that her authenticity was preserved. These discussions then centred around the depth to which she had embodied the performance narrative and how it previously supported her. She reports:

> People say to me, 'running is your life' . . . now I know that that is an unhealthy relationship to have. People think I am obsessive, but running took me away from other things, it gave me a focus and something to put my all into. It was positive and I wasn't getting that from anything else in my life at the time . . . I've been in situations where I've had to learn to survive, and without athletics, to guide my sort of development, I guess I could be, not a drug addict, that's not me, but would I have believed that I could have a different life . . . So, I built my sense of self around it, but it was beneficial for me and for other people in the group to do that. I only thought about this recently when people say, 'running is my life', that could be why I have had such a narrow focus, and pushing myself, I don't even know is it because I want to succeed anymore or is it just surviving.

Samantha's words were reminiscent of other participants' depiction of the resilience narrative, in reporting how it offered them a viable pathway during times of chaos and uncertainty. Although the concrete hope and orientation towards a singular outcome embedded within these narratives are inherently dangerous, after reflecting upon this encounter with my co-authors, we began to consider, how during certain periods individuals may feel as though they need something concrete to grasp onto. For Samantha, who reported fighting several intersecting waves of oppression, in being, black, female and from low-socio-economic standing, the performance narrative was offered to her not as a form of oppression but as a means of liberation and empowerment within her contextual climate. She reports:

> My teacher just empowered us, all of us girls at school. She showed us what it is we could do, not to settle, but to push and keep pushing. She told us you can do anything that you want if you put your mind to it, and she challenged us in so many ways, not because she wanted us to be amazing athletes or anything, but she wanted us to be able to know what it was we needed to do to break those boundaries within our society and our local area too.

Cautioning the propensity to champion certain storylines whilst condemning others, reflecting upon this encounter reveals the importance to remain mindful that an individual's social and material realities may render storylines such as the performance and resilience narrative suitable (Brett and Sparkes 2009). Although reducing the dominance of any one narrative is important, by maintaining a more egalitarian perspective of these prevailing discourses, we reduce the risk of potentially committing 'symbolic violence'. (Frank 2004, 115) According to Frank (2004, 115), symbolic violence comprises the 'often very subtle ways' in which we can infringe on a person's sense of alterity (i.e. otherness) by suggesting that an individual is wrong to live their lives by a certain type of story and projecting one's preferences for another storyline (Smith 2008). Following other scholars (Caddick, Cooper, and Smith 2019; Smith 2008), I acknowledge that I am limited by how much I can empathise with another's situation. For example, I have never been in a position whereby my choices were restricted to survival, therefore, my ability to fully grasp Samantha's lived experiences is an elusive concept. Yet, by remaining conscious of the equivocal nature of the dominant narrative she embodies, I am more likely to respect and honour her sense of 'otherness' and remain compassionate and open to exploring this viewpoint.

The theoretical insights generated from the above encounter provide a springboard towards navigating future pedagogical encounters. For example, when looking to share these narratives with athletes and supporting networks, maintaining a balanced perspective may encourage them to engage with narratives in a more dialectical manner, rather than further polarising contrasting perspectives. These insights also highlight the importance of not allowing the domineering nature of certain narratives to eclipse our outlook as narrative researchers, but instead remain open to the many viewpoints they can offer someone. In doing so, it could help reinforce the inherent nature of narrative theory, which is to offer the individual the flexibility and opportunity to choose the storyline which best fits their own experiences (Brett and Sparkes 2009).

Conclusion

This paper has extended previous sport injury research specifically (Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2021) and narrative research more generally (Smith and Sparkes 2011), by reflecting upon and further theorising how elite athletes engaged with diverse injury narratives. By grappling with participants' responses and drawing upon narrative theory as a means of theorising about and with them (Frank 2013), we have generated critical insights into the challenges and tensions incurred when storying and sharing diverse narratives. We would argue that this study provides novel understandings of how member reflections and reflexivity can enrich (e.g. tellability) and extend (e.g. new materialism) our theoretical understandings of how individuals respond to and engage with diverse narratives, which have further helped us to critically consider the challenges of creating an inclusive narrative landscape.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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