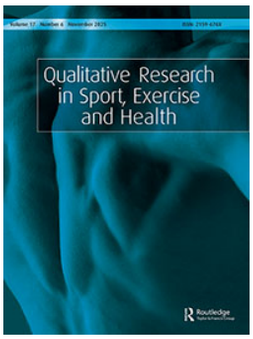

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Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health

ISSN: 2159-676X (Print) 2159-6778 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rqrs21

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**To cite this article:** Freya Davis, Ross Wadey, Stacy Winter, Melissa Day & Ciara Everard (14 Nov 2025): Poetic confessions of a neophyte qualitative researcher undertaking emotionally demanding research in sport, Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2025.2589099

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2025.2589099



Published online: 14 Nov 2025.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN SPORT, EXERCISE AND HEALTH
https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2025.2589099

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# Poetic confessions of a neophyte qualitative researcher undertaking emotionally demanding research in sport

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**ABSTRACT**

Undertaking qualitative research can be emotionally demanding, yet the emotional experiences and vulnerabilities of researchers themselves are often overlooked. In this confessional tale, the first author, a neophyte qualitative researcher, reflects on navigating emotionally demanding research in sport, specifically exploring athlete experiences of injury and disordered eating. By using poetry as an arts-based method, this study not only conveys the embodied intensity of these experiences but also builds on existing confessional accounts to provide a pedagogical resource for supporting neophyte researchers in managing vulnerability, ethical responsibility, and reflexivity. This study draws from the first author's reflexive journal (totalling more than 15,000 words), member reflections with participants ($N = 8$ interviews), and ongoing interpersonal reflection ( >30 hours) with her supervisory team, which was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The constructed themes were then crafted into poems to create a pedagogical resource to support reflection and training for researchers engaging with emotionally demanding topics. The five poems are entitled: *Shadows Linger, A Tinted Lens, Promise of Change, The Uncertain Path*, and *Beyond Words*. Each of the poems illustrates the tensions, ethical considerations, and moral complexities of undertaking emotional demanding research in sport. Reflections are then offered to consider how the poems could serve as a pedagogical resource for those engaged in emotionally demanding research, offering insights into the impact of such work, the ways qualitative researchers can embrace responsibility, and the importance of critically reflecting on language used throughout the research process.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 7 July 2025
Accepted 2 November 2025

**KEYWORDS**
Confessional tale; poetry; reflexivity; researcher vulnerability; arts-based methods

## Introduction

Undertaking qualitative research can be emotionally demanding, especially when researching sensitive topics (e.g. Dickson-Swift 2022; Liamputtong 2007; McMahon and McGannon 2024). Yet, compared to participant vulnerability, researcher vulnerability often remains marginal, receiving little research attention. For example, Clift et al. (2023) explored qualitative researcher vulnerability and suggested that few scholars have considered how researcher vulnerability can or might be something more than to protect against, but to embrace, think with, and work with. While confessional tales (e.g. Douglas and Carless 2010) and autoethnographic accounts (e.g. A. C. Sparkes 2024)

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have helped open broader conversations in sport coaching and qualitative research, such approaches remain in their infancy within the context of emotionally demanding research in sport (see Karcher, McCuaig, and King-Hill 2024). By enhancing knowledge and understanding around researcher vulnerability and emotional turmoil experienced during emotionally demanding research, scholars can share their experiences to help protect future researchers and enhance the research process (Mallon and Elliott 2019).

Researching emotionally demanding topics has been described to involve 'a tremendous amount of mental, emotional, or physical energy and potentially affects or depletes the researcher's health or well-being' (Kumar and Cavallaro 2018, 648). Such research encompasses unique challenges for the researcher, including the risk of burn-out due to the emotional intensity involved in engaging with participants' experiences (Berger 2021; Dickson-Swift 2022). Similarly, in interdisciplinary contexts such as nursing, education, health, and psychology, Clift et al. (2023) suggested how researchers frequently suppress their emotional responses to meet expectations of professionalism, often at the cost of their mental health and well-being. Additionally, early career or 'neophyte' researchers have been found to feel unprepared and unsupported when working on emotionally demanding topics and thereby, find it difficult to set boundaries (Micanovic, Stelko, and Sakic 2020). This vulnerability highlights the need for more pedagogical tools that can guide reflection and foster coping strategies and resources to better prepare researchers for the emotional demands of qualitative inquiry. McMahon and McGannon (2024) suggested the need for methodological approaches that safeguard the well-being of both participants and researchers, advocating a shift in focus from idealised notions of how emotionally demanding research *should* be conducted to critical reflections on how it is *actually* conducted in practice. This shift underscores the need to address and support the mental health of researchers and understand their experiences of engaging in emotionally demanding work (Mallon and Elliott 2019; Quinton et al. 2025).

