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EDITORIAL



Qualitative research in sports studies: challenges, possibilities and the current state of play

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Introduction

Qualitative social scientific research in sport, exercise and other contemporary forms of physical movement has made considerable strides in recent years, such that it is not an unreasonable claim to say that it now sits in the 'mainstream' of our field. Qualitative research is utilised across multiple disciplines in relation to sport, including sociology, psychology, management studies, history, policy, geography, coaching, pedagogy and in interdisciplinary research. Yet it could be argued that it has now moved out of the shadow of quantitative approaches in several of these disciplines, albeit to different degrees in different contexts. What's more, although acceptance of qualitative work in some disciplines remains elusive (e.g. Greenhalgh et al., 2016), elsewhere scepticism has slowly given way to recognition of qualitative research's legitimacy, with its contributions now taken more seriously (Bekker et al., 2020). Indeed, qualitative research now represents a respected and valued field of research in its own right which, according to some scholars, can be considered a research paradigm; so-called Qualitative research with a 'big Q' (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Although there is a danger that this claim simplifies the complexity and variety of philosophical and theoretical assumptions underpinning qualitative research, the continued contribution of qualitative research to the way in which we understand sport and exercise remains clear. The field at large is in a good position, with widespread creativity and the cross-

pollination of ideas, theories and knowledge across multiple fields and disciplines; this is an exciting time for the community. Challenges remain, however, including how to conduct research during the COVID-19 pandemic (Evans, Blackwell, et al., 2020), continued metricisation of research which can favour the natural sciences (Thiel, 2018) and the return of populist politics, the 'post-truth' era, and the frequent injustices that this can bring (e.g. Evans, Agergaard, et al., 2020; Evans & Davies, 2017; Malcolm, 2021). Such events have led to increasing criticism, and sometimes overt hostility, towards some of the disciplines at the forefront of qualitative research (e.g. Davies, 2020). Yet qualitative research continues to thrive.

Against this background, several key discussions have accompanied increases in the number and variety of qualitative approaches in sports studies. These discussions have both reinvigorated several key debates in relation to the 'hows' and 'whys' of qualitative research and have simultaneously provided a strong foundation for future work (see for example McGannon et al., 2019; Smith & Sparkes, 2016a; Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2013). Innovative methods and approaches abound, with an ever-increasing expansion in the range and ambition of qualitative methodologies. Some of these trends have been reviewed elsewhere, particularly in the field of sport psychology (McGannon et al., 2019), and yet they are also evident in the sociology of sport (Dart, 2014; Seippel, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2020). Likewise, such changes are reflected in the burgeoning number of academic publications, associations and journals dedicated to qualitative research. The impact on our field of research cultivated by the foundation of the International Society of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise and its associated journal (*Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*), for example, is notable, whilst qualitative studies are a mainstay of many sociological journals (Dart, 2014; Seippel, 2018). Consequently, the qualitative community has also grown in size and influence, such that qualitative research is no longer considered marginal, or used only to support quantitative work (Gibson, 2016). Rather, qualitative work in sports studies has become a respected school of thought in its own right, such that some have even described it as dominant (Pringle & Falcous, 2018; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). Whilst we feel this assertion of dominance might be over-stating the power of qualitative research in the wider academy, in publishing and in acquisition of funding (for example, only around 30% of psychology papers are qualitative at present according to McGannon and colleagues (2019)), qualitative research has achieved a new level of legitimacy in sports studies.

Such developments inspired a recent PhD course entitled 'Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise: Innovative Approaches' in November 2020, co-ordinated by several of the authors of this editorial. During the course, over 50 experts and postgraduate researchers who resided in Europe and North America (yet who came from across the globe) came together (virtually), in order to share their experiences of conducting research—not all of it qualitative! Here, we reflected upon both the current and future potential for rigorous, innovative and impactful qualitative research. The course showcased many approaches allied to multiple disciplines and theoretical traditions. For example, topics included focus groups (e.g. Nielsen & Thing, 2019), analysis of sources (e.g. Bonde, 2009), discourse analysis (e.g. Dowling, 2020), longitudinal research incorporating socio-narratological and mapping methods (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014, 2019;

