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“The story just brings the science to life”: exploring the use of stories to translate knowledge about self-regulatory processes during goal striving in running

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ABSTRACT

Storied representations of research have been recommended and identified as an effective pedagogical tool to facilitate knowledge transfer to end users. However, storied forms of representation have not yet been used to communicate knowledge of self-regulation during goal striving in running. Therefore, building upon a previous programme of research represented via a traditional realist tale (Jackman et al., 2024), the study aims were twofold: (1) to construct stories that communicate runners' lived experiences of self-regulation during goal striving in distance-running; and (2) to share these stories with relevant knowledge users to explore what they do *on* and *for* them in the short-term (1–2 weeks) and long-term (six months). Stories were constructed and represented through vignettes. To accommodate diverse views and appreciate different knowledge bases, we invited athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists to witness the vignettes and explored their responses via qualitative surveys and multiple interviews over time. Data analysis identified how the stories were useful for translating knowledge into practice, the reasons why, and how they acted *on* and *for* the participants. The accessibility of the stories enabled participants to connect meaningfully with the research. This expanded their knowledge, which some used in performances and to support other runners. Overall, our findings support an evolving body of research illustrating the potential of storied forms of representation to facilitate knowledge transfer, and extend understanding by providing a subject-specific (i.e., self-regulation and goal striving) and population-specific (i.e., running) example of how stories can work *on* and *for* athletes and practitioners.

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Sport and exercise psychology research has the potential to offer a range of performance, health, social justice, welfare, education, and professional practice benefits (e.g., Blodgett

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et al., 2011; Everard et al., 2023). However, one reason many of these benefits have yet to be realised in practice is due to an identified “gap” between research and practice (e.g., Ely et al., 2021; Vealey, 2006). A research-practice gap, or what some have termed a “know-do” gap (Leggat et al., 2023), represents a disconnect between what people *should* do based on research evidence and what they *actually* do in the real world (Ely et al., 2021). While traditional scientific forms of dissemination (e.g., journal articles) and communication (e.g., statistical analysis) have their place, researchers have reported how an over reliance on these might serve to alienate certain populations who might find them inaccessible (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2008; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2002). Consequently, sport and exercise psychology researchers over recent years have worked creatively to expand the repertoire of representational forms to communicate their research in diverse ways to multiple audiences (e.g., athletes, coaches, officials, parents, practitioners, sport organisations, policy makers). Framed as creative analytic practices (CAPs; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), these forms of representation have included comics (Forde, 2022), drawings (e.g., Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2017), poems (e.g., Culver & Werthner, 2018), musical performances (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2011), confessional tales (e.g., Cavallerio et al., 2020), infographics (e.g., Goosey-Tolfrey et al., 2023), narrative videos (e.g., Everard et al., 2022), film (e.g., Kluge et al., 2013), and stories (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2008).

One form of CAP of interest in this article is the use of storied forms of representation. Stories are our most ancient and refined means of knowing (Papathomas, 2016). They have been identified, *inter alia*, to be accessible (Bullock et al., 2021) and relatable (Everard et al., 2022), to “show rather than tell” (Cavallerio, 2022), to stimulate reflective practice (Douglas & Carless, 2008), and have the capacity to turn personal stories into collective stories (Denison, 1996). Stories also have been shown to be evocative and generate emotional impact (Scott et al., 2012). Indeed, stories can “do” things *on*, *in*, *for*, and *with* us (Frank, 2010). They have the capacity to act in ways that guide and inform our actions and future possibilities. As Frank (2010) reports, “People do not simply listen to stories. They become *caught up*, a phase that can only be explained by another metaphor: stories get under people’s skin. Once stories are under people’s skin, they affect the terms in which people think, know, and perceive” (p. 48). Put another way, some researchers have suggested that stories can do much more than reveal “what is”; they can move people to spaces that open vistas of “what could be” (McMahon & McGannon, 2019). Without this imagination stimulated by stories, we remain restricted to a world as we know it, which can be a limiting place (Andrews, 2007).