In recent years, reflexive forms of writing have been used to capture the challenges and complexities of qualitative research (Silverio et al. 2022). Within sport, exercise, and health research, for example, Sanders et al. (2019) and Rogers, Papathomas, and Kinnafick (2019) have recently highlighted how reflexive and confessional accounts can illuminate the vulnerability of researchers entering sensitive spaces and navigating ethical and emotional dilemmas. Work outside of these fields also demonstrated the value of creative and reflexive approaches. For example, LaMarre (2021) reflected on their pain, anxiety, and eating disorder recovery research as an early-career academic. She noted, 'I believe that for me it would not have been possible to unpack the painful embodied experiences of conducting my PhD research without engaging with the arts' (LaMarre 2021, 8). Such contributions have shown how arts-based methods can enhance transparency, foster dialogue, and support researcher development. Moreover, Douglas (2022) used performative text to explore researcher's thoughts when responding to stories of abuse, trauma, motherhood, poverty, and the covid pandemic, providing an understanding into the complexities of emotionally demanding research. Building on this foundation, the present study seeks to use arts-based approaches to illuminate the emotional and ethical dimensions of conducting qualitative research in sport while offering a pedagogical tool to support reflection and training for researchers engaging with emotionally demanding topics.

One method that has the potential to illuminate emotional and ethical dimensions and enable other researchers to engage with and learn from is the confessional tale. According to A. Sparkes (2002), the confessional tale draws on personal experiences that direct attention to the methodological and ethical issues encountered in the research process. By bringing ourselves into the research, we can convey a sense of reflexivity which demonstrates how we, as researchers can shed light on ways in which we interpret and conclude our findings. Plummer (2001, 208) suggested, 'reflexivity offers greater awareness of the research subject, how research knowledge is produced, and a greater sense of the personal, social, and cultural means of building research knowledge'. The use of a confessional tale is a methodological strategy that promotes the creation of reflexive knowledge (Douglas and Carless 2010). Such reflexive knowledge can act

as useful resources in raising questions around ethical practices in qualitative research, and prompt consideration of how researchers might respond to these questions through learning from those gone before (A. Sparkes 2002). For researchers navigating emotionally demanding work, documenting experiences of vulnerability can provide a valuable pedagogical resource for training, mentorship, and researcher development in qualitative research (Sanders et al. 2019). A pedagogical resource can be achieved by using poetry to evoke embodied understanding, allowing readers to feel and reflect on the lived realities of research, rather than merely think about them (Douglas and Carless 2012). Through poetic expression, researchers can engage more deeply with their own emotional responses and ethical responsibilities, fostering empathy and critical awareness in future practice. As Douglas (2022, 378) put it, poetry presents 'an opportunity to write again, to perform, to raise our voices, and to tell a tale of how our paths interconnect'. This is particularly salient for neophyte researchers who may be especially exposed to the challenges of such work. As a doctoral student exploring experiences of sport injury and disordered eating, without fully developed coping strategies, established institutional support, and often with limited awareness of the personal consequences of qualitative inquiry, I, the first author, was discomforted by the lack of accounts of other neophyte researchers sharing the emotional toll of research. At the same time, I felt pressures to achieve academic recognition which discouraged any acknowledgement of vulnerability (Brain et al. 2024). As Andrew (2017) reminds us, researchers must reflect on their motives, for example, *why* are we choosing to tell this story? For neophyte researchers, engaging with such questions can encourage reflexivity and open needed conversations. By presenting a confessional tale in this study, neophyte researchers can be equipped with examples of navigating vulnerability, offering lessons that can support reflection and practice in their own research journeys.

While there is a growing body of research that highlights the emotional toll of qualitative and emotionally demanding research, more studies are beginning to employ creative or arts-based approaches to explore these experiences (e.g. McMahon, McGannon, and Zehntner 2024). Such methods move beyond narrative accounts by offering evocative, condensed, and affective forms of expression that can communicate the intensity and nuance of a researcher's vulnerability in ways that traditional prose may not capture. In doing so, arts-based approaches can enhance dissemination by engaging diverse audiences, prompting reflection of the ethical and emotional dimensions of research, and help support or guide researchers at different stages of their careers (A. Sparkes and Smith 2014). One arts-based approach that can create a meaningful representation of a researcher's experience in a manageable and accessible form is poetry (McMahon, McGannon, and Zehntner 2024).

By inviting readers to pause, feel, and reflect, the poetic form creates a space to understand human experience by making embodied experiences tangible. For A. Sparkes and Smith (2014) poetry has the potential to evoke emotion and serve as a pedagogical tool, fostering open-ended connections that enable researchers to recognise, reflect on, and engage with their own emotional responses. As such, poetry can show another person how it is to *feel* and experience something with words (Blodgett et al. 2013; Culver and Werthner 2017). From an essentialist perspective, poetry can provide the researcher and the audience with a different lens to understand themselves and their vulnerabilities, affirming that such experiences are a natural part of qualitative research and providing a means to work with them constructively (Andrew 2017). However, researchers have found it difficult or impossible to write or reflect in the form of conventional academic prose, as such formats often struggle to capture the depth of emotion and vulnerability (Taylor 2019). Poetry, by contrast, is a form of representation that enables researchers to communicate their experience in a condensed form that encapsulated and illuminates thoughts, feeling, and reflections. Leavy (2015, 64) explained, poetry includes space for breaths and pauses, to 'evoke a snippet of human experience that is artistically expressed as in a heightened state'. A. Sparkes and Smith (2014) described poetic representations as having the ability to create

emotion evoking and open-ended connections between the researcher and the audience in a way that can recreate experience. Poems enable the reader or listener to feel something and respond to the use of words. Implicit with the gaps in the literature, poetic representation is a means to critically reflect on researcher vulnerability within emotionally demanding research in sport, recognising and voicing the challenges encountered by a neophyte researcher (Brain et al. 2024; Mallon and Elliott 2019).