Schubring et al., 2019), ethnography (Lenneis et al., 2020; McNarry et al., 2020; Williams & Gibson, 2017), arts-based, creative and sensorial research (e.g. Sparkes, 2017; Svendler Nielsen, 2009; Williams, 2018a, 2020; Williams & Annandale, 2020; Winther, 2018), narrative and biographical methods (Caddick et al., 2015; Dowling, 2012, 2020; Evans et al., 2019; Phoenix & Griffin, 2013; Phoenix & Smith, 2011) and visual methods (Degerbøl & Nielsen, 2015; Orr & Phoenix, 2015; Phoenix, 2010). Several overarching themes and topics were also discussed, including scientific rigour and impactfulness in qualitative research (e.g. Evans, 2020; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019; Smith & McGannon, 2018), research dissemination (e.g. Evans & Thiel, 2019; Williams, 2018a, 2020; Williams & Annandale, 2020), inter-disciplinarity and the effectiveness of mixed or multi-methods approaches (e.g. Gibson, 2016; Hausken-Sutter et al., 2021; Hybholt & Thing, 2019), use of social theory within and across disciplines (e.g. Cassidy, 2016; Denison, 2016; Malcolm & Mansfield, 2013), researcher positionality and reflexivity (e.g. Evans et al., 2018; McNarry et al., 2019; Townsend & Cushion, 2020), publishing qualitative research (e.g. Allen, 2016), and the new scholars' own presentations. Despite this breadth of discussion, we barely scratched the surface of what qualitative research has become, and can be, in sport studies.

The present editorial outlines several themes that consistently shaped out discussions during the course. It also presents some of our reflections and engagement with broader contemporaneous debates and developments in the qualitative research community. The intention is to provide something of a way marker on the present status of qualitative research in the field and as a foundation for imagining new horizons in the future. Here, we begin to offer a preliminary discussion of the implications of these themes for qualitative research in sport, both in the present and into the future. In so doing, we cover four themes, the first of which relates to the increased tendency for qualitative researchers to speak across previously established disciplinary boundaries.

Border crossings: qualitative research across boundaries

One encouraging development in qualitative research on sport we have observed over the past decade (or so) has been the increasing tendency for qualitative researchers to speak (and collaborate) across disciplinary boundaries, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. In so doing, researchers continue to defy—and avoid being labelled according to—‘traditional’ sub-disciplinary categories, conventions and expectations. Such a trend has opened up significant potential for the cross-pollination of ideas, theories and knowledge across boundaries. In turn, the barriers have been reduced which once, some have argued (McLevey et al., 2018), placed sociological, psychological, political or pedagogical research into relatively isolated ‘knowledge silos’. Thus, it has become more common to see phenomenology, discourse analysis and narrative approaches, for example, used across psychological, policy, pedagogical and sociological research (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Caddick et al., 2015; Dowling, 2020; Evans & Nistrup, 2020; McGannon et al., 2019; Sparkes, 2017; Williams & Annandale, 2019, 2020). These and other developments facilitate the ‘border crossings’ by those researching sport, physical activity, and health which are so fundamental to supporting and promoting critically informed knowledge production processes.

Such broad-ranging processes offer the potential to generate impact, and to influence and challenge policymaking, such as by questioning the prevailing trend of healthism in many societies (Evans, 2020; Giroux & Kincheloe, 1992; Mansfield & Rich, 2013; Pullen & Malcolm, 2018). Whilst it is important to remember that the emphasis of specific aspects of the human experience of sport can differ across these boundaries, depending on the research aim (e.g. to understand power, educational efficacy, or policy environments), strong qualitative research is now more likely to be informative of multiple audiences both within and outside the academy.