While many researchers have represented their findings through stories across a diverse range of topics (e.g., Carless & Sparkes, 2008; Cavallerio, 2022; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006), researchers have yet to story self-regulation and goal-striving research, which itself is an under-researched area in sport and exercise psychology generally, and within endurance sport (e.g., running) specifically (Wolff et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to construct stories that communicate the lived experiences of how runners self-regulate to maximise performance and negotiate decisional conflict during goal striving in distance-running; and (2) to disseminate these stories with relevant knowledge users to explore what they do *on* and *for* them in the short-term (i.e., 1–2 weeks) and long-term (i.e., six-months). Specifically, this study builds upon a systematic programme of research and seeks to bridge the “know-do

gap". Underpinned and informed by theory (Ntoumanis & Sedikides, 2018; Oettingen, 2012) and associated research (e.g., Brandstätter et al., 2013), Jackman et al. (2024) examined the "inner world" of runners in excellent performances and how they used two self-regulatory strategies (i.e., mental contrasting with implementation intentions; see Oettingen, 2012) to maximise performance and/or to negotiate decisional conflict about goal striving (e.g., whether to persist or disengage from a goal). Given that runners are likely to encounter similar instances of decisional conflict in endurance events (Wolff et al., 2019) and it has been recently recommended that sport and exercise psychology researchers seek to disseminate research to endurance athletes (McCormick et al., 2020; Meijen et al., 2023), we believe our aims to be both timely and original in the field of self-regulation and goal striving.

Methods

Philosophical positioning

Although it has been argued that we live in a story-shaped world (McMahon, 2013), identity and the self can be explored in different ways, depending on the degree of emphasis placed on the individual and social-cultural (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). While some researchers have taken a "thin individual" and "thick social-relational" view (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 13) within their research (e.g., Everard et al., 2020; McGannon et al., 2022), in the present study, we adopted a "thick individual" and "thin social-relational" spotlight (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 13), placing greater emphasis on the individual's inner world and the psychological states, structures, conditions, and/or processes they possess (McAdams, 1996). Thus, our research was underpinned by a realist ontology and constructivist epistemology.

Creative analytic practices

We sought to create stories that communicated our previous research (Jackman et al., 2024) through multiple vignettes. A vignette is a CAP in which short stories introduce a character, describe events, or draw attention to specific findings (Ely et al., 1997). We crafted four vignettes depicting runners' experiences over four race-distances (5-kilometre, 10-kilometre, half-marathon, and marathon) to maximise the knowledge translated and likelihood that the vignettes could appeal to different runners. We combined two vignette genres (Ely et al., 1997): (1) the *portrait* vignette (i.e., the plotlines were grounded in accounts provided by four runners in our original study); and (2) the *composite* vignette (i.e., we weaved together accounts from multiple runners). After revisiting participants' accounts of their experiences in the underpinning research (Jackman et al., 2024), the first author, a White-Irish, female researcher and trainee sport and exercise psychologist who ran 5–6 days per week, selected four accounts to inform the content and plotlines of the vignettes, each of which depicted the self-regulatory processes that runners engaged in during goal striving in a race. She then: repeatedly read transcripts of the four selected accounts; sketched out the basic, chronological plotline of each vignette; and highlighted relevant text (i.e., language, descriptions) on self-regulation and goal striving. She also revisited transcripts for the remaining participants and

highlighted passages that resonated with the four plotlines. After extracting relevant passages, the first author reviewed the verbatim quotes and composed four stories and characters to produce different learnings. The first author sought to use direct quotations where possible to maintain the runners' spoken words and language (Blodgett et al., 2011), produce knowledge adapted to the local context (Graham et al., 2006), and ensure the stories "spoke" the language of the subculture. The first author used her knowledge of running to select common running terminology, such as: "sit in", to describe how a runner positioned themselves in the middle of a group; and "switch off", to capture attempts to minimise effort exertion. After an initial, scene-setting paragraph in the third person, each story conveyed the "inner world" of the character during a race in the first-person, a perspective we hoped could help to create accessible and informative accounts.

To embrace a plurality of participants and to honour and accommodate diverse views and different knowledge bases, four sport psychology researchers, two endurance athletes, and a coach developer agreed to form a working group to provide iterative feedback on the vignettes. Based on their ongoing feedback, minor modifications were made (e.g., more information was provided on the characters' running background), as well as the recommendation to introduce photographs containing visual cues that resonated with the plotline and written text (e.g., route and race situation, perceived exertion levels, body language) to offer a visual translation (Palmer & Cavallerio, 2022). After "finalising" (M length = 1160 words; range = 769–1455) and digitising the vignettes (see Supplementary File 1), the first author narrated an audio recording of each vignette (range = 6.25–11.31 min) to ensure the stories were accessible and met different preferences.