In the context of this study, poetry, used as a confessional form, extends traditions of reflexive and autobiographical writing to bring forward the embodied, emotional, and ethical challenges of conducting emotionally demanding qualitative research in sport. In doing so, this study aims to: (a) document the embodied experiences of a neophyte researcher navigating emotionally demanding research in sport, recognising that such experiences have tangible effects on researchers' emotions, well-being, and professional development, and (b) provide a pedagogical resource or neophyte researchers, offering insights into ethical responsibility and managing vulnerability, grounded in the real, felt experiences of the researcher.

## Method

### *Positionality statement*

I am an early career academic who has researched a variety of emotionally demanding areas, for example, sport injury, mental illness, disordered eating, and eating disorders. These research areas are deeply personal and often involve experiences of physical pain, psychological distress, and identity disruption (Papathomas, Luisa Pereira Vargas, and Prior 2024). Such experiences can evoke strong emotional responses, as they touch on the vulnerability of both participants and researchers, making the research process ethically and emotionally complex (McMahon and McGannon 2024). This study emerged from my own embodied experiences of navigating the emotional and ethical challenges inherent in researcher vulnerability. Beyond the limited number of reflexive accounts in sport, the fundamental motivation lies in the recognition that such experiences are universal and intrinsic to engaging with emotionally demanding qualitative research. For neophyte researchers, encountering reflexive accounts can validate these experiences, affirming that feelings of uncertainty, strain, or vulnerability are a natural part of research rather than signs of inadequacy (Sanders et al. 2019). In line with an essentialist perspective, reflexive writing and its expression through poetry and the confessional tale, provides a way of being-with these experiences, fostering understanding, reflection, and the capacity to work *with*, rather than resist, the emotional dimensions of research (A. C. Sparkes 2020).

### *The research context*

This study emerges from my doctoral research, which explored athlete experiences of sport injury, disordered eating, and eating disorders. Using both interviews and visual methods, data collection spanned over 8 months. During this time, my conversations with participants were often emotionally charged. For example, we discussed their relationships with food and body image, the psychological impact of long-term injury, feelings of loss associated with time away from sport, and the pressures to conform to performance expectations. These conversations often revealed deeply personal struggles rarely spoken about in sporting contexts (Papathomas 2018), requiring sensitivity, empathy, and continual reflexive engagement to ensure participants felt heard and supported. As a neophyte researcher, with no prior experience conducting emotionally demanding research, this confessional tale reflects on some challenges that arose. I used reflexive journal entries, participants member reflections, and discussions with my supervisory team, with whom I met weekly to discuss and reflect upon my experiences, to reflect on my experiences.

### *Data collection*

Three methods of data collection were used to support an in-depth, reflexive account of the emotional demands of the research process. First, individual reflections were recorded in an online diary throughout the research process. These diary entries captured immediate emotional responses, ethical challenges, moments of uncertainty, and embodied experiences during and after collecting qualitative data. For example, the reflexive journal included elements of embodied reflexivity (e.g. Chadwick 2017). I was committed to articulating my 'embodied' experience of research by reflecting on the 'feel, sight, and sound of it' (P. K. Turner and Norwood 2013, 696). I attempted to create a more body-centred approach to reflexivity using memory. This involved me writing memories from my embodied experience of research (e.g. the emotions I felt at certain stages of research). I would ask myself how I *felt* at certain times, and I would draw from sensory prompts to articulate my responses (e.g. voice recordings). This type of embodied reflexivity enabled me to note the ups and downs of the research process, examine, and critically consider how I had been influencing the research and how the research has been impacting me (e.g. emotionally). A quote from my journal reflected on some of the more harrowing stories and I noted how I *felt* hearing participants' experiences.

> I'm not even surprised to hear what Becca (pseudonym) has been through; it isn't the first time I have heard someone detail such shocking events. Hearing her thoughts and how she is affected still to this day is something I won't forget quickly. Did I respond appropriately? Did she seem okay? Should I have asked more? I feel slightly emotional and overwhelmed.

In total, the reflexive journal included over 15,000 words worth of diary entries.

Second, member reflection interviews were conducted prior to the dissemination of research findings. These reflections involved eight participant interviews in which participants were invited to engage with and respond to the ways their experiences had been represented through non-fiction stories. The reflections were guided by prompts that encouraged participants to consider: the accuracy of their representation, whether the representation captured the complexity and emotional nuance of their experience, and how they felt about the sharing of their stories with wider audiences. I also reflected on my own positionality, the choices I made when representing participants experiences, and the emotional and ethical implications of representing others' experiences. These reflections offered insight into both participant and researcher vulnerability, prompting consideration of new ethical and emotional questions, for example, what responsibilities remain after the interview is over? What does it mean to faithfully represent another person's experience? In this way, the member reflections disrupted assumptions, evoked unexpected emotions, and surfaced thoughts about authorship, interpretation, and relational accountability. They extended the confessional process beyond data collection into dissemination, providing a collaborative and ethically attuned approach to qualitative research.