The shift towards speaking across disciplinary borders has resulted in the production of a shared research language and ways of 'doing' qualitative research that are more widely accepted. Arguably, this has raised the bar concerning the standards by which high quality qualitative research is assessed. Such commonalities include the growing number of scholars who recognise the centrality of their subjectivity in the research process (as opposed to scientists being purely 'objective' beings), although others still maintain more realist notions of researcher positionality. Yet it is now a common assertion that subjectivity does not have to be something to 'control' or eliminate from science; rather, it is always present, and should be acknowledged and even embraced. Consequently, there is also widespread recognition that we must consider (and often make explicit reference to) the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions which underpin qualitative research. Frequently, such considerations are explicated through researcher reflexivity and contemplation of researcher positionality, often in relation to specific theoretical traditions and perspectives (e.g. Evans et al., 2018; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012; Matthews, 2018; McNarry et al., 2019; Phoenix & Orr, 2014; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019). It is not enough for a researcher to simply say they are reflexive; they must *show how* they engage in reflexive processes. Such elements of the research process should be systematically incorporated into qualitative research. Indeed, debates in the field in relation to measures of rigour have developed in recent years, so that they now provide additional guidance with regards to elements of research such as data analysis, judgement of data quality and the representation of data (e.g. McGannon et al., 2019; Richardson, 1990; Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Indeed, the increased tendency to view qualitative research in a broad perspective has led to the establishment of an increasingly multidisciplinary research community within which common standards of rigour have been enhanced. These standards were a second key focus for us during our course. Yet how best to develop and maintain rigour is still debated. Whilst some perspectives put forward rather formulaic applications of 'validity', others have highlighted more systematic approaches often framed in relation to specific philosophical and theoretical traditions. Similarly, consideration of the philosophical, theoretical and methodological elements which underpin mixed and multi-methods research remains a challenge (e.g. Gibson, 2016; Hybholt & Thing, 2019). We now turn our attention to these debates.

Rigour in qualitative research: ongoing debates and avoiding polemic

Debates about how to ensure rigour in qualitative research, together with how rigour is expressed, has become more focussed in recent years in sport studies. It was also a key and recurring focus of our discussions during our PhD course. Put simply, rigour is embedded in the 'hows' and 'whys' of the selection of specific theoretical frames or research designs to understand a particular research question or aim. It is part of the process through which we design research, undertake it and express, monitor and reflect upon our position as researchers in relation to our participants as well as how we present and represent our data (such that we might seek to 'give voice' to our participants, rather than simply speak on their behalf) (Smith & Sparkes, 2016b; Svendler Nielsen, 2009). It is part of the process of selecting particular methods according to their strengths and weaknesses, and justifying those choices. It is also deeply embedded within the way in which we collect, analyse and assess the quality of data, such that we might choose to 'select' certain methods and data over others as more reliable, representative or evocative (or according to some other measure of quality). Finally, questions of rigour are entrenched in the ways that we express who we are, what our assumptions might be, and how these aspects of humanity might have influenced the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). We are, after all, humans who study other humans.

Let us now unpack a couple of these initial points further.

Specific forms of rigour in qualitative research have been revisited in recent years. In the most general terms, the question of rigour can be related to the way in which validity across a study is (re)evaluated in qualitative research, particularly in how it might differ from the way these terms are applied in quantitative studies. Many of these aspects relate to the process of conducting research, such as ethical considerations, data collection processes, and adherence to the assumptions of a given (and hopefully coherent) theoretical and philosophical perspective. For example, several authors have re-examined how typical measures of research quality, rigour or (contentiously) 'validity' might be (re)conceptualised in qualitative research in relation to largely philosophical positions, including post-positivist, neo-realist, critical realist, and interpretivist standpoints like social constructionism (e.g. McGannon et al., 2019, Smith & McGannon, 2018; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). This has resulted in some degree of critique and counter-critique of different positions, which could yet prove fruitful. Yet caution must be exercised in this debate if we are to avoid a return to the 'bad old days' of the twentieth century paradigm wars (Denzin, 2018), where different perspectives were caricatured, treated as incommensurable and (in some cases) 'better' or 'worse' than others. As we have seen in the past (and in some cases continue to see in our own departments), taking this route can lead to division and conflict. Perhaps such polemic or value judgements are best left to philosophers, whilst we are better to remain open to the many co-existing ways to *do* qualitative research that are specific to the social sciences (Malcolm, 2015). After all, explicating one's philosophical assumptions is only one step, albeit an important one, on the way to completing good qualitative (or social scientific) work. It is not the primary objective, nor is it the end game in social science.