Participants and recruitment

We used maximum-variation sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) to recruit runners, coaches, and sport psychology practitioners, on the basis that these individuals would represent intended end-users of knowledge about self-regulatory processes during goal striving in running. Following institutional ethical approval, we posted a recruitment message on our social media accounts. We recruited 11 runners (6 females, 5 males; M age = 39.19, range = 29–59 years old), three of whom were also running coaches, and two sport psychology practitioners (1 female, 1 male; M age = 31.50). All participants described their ethnicity as White, and most were White-British ($n = 12$). The runners had been running for an average of 14.18 years ($SD = 12.65$, range = 1–40 years) and were non-elite runners (running club members $n = 7$) that ran different distances (i.e., 5 kilometres to ultra-marathons).

Procedures

After providing informed consent, participants received instructions and hyperlinks to the vignettes. After reading these stories, we obtained (1) written responses to the stories via qualitative surveys (i.e., one per vignette) to elicit a breadth of information, and (2) verbal responses via multiple follow-up interviews (i.e., two interviews per participant) over time to expand upon the survey data and develop an enriched dataset. Designed in alignment with recommendations from Braun et al. (2021), the survey had eight, open-ended

questions (see Supplementary File 2). Participants took approximately 15 min to complete one survey for each vignette, over a 4.53-day period on average. The first author then interviewed participants within 1–2 weeks of completing their last survey. An open-ended, semi-structured interview approach was adopted, as this allowed us to expand upon the survey data and afforded the flexibility to engage in additional dialogue as points arose (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). After initial background questions, the first author posed questions in relation to three areas: the participant's general experience of engaging with the stories; their perspectives on each vignette; and their views on the utility of stories (or not) for communicating knowledge about self-regulatory processes and goal striving in running and any suggestions on ways they felt (the) stories could be used in future. Within the interview, the first author also posed follow-up questions to elicit further detail and elaboration on their survey responses (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). These interviews took place in person ($n = 3$) or online ($n = 10$), were recorded, and lasted 60 min on average.

Approximately six months later, participants took part in a relatively unstructured, follow-up interview online, which explored their longer-term use of the stories (or not). The first author began by asking participants, "Have you found yourself using the stories in your running/coaching/sport psychology practice?" and "What are your views now on using stories in your running/coaching/sport psychology practice?" When participants reported using the stories, the first author asked about specific examples of what the stories had *done* in practice and *how*. If participants had not used the stories, the first author asked questions about potential reasons for this (e.g., "Why do you think that might be the case?"). The second interview also sought to further enrich the data from the surveys and opening interview as a form of member reflections (Tracy, 2010). The interviews were recorded and lasted 25 min on average.

Data analysis

We analysed the participants' accounts using template analysis (King, 2012), a flexible method for thematically organising and analysing qualitative data. The flexible nature of template analysis was suitable as we could interpret the participants' accounts using inductive (i.e., without using a preexisting coding frame) and deductive (i.e., interpreting the participants' accounts using theories from our primary research) orientations. After transcribing the initial round of interviews, the first author repeatedly read the survey responses and interview transcripts for each participant to aid familiarisation. Next, she identified relevant segments of text to form descriptive codes (i.e., explicit words) and interpretative codes (e.g., codes capturing implicit meanings that could be interpreted through theories or our primary research) (King, 2004). After coding approximately half of the initial accounts, the first author reviewed the codes and organised similar codes into more substantive clusters. For example, the codes, "I tried something different" and "the stories changed my mental approach in a race", were clustered together within the sub-theme, "applied knowledge to my running". This process was then repeated to generate candidate themes and an initial coding template, which the first author then used to guide (but not constrain) analysis of the remaining surveys and interview 1 transcripts. After conducting the second interviews, the first author re-engaged in the aforementioned processes to analyse the additional information generated. This process led to further development of the coding template, as, for example, the

second interviews provided insights into longer-term changes reported by participants. The first author shared their analysis with the second and fourth authors, during which she explained the coding template and elaborated on patterns within the accounts contributing to each theme's development. The second and fourth authors acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018), posing questions and offering different insights that developed the analysis further. For instance, the fourth author encouraged deeper reflection on how the themes differed from one another and suggested further engagement with literature on identities (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) and psychosocially-informed, CAPs (Stodter, 2021). This process led to further modifications and development of the final analysis.