Finally, regular conversations with critical friends were documented. Weekly meetings over a period of 8 months produced over 30 hours of reflexive data. These dialogues provided a space for emotional and methodological 'unpacking', functioning as a sounding board for the researcher's interpretations, challenges, and ethical concerns. The use of critical friends was pertinent in asking difficult questions (e.g. 'Why do you think they responded that way?' 'How are you introducing yourself to the participants?'), challenging emotional blind spots, and offering alternative assumptions. Ultimately, they helped move beyond introspective reflexion (Finlay 2002) towards critical self-awareness. For example, moments initially recorded in the reflexive journal as 'ethical tensions' were, through conversations with critical friends, reframed as products of internalised ideas of a 'competent' or experienced researcher. Engaging with this form of intersubjective reflexivity (Finlay 2002) enabled multiple interpretations of the data to be expressed, which in turn enhanced analytic choices and reflexivity (McGannon and Smith 2015).

### *Data analysis and representation*

While poetry as a form of representation is often associated with open creativity, this study used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun and Clarke 2021), as a way of grounding the poems in systematic engagement with the data. The use of RTA offered a transparent and rigorous approach that helped to identify patterns across reflexive data, ensuring that poems remained connected to my lived experiences. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations of this approach. RTA, with its focus on coding and theme development, carries procedural undertones that may appear in tension with the openness of arts-based inquiry. However, rather than viewing thematic analysis and poetry as contradictory, we approached them as complementary: RTA provided a foundation of analytic depth, while poetry enabled a creative re-storying of the data that captured emotional nuance and affect in ways that themes alone could not.

Braun and Clarke (2021) six phases to RTA were followed to develop and refine themes based on the data collected (i.e. journal entries and observations from the research process). I engaged in recursive, immersive reading of the data, identifying moments that reflected the experiences of conducting emotionally demanding research. Subsequently, the data was coded, and initial themes were refined and reviewed by revisiting the data and consulting critical friends. The themes that emerged took shape through iterative cycles of coding and reflexive engagement. For example, the theme 'emotional burden' was grounded in both participants' accounts and my reflexive notes, such as 'I left the interview and felt emotionally drained'. From the themes, poems were crafted as a second layer of representation of the data, re-storying the themes in a way that captured emotional intensity and vulnerability. I had no experience in poetry and was not aiming to produce polished verse but to create poems that would engage readers emotionally, move them to reflect, and prompt dialogue (A. C. Sparkes 2020). Words, phrases, and metaphors from the reflexive notes were re-shaped into verse, with attention given to rhythm and imagery to evoke rather than explain the themes. For instance, the themes 'emotional burden' and 'weight of representation' were reimagined through the poem titled 'Shadows Linger'. Rather than explaining the weight of emotional burden, the poem aimed to evoke it, inviting readers to feel the uncertainty and challenges of emotionally demanding research. As such, the poems have the ability to touch both the cognitive and sensory of the reader, establishing the emotional dimensions of my experiences (A. C. Sparkes and Douglas 2007). The poem-writing process was iterative, with drafts shared and discussed with the research team to ensure resonance with the data and to make sense of reflections in a safe and supportive environment.

The poems in this study are not intended as works of literacy art, rather, they are reflexive tools designed to capture the embodied and emotional realities of conducting emotionally demanding research (A. C. Sparkes 2020). The priority in their construction was clarity, accessibility, and the ability to evoke reflection. The rhyming and structured format was chosen deliberately to emphasise words and capture experiences in a way that others can experience and feel them. The intentional rhyming demonstrates *my* choice over how my experiences are shared. In this respect, the poems empower my experiences, capitalising their strengths to be shared with others (McMahon, McGannon, and Zehntner 2024). While arts-based researchers do not require creative skills or special training, Leavy (2018) recommends that researchers should 'think with an artist' and consider learning from more creatively experienced individuals. I chose to collaborate with my adult sister, a published author and poet who studied creative writing at university. This collaboration was valuable in showing me different writing techniques to evoke emotion, play with rhythm, and structure imagery. Feedback from this collaboration was integrated iteratively, ensuring that the poems conveyed vulnerability and emotion. The institutional ethics committee did not consider this research; therefore, ethical approval was not sought nor granted.

## Reflections

### *Shadows linger*

Gathering truths, thoughts unsaid,
Wrestling battles fought inside my head.

Did my caution cast a shroud,
The depths of voices, disallowed?

Afraid of labels, judgement's light,
Did I fail to see their true fight?

The injured body, the broken bone,
Were thoughts left to remain unknown?

In my hands, their stories heard,
In every carefully chosen word.