Another key aspect that arose multiple times during our discussions was that relating specifically to the judgement of data quality, and how data and analyses should best be presented. Several perspectives on how we judge the quality of qualitative data exist. Although the origins of debate are reasonably venerable (e.g. Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Cho & Trent, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1986), in recent times this debate has become more focussed and has been enhanced in the field of sports studies. Whilst a detailed discussion of the different perspectives on assessing the quality of data is beyond the scope of this editorial, it is still worth briefly outlining some of the contemporary perspectives surrounding this element of rigour in qualitative sports studies. On the one hand, some have outlined how set-lists of universal criteria, such as credibility, rich or 'thick' description, significant contribution and evocativeness, can be applied to the judgement of data quality, irrespective of theoretical or methodological assumptions (Tracy, 2010). Of course many of these criteria could be applied to quantitative research, which can also provide rich description and be evocative; the key is to show how these criteria are sought in relation to the qualitative data in question. Conversely, others have argued how judgement of the quality of data might be adapted to particular study aims, and according to theoretical, philosophical and methodological considerations that vary between studies, depending upon the use of theory and the type of data being represented (Gordon & Patterson, 2013; Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). In noting the differences between these perspectives, however, the danger of over-emphasising difference, in sweeping terms and (on occasion) with error, once again exists. For example, a relativist position on criteria does not deny the existence of a reality, contra to claims made in critical realist arguments (see footnote 1 in Smith & McGannon, 2018, and Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). Despite such errors and misconceptions, however, what is consistently highlighted is the importance of *coherence*. That is, a study should see coherence between several underpinning elements if it is to be considered rigorous. These elements include a study's epistemological and ontological assumptions, its ethical framework, its theory, methodology, methods and presentation of data. Indeed, we would go so far as to suggest that successful publication of qualitative research is highly dependent upon such coherence, irrespective of philosophical approach.

Avoidance of the suggestion that different epistemological and ontological positions concerning rigour are oppositional or antagonistic to one another is also important if we are to appreciate the value of interdisciplinarity. This value lies in the recognition that different approaches can strengthen the original contributions of any one discipline, such that we can understand phenomena from multiple perspectives. We need to avoid setting up 'straw (wo)men' to break down in caricaturing or attempting to falsify opposing positions. That particular polemic has been done before (Bryman, 2008), and was hardly constructive. Instead, debate should not be a matter of highlighting how one approach or measure is 'better' than others, but should seek to promote understanding about the value and strengths of different approaches, different ways of 'knowing,' and different ways of doing qualitative research. We must remember that, in the fundamentally abstract world of philosophy (a sentiment meant not as a criticism, but as a reflection on its distinct value in knowledge production), it is quite normal to hold epistemological and ontological positions as oppositional. In

the fundamentally *lived*-reality of empirical social science, however, these positions co-mingle. Our focus in the social sciences can be upon feelings, experiences, distances, time, complex human behaviours. And complexity is something to be embraced. Perhaps, therefore, we can think of different approaches to research as parallel ways of viewing and knowing the world empirically, and of representing our work as reflections of that world and our understanding of it. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, more or less appropriate ways of understanding different aspects of the human experience, many of which can complement or support one another, and which can have their own qualities. Indeed, we also note that, in shifting from static and atomistic studies towards more processual and integrated studies on issues such as climate change, COVID-19 and brain injury, the natural sciences are also increasingly focussed upon subjects of similar character to those traditionally studied in the social sciences. The blind spots of one discipline can be rendered visible by others.

Finally, we note that the debates outlined above tend to focus upon qualitative research as a methods-driven endeavour, at times seemingly decoupled from specific theoretical considerations and frameworks which are often replete with implicit philosophical (or methodological) underpinnings of their own. There is nothing explicitly qualitative or quantitative about the analytical potentials of, for example, feminist, figurational or Bourdieusian frameworks. As Elias (1956) reminds us, social scientific research is often better served by cutting its (research) methods to suit the problem under investigation, not the other way round. Hence, although we re-emphasise that researchers should address and explicate rigour as a central pillar of any qualitative study, we also note that there is no universal 'way' of doing qualitative research, nor is there one single way of 'knowing.' Nor should there be, if we hope to maintain the current levels of innovation apparent within the field. It is to creativity and innovation in qualitative research that this editorial now turns.

Innovation with originality? Wants, needs, and the drive towards novelty in qualitative research

The third recurrent theme in our discussions concerned the drive towards multiplicity and novelty in qualitative research. On the one hand, this related to creativity and the search for innovative ways to generate, analyse and represent qualitative data in sports studies. Just as in the natural sciences, where failure to adapt can leave scientific knowledge wanting, so too are novel ways of understanding the world considered crucial in the social sciences. On the other hand, our discussions also related to collective frustrations about the use of a wide array of jargon and terminology to describe methods that bear a strong resemblance (or at least have strong commonalities with) established techniques or concepts. This contradiction requires explanation.