Rigour

In this research, we sought to make a *substantive contribution* (Tracy, 2010) by advancing understanding of the use of stories for translating sport psychology research into practice and sharing research offering fresh insights into runners' self-regulatory processes in goal striving (Jackman et al., 2024), an under-researched area in endurance sport (Wolff et al., 2019). Furthermore, we also sought to enhance rigour by composing our vignettes in the first-person and in both textual-visual and audio forms so they: had *aesthetic merit*; could be *engaging*; and could *incite action* (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Smith, McGannon et al., 2015). We also sought *rich rigour* by recruiting various potential knowledge-users (Graham et al., 2006), exploring participants' perceptions and experiences at multiple time-points (Josselson, 2013), and engaging in critical friends' discussions and member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In producing our written report, we sought to achieve *resonance* by presenting rich, in-depth descriptions (Tracy, 2010).

Findings and discussion

While most participants read the stories ($n = 8$), some read and/or listened to the stories ($n = 4$), and one only listened to them. Our final analysis encompassed four themes. The first two themes, *making lived experiences of self-regulation accessible* and *an opening for connection and resonance*, relate to how the stories worked "for" participants (e.g., by providing a map or destination to follow), whereas the second two themes, *expanding knowledge of self and others* and *helping athletes, coaches and sport psychology practitioners to manage goal striving*, focus on how they worked "on" them (e.g., teaching them what to pay attention to and how to respond to certain situations).

Making lived experiences of self-regulation accessible

Our first theme captured characteristics that participants felt made the stories effective at communicating research on runners' lived experiences of self-regulation during races. By using "everyday language" within the stories, participants explained this helped to overcome terminological and perceived knowledge barriers to engaging with research. As Runner-Coach 1 said:

I think it's the real, real-life example, but it's the real-life way of *telling* it as well. It's telling it in a language that we all understand, talking it through, and not using the big words or the

concepts, and just talking it through in a very relatable way that you can understand, and in that person's own vocabulary. (Interview 1)

Participants explained that accessibility was enabled through the *showing* of psychological theory (e.g., Cavallerio, 2022; Douglas & Carless, 2008) and communication of knowledge about self-regulation (Jackman et al., 2024) in a relatable manner. This was depicted in the following quote from one of the sport psychology practitioners, when contrasting how the stories compared to traditional approaches to communicating about mental skills in sport psychology:

I think we normally present, "here's the skill" and not much else, and [say] "go and figure this out for yourself how to use it. Go and help your athletes figure out how to use it", but the story is actually giving you an example of, "this is how this person is using it". I think it adds to, and goes above and beyond [traditional writing in journal articles], in terms of the application of those strategies. (Interview 1)

As portrayed here, the stories were able to communicate knowledge "in action". While traditional approaches to knowledge translation (i.e., journal articles) can be time-burdensome (Pope et al., 2015), the relative brevity of the stories was also regarded as a positive feature. As Runner 6 commented:

There's always a worry that sometimes people might go into so much detail that it becomes almost too lengthy and too boring to read. But I felt there was good detail, but also enough to make it a good duration. (Runner 5, Interview 1)

Additionally, participants outlined that the level of detail in the stories helped to make the runners' experiences accessible. For instance, a runner who listened to the audio recordings stated that "it just helped me build a good picture in my head of what was going on" (Runner 3, Interview 1), while another suggested that the digitised stories, with their matching textual and visual representations, also conjured up such vivid images that it allowed them to feel "involved": "You felt quite involved in the stories. You could picture what was happening and you could picture them [character] running and then breaking away. The detail was quite good, and the pictures were good to help set the scene" (Runner 8, Interview 1). Overall, the stories were perceived as being an effective approach to communicate lived experiences about self-regulation in running in an accessible, understandable, and brief manner.