A common challenge faced by researchers is maintaining emotional detachment when hearing harrowing stories (Batey and Szedlak 2024). After each interview, I often questioned whether I had responded appropriately, reminding myself that the purpose of the research was to give voice to previously silenced stories. While emotional engagement can deepen the richness of the data, it also exposes researchers to emotional vulnerability. Managing my emotions became a significant aspect of the data collection process. I often became cautious about probing too much or asking potentially difficult questions to the participants for fear of causing them emotional distress. I elaborated within my reflexive journal:

> I find myself feeling guilty for opening up wounds. Wounds that might be healed completely or that still are red and raw. Some of them [the participants] have been through so much and I don't want to keep bringing up bad memories. I can see the pain in their faces, the distress at recalling information.

The persistent feelings of guilt have been referred to as an 'ethical hangover' (Lofland and Lofland 1995, 28), whereby, the researcher wants to hear the story and gather data but feels a sense of unease or betrayal for 'using' participants as a means to an end. Ultimately, I was protecting my own feelings whilst also being sensitive to the feelings of my participants. However, if I swiftly moved on from certain difficult topics or refrained from probing for more information, I could have acted in further silencing their story. In hindsight, I recognised the need to critically reflect on my actions and acknowledge that I should have taken every possible step to minimise harm to participants while also striving to create meaningful benefits (A. C. Sparkes 2024). Hearing and telling difficult stories can be both therapeutic and painful, making it essential to carefully consider the potential distress to participants alongside the value of sharing these experiences (Andersen and Ivarsson 2016). Andrew (2017) reminded us that researchers must be aware of their motives and ask why they are choosing to tell a particular story. In reflecting on such questions, I recognised that by exposing these difficult experiences, the stories convey real, embodied aspects of participants' lives and illuminate feelings that may be oppressive. In hearing and representing these experiences, researchers can give form and visibility to voices that might otherwise remain unheard. It is important to emphasise that participants actively shared their stories to convey their experiences, providing authentic insight into the topic being explored.

Another reflection to confess was how my cautious choice of questions or language may have led the participants to feel as if they couldn't speak more openly about their experiences. I reflected in my journal:

> I said to a participant today that I wouldn't keep bringing up their past eating disorder because I knew it was uncomfortable. I wish I didn't say this. What if they wanted to talk more about it and in me saying that stopped them opening up? In the future, I need to find a balance between being empathetic whilst also being open to

> communicating challenging stories. Perhaps, I should have given more autonomy to the participant and let them decide how much and what they tell me. Remember, silence doesn't always need to be filled.

According to Frank (1995, 103), 'in a world so permeated by contingencies that turn out badly … relationships with others have become dangerous'. With this view, consequently, those who seek to support individuals experiencing physical or mental illness often find themselves grappling with uncertainty, unsure of what to say or how to act, resulting in ethical and moral ambiguity. This was true in my own research encounters, particularly when working with participants who shared experiences of disordered eating in sport. As someone without lived experience of this issue, I frequently questioned my legitimacy to speak, interpret, or even ask. I was torn between a desire to protect participants from potential harm and a responsibility to hold space for their stories. In one instance, I responded to a participant's visible distress by saying, 'We don't have to keep talking about this, I know it is upsetting'. Though intended as an empathetic gesture, I later recognised by drawing on Smith et al. (2009), that such comments can inadvertently foreclose dialogue by reasserting boundaries between researcher and participant. Over time, I learned to attune myself more closely to participants' cues, focusing less on managing my own emotions and more on observing and responding to the lived realities they conveyed. This shift marked a transition from data collection to relational engagement, highlighting that I was encountering participants' embodied experiences rather than merely recording information. Reflecting on this, I encourage future researchers, particularly those new to emotionally demanding topics, to remain grounded in their sense of purpose. Maintaining clarity about *why* the research matters can serve as an anchor amid the emotional and ethical complexities that arise when engaging with real, often challenging experiences.

## *A tinted lens*

> An insider's lens through which I see,
> Questioning if my view is distorting me.
>
> My own past remains in my head,
> In stories they share, and those unsaid.
>
> Does my language build a wall,
> Disguising truths they'd share, if heard at all?
>
> For each story, a tale unique,
> Deserves to be heard, they are ready to speak.
>
> May I find the grace to see,
> Where their paths diverge from me.

This poem represents the tensions I experienced around the negotiation of boundaries and the ethical implications of crossing or blurring those boundaries. In several cases, I had existing relationships with participants prior to the research, which complicated the dynamic and required ongoing reflexive attention to my role as a researcher. As Smith et al. (2009, 343) questioned, 'how close is too close to research participants, and how far is too far?' At the time, I believed that fostering closeness would generate more open, comfortable conversations and lead to richer data. In practice, I intentionally softened the researcher-participant divide, occasionally sharing aspects of my own story in ways that reduced power imbalances and built rapport. In hindsight, however, I recognise that these acts of vulnerability, while well-intentioned, also raise important questions about ethical proximity. Did my efforts to understand lead me too far into the personal lives of my participants? And if so, what are the implications of this closeness for both them and me? This reflection underscores the ongoing and unresolved nature of relational ethics in qualitative research, particularly for

those positioned as insider-outsiders in emotionally demanding contexts. I reflected further in my journal:

> We [a participant and I] spent over 30 minutes catching up about our lives before turning to the research questions. From my perspective, this appeared to ease both of us into the conversation and created a sense of relational connection. Rather than rigidly steering the discussion, I allowed space for the participant to shape the flow of the interaction.