As noted above, a considerable range of methods is available to the qualitative researcher, even when collecting or communicating similar 'types' of data (e.g. visual, oral, textual or historical sources or artefacts), offering the potential for qualitative researchers to adopt the position of *bricoleur* (Denzin, 1994). What's more, although some forms of data collection are more dominant than others (McGannon et al., 2019; Seippel, 2018), even 'traditional' qualitative methods have become increasingly sub-

divided and attuned to specific purposes. The range of modalities, tools and processes in an interview, for example, is considerable. Depending upon the participants and study aims, one must initially choose between life-history, life-story, conversational, structured/semi-structured/unstructured, focus group and group-interviews (Smith & Sparkes, 2016b; Svendler Nielsen, 2009). In addition, one might also consider more nuanced and supplementary approaches, such as multi-modal elicitation techniques designed to enhance discussion (e.g. use of visual and physical artefacts, or referring to other data) (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014, 2019; Langdridge et al., 2012; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Schubring et al., 2019; Svendler Nielsen, 2009; Williams, 2018b). Moreover, interviews can be deliberately conducted in a range of places and spaces, online or in person, formal or informal, seated, walking, dancing or even swimming, whilst interview data can be recorded in real time face to face, online (Archibald et al., 2019), drawn or visually represented, filmed or produced alongside visual data, with each potentially analysed in multiple ways (Denton et al., 2021; Kowalewski & Bartłomiejski, 2020; O'Neill & Roberts, 2019; Phoenix & Orr, 2017; Smith & Sparkes, 2016a). Perhaps the simple interview isn't quite so simple after all.

Those who regularly teach research methods or supervise research projects, as well as those who are new to the field, are doubtless aware that such depth can feel overwhelming. Indeed, it can seem like new methods or approaches, many of which are attuned to the aims of a specific study, population or context, are continuously developed at a considerable rate. Our own course, too, focussed upon nuance within the use of qualitative methods, and several novel and creative forms of data collection and reporting were outlined in relation to specific studies (see, for example, Berg & Winther, 2020; Dowling, 2020; Lenneis et al., 2020; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Schubring et al., 2019; Sparkes et al., 2003; Svendler Nielsen, 2009; Williams, 2018a, 2020; Williams & Annandale, 2020; Williams & Gibson, 2017; Winther, 2018). There are often many good reasons to engage in such specific and creative methods, and the potential of many methods remains considerable, particularly when coupled with fast-paced technological advances that can open up new and enticing opportunities for data collection, analysis and presentation. The result is a rapidly developing field in which novelty in method is often actively sought and is sometimes rewarded, such that innovation appears almost necessary in qualitative research*¹. Indeed, it is fair to say that many of the early career researchers on our PhD course felt such pressure.

And therein lies a potential problem. In such a rapidly changing and developing field, there remains a threat that the full potential of many methods can all-too often be untapped, before the next fashionable method, tool or smartphone app comes to the fore. At the same time, innovation can sometimes be an illusion. The rush to design anew, to attempt to coin a new term or phrase to describe a 'new' method, should perhaps also be tempered with careful consideration that, given the huge array of methods currently available to the qualitative researcher, the chances of creating an entirely 'new' method are probably quite slim. Indeed, it is notable that many innovations also focuses upon the *collection* of data, whilst what we actually *do* with the data once obtained might incorporate new technological solutions to complete established techniques in new ways (Phoenix & Orr, 2017). And by introducing a new term to describe that method, we risk unnecessarily complicating the field, and potentially

rebuilding barriers between disciplines as each discipline invents new terms to describe broadly the same method or practice. Indeed, many sociological theories have been critiqued in this way, as *'old wine in new bottles.'* Such approaches as figurational sociology and new materialism have been labelled in this way, due to their similarities and overlaps with previous approaches. Yet both have made a distinctive and distinguished contribution to social scientific knowledge.

Perhaps, then, this is the nature of innovation; it is incremental. Maybe more durable and embedded innovation takes time, work, and a buildup of ideas that are anything but instantaneous. The myth that science is built of a series of 'Eureka' moments tends to overlook the depth and duration of work that underpins each stride. The hard work that underpinned the long journey of Archimedes' ideas from his climbing into his bath and displacing water, or Galileo theorising the spherical nature of the earth, and their ideas entering the public consciousness, remains largely invisible. Innovation takes time.