An opening for connection and resonance

This theme portrays how the accessibility of the stories helped the participants to connect cognitively, emotionally, and corporeally with the stories' characters and their experiences. By deviating away from the "author-evacuated text" characteristic of traditional scientific tales (Sparkes, 1995, p. 164), participants explained how this encouraged them to enter the character's perspective. This, in turn, helped to enliven the underpinning scientific content and transformed it from "abstract and conceptual to real and felt" (Everard et al., 2023, p. 744). Runner-Coach 2 explained this as follows:

I know there are theories, but sometimes that turns people off. In any walk of life, if you talk about, "oh well, this theory says X, Y, Z", then people would be like, "oh, yeah, it's a theory

[unenthusiastic tone]. It's just something that's written in a textbook". But, by reading a real-life example that you can relate to, and I think a lot of runners will relate to it, I think it's just more real. (Interview 1)

The stories' real and felt nature closed the gap between the participants and the stories. Several participants commented on how the characters' internal monologue was authentic and relatable, which enabled them to build meaningful connections with the information presented (Everard et al., 2023). For instance, Runner 6 noted:

The thoughts, and the strategies, and what was going through their mind during the race, it reminded me a lot of races, be it a 400-metre sprint or a 10-kilometre run, whether it was a leisurely run or a formal competition. I think the strategies and the thoughts that would be passing through their mind whilst running, I found that I could resonate with them. I remember thinking, "I think like that". (Interview 1)

As in the above example, the runners outlined that the internal monologue in the storied accounts connected (at least to some degree) with their experiences. Connecting to the inner world of the stories' character did, however, evoke different emotional responses. Some participants expressed surprise at resonating with a character's internal dialogue (i.e., due to the difference in performance level), while others felt reassured, as the stories humanised their experiences. Runner-Coach 2 explained:

I found it quite reassuring that all the things I go through in my head, other people were describing them, so that was my biggest thing. In a lot of them, I think I read them and I was like, "oh, God yeah. I've definitely had that exact conversation at some point in my head". Or "yeah", that was quite reassuring I'd say. I'm not crazy! [laughing] (Interview 1)

Here, this participant portrays how the stories helped them recognise and validate their own experience (Frank, 2010) and how shifting from thinking about their experience as "individual" and towards a broader social consciousness might foster greater awareness of how humans are not bounded individuals but relational beings that can share mutual resonance (Gergen, 2011). Participants also spoke of how the connection to the stories manifested in the form of somatic empathy (Allen-Collinson et al., 2016), as they could understand the bodily sensations portrayed. As Runner 7 said:

It doesn't matter if you're running a 12-minute 3-miler or 20 min. If you're running as hard as you can, you're going to feel discomfort because you're running as hard as you can, regardless of how quick you're running. And I think when I went through Joyce's story here and how she spoke about that feeling of tiring as the race goes on, that is similar to how I feel when I do the 5 K [5-kilometre race]. (Interview 1)

Alongside creating a connection between participants and the story, communicating knowledge about self-regulation in a relatable way was also considered useful for aiding recall in future (Scott et al., 2012). As one runner put it, "by actually relating it to people and how it helped them on a more personal level, it puts it more on a personal basis. It makes you remember it a bit more" (Runner 2, Interview 1). Although elements of the stories connected to the participants' experiences, and thus offered a degree of naturalistic generalisability (Smith, 2018), some aspects were not as relatable, though this was highly individualised. For instance, some participants described feeling somewhat disconnected from the characters (e.g., age), context (e.g., terrain), or plotline (e.g., in-race responses). This disconnect does not mean that such knowledge was less useful

but shows how stories can evoke different responses (Douglas & Carless, 2008). Indeed, one runner explained how re-casting a story (e.g., character, contents) to fit with one's personal experiences could help to build a connection:

I don't think I've ever been in front in a race. I've never been at the back either, but I've never been at the front, so I wouldn't know what it was like to be fighting for that first-place spot. However, I know what it's like to be fighting for that 90th place spot, and it's just the same. If I can contextualise that, "actually, I'm racing against this guy next to me or the one that's just in front of me and I am going to stay there". It's important that people can do that. (Runner 3, Interview 1)

This extract illustrates the flexibility of communicating research through a story, as changing aspects of a story and using one's imagination can allow someone to locate themselves within a story more meaningfully. Moreover, it showcases how stories can allow an audience to (re)imagine their own stories, opening up imaginative possibilities about how things are in the present, were in the past, and could be in the future (Monforte & Smith, 2023).