Smith et al. (2009, 346) suggested 'researchers may necessarily turn attention to the quality and patterns of interaction and the ethical ideals of respecting difference while striving for understanding'. In light of this reflection, I am grateful for the closeness I developed with participants, which I believe played a key role in them opening up to me. Day and Thatcher (2009) highlighted the importance of rapport in understanding participants' lives, and without it, I would have remained an outsider. Despite our brief time together, researchers can become trusted confidants (Warr 2004). I was conscious that sharing aspects of my own story would 'merge' our voices and impact the way in which participants responded, whereas this acknowledgement of shared experience created a safe space not to share the same identities but to share affinities. The dialogical space between us was maintained (Smith et al. 2009).

This poem further reflects on how boundaries can limit or sustain dialogue and monologue (Smith et al. 2009). In one interview, I found myself responding with, ' . . . you can recover and get better', a statement intended to reassure but which, in retrospect, prematurely foreclosed the participant's story (Smith et al. 2009). In offering a hopeful framing, I unintentionally imposed a trajectory that may not have aligned with the participant's lived experience. As the interviews progressed, I became increasingly aware of moments where I might misinterpret participants' lived experiences or needs, being cautious not to impose my own assumptions or over-rapport (Mackenzie and Leach Scully 2007). From an essentialist standpoint, it is crucial to attend closely to the actual experiences participants convey, recognising that language can shape how these experiences are expressed without altering the realities themselves. For neophyte researchers, I recommend approaching language use with care and critical awareness, particularly in emotionally demanding contexts. Reflecting on how certain phrases might inadvertently constrain, redirect, or fail to capture participants' real experiences is vital. As Smith et al. (2009, 356) put it, future researchers should ' . . . take seriously the relationships in which they engage, how they orientate to boundaries, and the consequences this may have for themselves and others'.

### *Promise of change*

Their eyes shine, hopes seem bright,
In worlds where cultures cling so tight.

Promises I cannot bestow,
For winds of change are often slow.

Although the steps might feel small,
Every leap forward matters to us all.

While I cannot shift the tides,
I walk with them, stories allied.

This poem describes my feelings of guilt around carrying out research that will not necessarily have an immediate impact or change on the culture, as Christians (2005, 159) put it: 'Human worthiness is recognised as non-negotiable, and where it has been violated or lost, we are under moral obligation to restore it'. Throughout data collection, I felt as if I was making empty promises to my participants, that this research would be a catalyst for organisational, cultural, political, and social change. I noted in my journal:

> I could see the hope in his eyes at the prospect of this research helping others avoid going through what he went through. He was expressing the ease in which people (i.e., coaches and athletes) could change their behaviours and subsequent cultural pressures. In reality, I can't promise that this research will change people's attitudes. The cultural values are deeply embedded; a few stories won't make much difference.

This extract illustrates a moment of self-doubt, a common experience among early career researchers. As Patnaik (2013) noted, self-doubt can emerge when researchers begin to question the credibility of their work and whether their voice will be recognised within the broader academic landscape. These concerns became particularly salient for me following a focus group conducted with several coaches. At the end of the discussion, one coach offered a comment that deeply resonated with me:

> . . . if I'm like being brutally honest, I think they've existed for a long time, and I think people will still just choose to ignore them and that is the issue. It comes down to the individual choice, those stories hit home with me, but they don't scare me. They don't intimidate me. They just hit home because I feel sad . . . So I think if we are to change things, I think it has to be significant change because yeah, I also think that's a significant change from the top and good role models and in the right way. And it could, it could potentially happen, but we still will always have this issue, always.

Following this exchange, I was left feeling disheartened. The comment made me question whether my work was truly making a difference. If meaningful change is to occur, it must be underpinned by something substantial, and as the participant noted, these kinds of stories have often been heard before. This led to a spiral of self-questioning: 'Why am I doing this?' and 'What's the point?' In navigating these doubts, reflexivity proved invaluable. Returning to earlier reflections reminded me of my motivations and reaffirmed the value of the work. I recalled moments when participants expressed appreciation for having the opportunity to share their stories, reinforcing a sense of purpose. Additionally, several participants offered words of encouragement, recognising the significance of the research (e.g. 'I think what you're doing is really great'), which helped me reconnect with my original intentions.

Researchers can become discouraged when exploring emotionally demanding topics because they may feel unable to influence the impact of their work beyond publication (Mallon and Elliott 2019). While this is not universal, some researchers report feeling empowered to enact change, these experiences highlight the emotional weight of ethical responsibility in qualitative research. In my own experience, I began to counteract feelings of helplessness by taking actions outside of academia, such as conducting webinars and openly sharing my emotional reactions with the research team. These actions reflect tangible responses to lived experiences of vulnerability, demonstrating that learning occurs when researchers engage with the emotional and ethical challenges of their work in concrete ways. This approach not only supports the researcher's own well-being but also inspires reflective practice and offers guidance for other neophyte researchers, showing that navigating emotional demands can be coupled with purposeful action and meaningful dissemination.