Furthermore, the drive for innovation should be moderated by careful consideration of need. Indeed, the 'needs' and 'wants' of research are very different things. In other words, researchers must assess the need for a specific type of data that cannot be obtained through established methods, or the need to tailor a study to the needs of a specific group, against their 'want' of novelty and the potential credit it could afford them. To reiterate, there is nothing wrong with a well-constructed and well-executed interview, if it suits a particular study aim. Just because one can invent, does not mean one should. Indeed, without evidence of the need for novelty, innovation for the sake of innovation can actually be harmful. For example, we might reduce the extent to which qualitative studies can be meaningfully understood in relation to one another, or we might make our work increasingly inaccessible and jargon-ridden by introducing new terminology into the qualitative lexicon in order to describe new or adapted methods that might be established in other fields beyond our knowledge (Allen, 2016). New methods often require new language, which is also likely to be a hindrance to interdisciplinary research. In short, without careful consideration of need, innovation in qualitative methods can run the risk of overlooking previous work, rather than building upon it. Innovation is important, but should be considered in relation to its costs and benefits to the field, and the maintenance of rigour. Whilst innovation in qualitative data collection, analysis, presentation and dissemination can be creative, exciting and rewarding, it is neither risk free, nor uniformly useful. Indeed, how we present data, and how we 'manage' our perspectives as qualitative researchers, is the final theme to which this editorial now turns.

Professional responsibility: considering how to represent qualitative research

The final theme that shaped discussions amongst both presenters and participants in the PhD course was a sense that the responsibility of representing the views of often unheard, marginalised or stigmatised groups could weigh heavily upon our consciences as researchers. Some of these concerns focussed upon methodological questions and considerations, including how best to 'give voice' to participants in a sensitive, empathetic, creative and ethical manner. Such foci included how to assess and

manage researcher positionality (i.e. rapport and relationships with participants, and managing perceived power hierarchies between researchers and participants). Indeed, our participating researchers were often keenly aware of their relatively 'privileged' position in relation to many of those with whom they were speaking, although the nature of this privilege tended to vary according to the group with whom research was conducted. For example, privilege was considered in relation to researchers' ethnicity (often 'white privilege' from the researchers' perspective), to their relative youthfulness or positive health status (e.g. when participants included those managing chronic illness, higher weights, or who were in later life) or to socio-economic status or class, particularly when participants were socially disadvantaged in some way.

Such observations led to several descriptions of feelings of unease, particularly concerning the role of academics in the research process. After all, we too take emotional journeys with our participants (Johnson, 2009). In this regard, several presenters from various career stages reflected upon their discomfort at what McRobbie (1991) referred to as 'holidaying on other people's misery.' That is, whilst the lives of their research participants might remain largely unchanged after research had ceased and results had been published, researchers tend to benefit professionally from their research. Conversely for the researcher, contact with such lifeworlds is often more fleeting. They might acquire an academic position and the relatively privileged lifestyle afforded to them by such employment, or gain recognition for the publication of their results. Many of us have questioned whether our research amounted to profiting from the challenges faced by others, and whether we have a 'right' to speak on behalf of those with whom we conduct research. Such social responsibility is equally applicable to all social scientists, and yet has particular resonance in qualitative research due to the different ways we present the words and life-worlds of our participants. This led to the discussion of a number of questions, such as; do researchers who fail to be reflexive about their own position 'other' those who they 'give voice' to in their attempts to highlight and understand experiences of marginalisation, stigmatisation, and other challenging circumstances? To whom should we speak, who should be prioritised, and how might we ensure our research is impactful to those who most need it?

In response to such concerns, we reflected on the role that all social scientific researchers should play in society by attempting to speak beyond the academy, to engage in additional 'border crossings' needed in order to engage with both decision makers and research participants, in order to try to make a demonstrable difference. We also focussed upon the temptation to be apologetic about who we are, irrespective of how others in society might label us (as men or women, according to our socio-economic class, as old or young, disabled or able-bodied and so on). Intersectional elements of identity and social existence privilege and disadvantage people in various different and complex ways, and therefore researchers should always be reflexive about issues related to their identity, assumptions and preconceptions. By being reflexive, issues of identity can be negotiated, irrespective of how others might judge us as individuals, and how they position us in relation to the groups with whom we work.