Expanding knowledge of self and others

By forming meaningful connections with the stories, participants spoke about how the stories had become a catalyst to expand their knowledge of self-regulation during running. Participants explained that connecting with the stories and juxtaposing these with their own experiences prompted reflective thought about how they self-regulated and how it compared to the stories, illustrating how they had come to think *with* the stories (Frank, 2010). As Runner 7 commented:

Even if I've not necessarily matched the way in which some of these people think about their races, it's still made me think about what I do. I've obviously thought about what I do to realise that I'm not the same as some of the people. So, it's prompted that, yeah, internalisation, self-reflection on what I do to achieve similar things. (Interview 1)

Coaches have previously reported reflective practice benefits of engaging with stories (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2008; McMahon, 2013) and, as portrayed in the above extract, the stories expanded the participants' awareness about how they and others self-regulate. These comparisons, in turn, had given some runners the impetus to adapt their approach to self-regulation. As one runner reflected in her second interview: "I never actually knew before what other people did during a race. I think having read those stories and realised that that's what people were doing, it made me more conscious that that's what I should be doing" (Runner 2, Interview 2). Informed by the different insights communicated through the stories, participants spoke about being better equipped to organise and make sense of past experiences (Phoenix et al., 2010). As an example, one runner recalled a previous race when their performance did not unfold as hoped, yet stories depicting the experiences of *other* runners gave them a new perspective on their *own* running experiences:

Reading how aware the runner was of themselves in terms of knowing how their body should feel, not relying on their watch, is something I will take away from this story. I feel this is something I should become more aware of as in the last half[-marathon], I ran based on my watch, rather than feeling, and found the final few miles tough. (Runner 5, Survey)

Recognising this educational potential of the stories (Douglas & Carless, 2008), participants suggested that stories could be useful for a range of learning outcomes and that by distributing these outcomes among different stories, these could become valuable educational resources to develop knowledge of self-regulation during goal striving among runners. The coaches and sport psychology practitioners shared a view that the stories could be a useful starting point for conversations with runners and imagined how they could be employed to initiate dialogue. For example, Runner-Coach 3 explained:

Everyone's going to get something out of a story. So, it might be someone disagrees with something with the story. Brilliant! That's then a discussion point. You can then bring some coaching points out from that. It might be sometimes that everything's great and they think, "right. I might use that tactic in my race". (Interview 1)

Although demonstrating the potential utility of a story as a knowledge-to-action mechanism, this extract also shows there is no guarantee a story will impact as desired – stories are inevitably out of our control (Frank, 2010). Nonetheless, it suggests stories can be a useful starting point for conversations, even if interpreted in diverse ways (Dowling & Garrett, 2016). Both sport psychology practitioners stated that the stories developed their cognitive, emotional, and corporeal maps of running, and suggested multiple ways the stories could be interpreted and used to inform actions, including to stimulate reflective thought in clients. As an example, one sport psychology practitioner said:

You could even be showing them the story, like, "so this is one athlete story. What might yours look like? Tell me yours." Like, it could even be fun to do it in that way and to then start to support your client to build up to, [answering questions like] "what's your story of a certain performance?", or "what's one of your best performances?", or "what's one of your worst performances?" (Sport Psychology Practitioner 1, Interview 1)

In explaining the potential use of stories with clients, the sport psychology practitioners noted the importance of active listening, reflecting, and questioning to support the elicitation of the athletes' stories.

Helping athletes, coaches and sport psychology practitioners to manage goal striving

Implementation is a primary objective of knowledge translation (Graham et al., 2006) and our final theme represented the stories' performative functions and how they had been put into action. Several participants spoke about using the self-regulatory strategies communicated in the stories in the follow-up (~6 months later) interviews. For instance, Runner 2, who had been running for 40 years, recalled using knowledge communicated through the stories and explained how they had become a companion guiding her actions (Frank, 2010):

I've definitely carried on using them. I mean, in particular, the thing that all the stories brought home to me was that people actually are constantly motivating themselves as they run, whereas beforehand, I would use a lot of the techniques, but waited until I was actually struggling to then start trying to motivate myself. But now, I am [doing that] much more on a regular basis. (Interview 2)

The passage above illustrates how through meaningfully connecting with the stories, this runner realised that their typical self-regulatory attempts differed somewhat to the characters. Yet, by expanding her knowledge of alternative ways to do this, this changed her self-regulatory approach and behaviours. Illustrating how communicating knowledge in a relatable way can aid recall (Scott et al., 2012), Runner 5 outlined how she handled a moment of decisional conflict in a parkrun several months after first engaging with the stories:

I remember, yeah, definitely thinking, “oh, in those stories, they were like confident from the outset in their plan and if they felt good, they were sticking with it”. So, I just thought “right, no, stick with it. You’re feeling good. Legs feel fresh”. (Interview 2)

Linking this example to our original research (Jackman et al., 2024), this runner found themselves running quicker than they anticipated, but by engaging in mental contrasting (Oettingen, 2000), as communicated through the stories, they decided to persist with their goal. Alongside implementation of knowledge by runners themselves, all three coaches spoke about the use of stories with their athletes. One coach spoke about how one story’s knowledge proved useful four months later when preparing an athlete for their first marathon, when asked, “have you used either the stories or learnings from the stories since we spoke?”