I would, therefore, encourage neophyte researchers to remain open and transparent with those around them. In grappling with my role as a researcher, I found it invaluable to turn to my research team, family, and partner for support and guidance. By sharing my uncertainties and emotional responses, I was able to recognise the real, embodied weight of these experiences, which were validated and normalised through relational engagement. This process helped me reframe feelings of guilt, not as a personal failing, but as a reflection of the tangible complexities inherent in emotionally demanding research. Over time, I became increasingly aware that insecurities and self-doubt are common aspects of engaging deeply with sensitive, lived experiences, and acknowledging these feelings is essential to ethical and reflective research practice. From a pedagogical standpoint, presenting these reflections and the confessional poems offers neophyte researchers concrete examples of how to recognise, process, and respond to vulnerability in their own research, fostering

both personal resilience and ethical awareness. As Appaneal (2020, 226) notes, 'showing compassion towards oneself frees us up to empathise with others in shared difficult experiences'.

### *The uncertain path*

From dark to light, paths remain unclear,
Not every end is free from fear.

When stories shift from bad to good,
Should we pause and question if we should?

In stories raw,
The truth remains unsure.

In reflection, I can start to see,
The varied paths of their journey.

Not all lead to redemption,
Perhaps shaped by perception.

This poem represents my feelings around the uncertainty of interpreting participants' experiences, and my own vulnerability as a researcher navigating ethical and emotional challenges. It captures the tension between empathy, understanding, and the limits of what can be known or fully conveyed, highlighting the need for reflexive engagement with both the data and my own responses. Stories of hardship, physical depletion, isolation, or emotional distress are often underrepresented in sport (e.g. Everard, Wadey, and Howells 2023; Prior, Papathomas, and Rhind 2024). During member reflections, participants frequently highlighted these experiences, which reflect the real, lived challenges that are often silenced in sporting contexts. These experiences represent the upper boundary of what participants are able or willing to share, revealing the emotional intensity, embodied strain, and vulnerability inherent in their realities. Ochs and Capps (2001) refer to as the upper boundary of tellability as the point at which stories become emotionally uncomfortable or socially unacceptable to share. While such stories risk being dismissed or silenced, in this context they were met with validation and even relief. Participants expressed feeling seen and understood through the articulation of these challenging experiences, suggesting that moving towards the edges of tellability can foster recognition and resonance. At the same time, there were moments of tension. Some participants expressed a desire for more 'positive' or 'hopeful' stories, which prompted reflection on my responsibility as a researcher to represent experiences as they were lived. From an essentialist standpoint, the focus is on conveying the real, embodied experiences of participants, including discomfort, uncertainty, or unresolved outcomes, rather than reshaping them to meet expectations for hopefulness. This underscores the ethical responsibility of accurately representing the emotional and lived realities of participants, even when they are challenging or unsettling. For researchers, especially those working with emotionally complex material, this underscores the delicate balance between honouring the stories shared and navigating the interpretive and emotional responses they elicit from others. I reflected in my journal:

> Lily made it very clear that the stories were 'depressing' and that I could make up one that is slightly more 'positive' that could resonate with more people. She expressed her concerns over the stories being at the extreme end of the spectrum and are almost too farfetched to be believable. But these are the experiences I heard, if I were to create more positive stories, they would be inauthentic to my data.

This leads onto the debate around: *who owns the story?* If the participants wanted to have a more positive story, should I have been more concerned with bring forth more 'positive' aspects of their experiences? I was reminded by Bochner and Ellis (2016, 147) that 'It's your story, and you get to decide how to tell it and what to tell, but along with that privilege comes additional responsibilities'. I am presenting my interpretations of the collective experiences in an accessible form that highlights

their emotional and ethical nuances. This polyphonic approach to storytelling enabled the representation of experience to be more authentic by using multiple voices, creating a more realistic representation of experiences (Winkler 2018). A. C. Sparkes (2024, 7) pointed out that 'the ethical burden and responsibilities of interpretation and representation, as well the as the consequences of decisions made along the way, belong to the author and should not be deflected onto those who inhabit the stories told'. Furthermore, member checks and reflections have been questioned when balancing claims of the 'right to be heard' and 'oppressive silencing', we are reminded that member reflections should be treated with caution when participants might try to avoid harm to themselves by wanting a more 'positive' story, silencing difficult experiences that are often untold (A. C. Sparkes 2024). This reflection highlighted the importance of resisting the temptation to dilute or soften emotionally challenging experiences to make them more accessible or comfortable for readers. Engaging with these intense, often difficult experiences allows researchers to acknowledge the full weight of participants' lived realities, including pain, uncertainty, and vulnerability. For neophyte researchers in sport, especially in emotionally demanding contexts, it is crucial to remain attentive to these experiences and to embrace the ethical and pedagogical responsibility of representing them faithfully, creating space for voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

## *Beyond words*

I have a duty of care, I must be there,
To offer help when they feel ready to share.

But is a helpline's unknown voice,
Enough to support their courage and brave choice?

In sharing stories of pain and fear,
They may need more than just words to hear.