I have actually, particularly with the London Marathon. A lot of people had set time-goals in mind and I know one of the stories was about having like three different goals. So I’ve used that and I said to people, “don’t set your heart on that one goal; have some slightly easier ones as well”. (Runner-Coach 1, Interview 2)

The above example of knowledge-to-action illustrates how the story with a marathon runner encouraged a flexible approach towards goal setting (Author 1 et al., 2024). From a narrative theory perspective, this illustrates how stories can act on people and prompt them to reflect and act on stories in their own lives (Brockmeier, 2012). Furthermore, one coach explained how the stories led to discussions about, and sharing of, stories in her running group:

I spoke to people about some of the stories and we just had that discussion on how people were feeling in races and at different points. It was about having that appreciation of everyone having different feelings and emotions and things that drive them in their running, and using those and reflecting on those. (Runner Coach-2, Interview 2)

As portrayed above, by cultivating a safe and compassionate environment that enabled athletes to voice their stories, coaches could hold a unique position in which they can aid reflection and stimulate greater insight into athletes’ own experiences. Despite the reported use of stories by some participants, several runners did not report the translation of knowledge into action. Some attributed this to the lack of connection they had with the stories at the outset (e.g., being a trail runner). Thus, the stories were “working” for some and informing their actions, but had yet to be translated into action for all.

Conclusion

In this study, we constructed stories and shared them to explore their utility as a knowledge translation tool for communicating evidence about self-regulatory

processes during goal striving in distance running. Our findings support and resonate with those of previous studies (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2008; Everard et al., 2023; McMahon, 2013; Smith, Tomasone et al., 2015; Szedlak et al., 2020) in suggesting that key benefits of the stories lay in their capacity to be accessible, time-efficient, memorable, thought-provoking, and educational. By exploring participants' perspectives at multiple time-points, however, our findings also provide added insights into how the stories bridged the gap between research and practice, both in the short-term and longer-term. Our findings illustrated that the knowledge about runners' self-regulatory processes during races could be communicated effectively through stories and that they offered a way for participants to meaningfully connect with the "inner world" of the characters. Forging these connections enabled participants to reflect on their own experiences, developed their knowledge, and, in some cases, led them to apply this knowledge in practice. Furthermore, some participants also reported acting upon this knowledge and applying it in their running performances, while others used this knowledge in their coaching or encouraged the sharing of stories with other runners. Consequently, our findings portray how the stories acted *for* and *on* participants.

By developing and utilising innovative knowledge translation methods, researchers will be better equipped to realise the potential impact of their research and enhance the likelihood that intended knowledge-users are best served by research evidence. Based on the current study, we suggest that stories could represent a promising approach to achieve this and suggest several opportunities for the use of stories. First, rigorously crafted stories could help to make sport psychology research accessible to end users, such as athletes, coaches, sport psychologists, parents, and students, which could increase the reach and potential impact of scientific outputs. Second, for sport psychology practitioners, we suggest that stories could be used to initiate conversations with clients. Drawing from narrative therapy, which operates from a social constructivist perspective and views individuals as authors of the meanings in their lives (Polkinghorne, 2004), this approach involves firstly facilitating individuals in constructing their story. The stories used in this study, therefore, could help to act as templates to validate an athlete's story or help facilitate the athlete in constructing their own story. Furthermore, given that there is more than one story, they also hold potential for an athlete to compare their story with other stories and perhaps replace their story with an alternative (Polkinghorne, 2004). As suggested by several participants, stories could also constitute an engaging, discovery-based activity for younger clients to develop self-knowledge and awareness. Finally, sport psychology practitioners and coaches might consider how stories could be used to facilitate storytelling sessions. Drawing on principles of narrative pedagogy, sport psychology practitioners and coaches could communicate and/or facilitate the exchange of stories within a group to help members of the group to develop new understandings, through reflecting, revisiting, and collaborating with others (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009; McMahon et al., 2018).

Disclosure statement

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

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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