For their stories, both happy and tough,
Will my support ever be enough?

This poem reflects on the moral and ethical tensions that can surface when conducting emotionally demanding qualitative research in sport. It is easy to underestimate the impact that participation in such studies can have on individuals, particularly when they are invited to disclose deeply personal or painful experiences, conversations that may not have previously been spoken aloud. As researchers, we often focus on creating space for storytelling, yet may overlook the emotional labour required of participants in the act of sharing, especially when stories approach the upper boundary of tellability (Ochs and Capps 2001).

Presenting research findings to participants through member reflections is a valuable practice for ethical representation and collaborative meaning-making. However, these moments can also reveal unanticipated consequences. Participants may find it difficult or distressing to see their experiences rendered in written form or read aloud, even when their voices have been treated with care. Such encounters raise important questions about timing, consent, and emotional readiness, especially when participants' current circumstances (e.g. injury, mental health struggles) may amplify their vulnerability. I reflected in my journal:

> I knew the stories could be distressing for the participants, but I didn't think about if the athletes might have regressed in terms of 'recovery' or if they were mentally stable enough to read the stories. I thought the process would be straightforward for participants. I should have been more considerate of what they might be going through in the present time.

This reflection draws attention to the emotional complexities involved in the dissemination phase of qualitative research, particularly when returning sensitive material to participants. Feelings of guilt can surface when researchers realise, in hindsight, that they may have underestimated the emotional

impact of the research on participants. In this case, the assumption that participants would be ready or willing to engage with the material at a particular point in time proved ethically and emotionally fraught. Such moments raise critical questions about the timing and method of sharing research outputs with participants: When is the 'right' time for participants to read or respond to emotionally charged material? How can researchers be more attuned to participants' current emotional or psychological states? As Pelias (2019) reminds us, writers bear an ethical responsibility to protect those they write about, recognising that narrative representation is never neutral. Once a story is released to a reader, whether a participant, practitioner, or wider audience, it can no longer be controlled. It may resonate, heal, or harm in unexpected ways.

For qualitative researchers in sport, particularly those engaging in arts-based research, this underscores the need for reflexive, compassionate, and context-sensitive dissemination practices. Ones that acknowledge the unpredictability of reception and the enduring relational responsibilities we hold towards participants even after data collection ends. Frank (2010, 35) argued that once a story is released 'those who have received it have it as theirs and will use it as they will, with the story lending itself to each of these used but also shaping each use'. This raises ethical challenges in being left unsure if sharing findings is worth the potential upset of even just one person (L. Turner 2013). I reflected in my journal:

> How am I supposed to know how one person will react to a story compared to another? What if the stories upset, anger, confuse, or offend someone? Alternatively, what is they comfort, appease, or help someone else? How as writers and researchers can we be sure our research practices are ethical?

A similar concern was raised by Tullis (2021), who suggested that research and ethic committees fail to consider ethical responsibilities after data collection has ceased. This leaves the sole responsibility of the care and consideration of participants to the researcher. As a neophyte researcher, I was initially uncertain about how to provide support to participants during emotionally demanding research. I sought guidance from my supervisory team and the existing literature, and I came to recognise that when all ethical considerations are observed and participants are treated with respect throughout data collection, there is often little more a researcher can do. Accepting this was challenging; I had to remind myself that I am not a qualified psychologist, life coach, or counsellor. By providing appropriate helplines and guidance for seeking support, I was fulfilling my responsibilities while acknowledging the limits of my role. From an essentialist perspective, this poetic representation reflects the embodied reality of navigating researcher vulnerability, demonstrating that even with careful planning, emotional responses are difficult to predict and may only become fully apparent after time and reflection. As A. C. Sparkes (2024) emphasises, researchers must make every effort to minimise harm while recognising that the lived experiences of both participants and researchers are complex and ethically demanding.

## Conclusion

This confessional tale, shared through poetry, offers a personal and transparent account of the embodied experiences of a neophyte researcher navigating emotionally demanding research in sport. From an essentialist perspective, the focus on lived, embodied experiences may enable neophyte researchers to engage directly with what it is like to navigate ethical, relational, and emotional complexities, providing concrete examples for reflection and learning (Barone and Eisner 2012). These reflections are not presented as definitive answers, but as practical insights that can guide others in attending to vulnerability, self-care, and relational responsibility. The use of poetry as a methodological choice is integral to the pedagogical aim of this work. Poetry captures the intensity, nuance, and affective weight of experiences that conventional prose may struggle to convey, offering readers a means of feeling and resonating with the challenges of emotionally demanding research in sport. By presenting these reflections and poems, the study

provides a resource to for neophyte researchers to observe, learn from, and navigate the embodied and relational dimensions of qualitative research, helping to support their development and resilience as they encounter similar challenges. As such, we encourage future researchers, particularly those new to emotionally demanding qualitative work, to *read, reflect upon, and respond to these poems* as part of their own learning process. Doing so may prompt deeper awareness of the emotional and ethical realities of research practice and inspire further exploration of how poetry can facilitate critical reflection, empathy, and researcher development within sport, exercise, and health.

## Disclosure statement

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

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