Instead, we must focus upon upholding the ethical standards against which our work is assessed, not least in seeking justice, beneficence, non-maleficence and

respecting the autonomy of our participants (even seeking to be allies and advocates). It is probably also worth noting that these concepts are 'borrowed' from medical ethics, demonstrating once again the importance of interdisciplinarity and the importance of crossing borders. Similarly, we should therefore endeavour to be empathetic, rather than sympathetic towards those we conduct research with. This latter point is crucial; as ethical qualitative researchers (and as social scientists more generally), some have convincingly argued we should seek to work with -not 'on' or 'for'- our research participants, acting more as travelling companions and less as data miners (Sparkes & Smith, 2013; Svendler Nielsen et al., 2019). It might also be helpful to remind ourselves that, in 'giving voice' to those less able to speak truth to power, we can offer avenues towards opportunities to be heard. At the same time, as Durkheim originally stated, there is also an element of value in the social scientists' role to bring to bear their expertise and esoteric training to construct a view of the social world that is, in some ways, distinctive from the view of its 'lay' inhabitants (Malcolm, 2015). In this way, there is potential for social scientists (depending upon their objectives) to advocate for the interests of the disadvantaged, and also bring additional understanding of the complexities of the production and reproduction of social inequalities, for instance. With careful consideration and conscious, concerted effort to widen our audience, we might also ensure that those voices are heard by those in a position to make a difference. In this sense, reflexivity in the research process only begins with explication of researcher assumptions and positionality; it must continue through the data collection, writing and dissemination processes (Evans et al., 2018; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). And clearly the chances of this are higher if qualitative researchers are in a position to fulfil such work—which usually requires employment and, ideally, the freedom within employment to dedicate time to ensuring our research is impactful. Such work might differ from the usual ways in which academic work is evaluated; tasks which boost academic metrics are often more meaningful to University managers (Thiel, 2018), than they are to participants in social scientific research! As researchers, therefore, we can play an important part in witnessing, amplifying voices, and, when deemed valuable, by working with the public to generate and disseminate knowledge and contribute towards meaningful change.

Clearly, such considerations are common to all social scientists, qualitative and otherwise. More specifically to qualitative research, however, is the need to give consideration to the ways in which qualitative data is presented and disseminated, particularly in relation to the ongoing calls for a more 'public' and impactful model of scientific knowledge sharing (Evans, 2020). Peer reviewed papers certainly serve a purpose, but have a limited reach due to their relative inaccessibility and perceived complexity to audiences both within and outside the academy (Evans, 2020; Mewburn & Thomson, 2013). Nevertheless, just as in the case of the development of new methods of data capture and analysis, so too has creativity, innovation and technological development opened up new opportunities for the dissemination of qualitative research in recent times. Research findings can be communicated more effectively to a diversity of audiences through multiple mediums, including photographic and artistic exhibitions, comics, dance and theatre, music, film, technological platforms such as blogs, vlogs, apps and podcasts, as well as other formats. Indeed, many of the more creative

forms of communication can be used to evoke multiple forms of response from their audience which, in some ways, can be just as informative as the initial data and might lead to an increased sense of what participants in the initial research might have felt or experienced (Sparkes, 2017; Winther, 2018). Such forms of dissemination have gained traction and increased legitimacy in recent times, both within wider channels of dissemination and academic publishing circles (Phoenix, 2010; Williams, 2018a, 2020; Williams & Annandale, 2020; Winther, 2018). These developments represent a new horizon for more accessible and engaging research to reach a wider and more diverse audience than ever before. Social scientists should make every effort to ensure that we engage in continued research practice that enables us to maintain a high level of rigour and ethical standards as we begin to pursue such new avenues of communication. However, academic structures also need to be modified so that such work is considered as valuable as traditional markers of academic success (e.g. publications, grant revenue), so that researchers are supported and incentivised to carry out this important form of academic labour (Williams, 2018a).

Concluding comments

In this editorial, we have drawn upon our reflections of the present state of play within the field of qualitative research on sport and exercise. We have highlighted how this is a relatively fast-paced and rapidly changing field. It is a field in which a strong, multidisciplinary community has become established, catalysed by a shift towards increasing legitimacy of qualitative research and interdisciplinarity practice within sport studies. Increasing interdisciplinarity within this community has also facilitated and normalised the sharing of ideas, of a common lexicon, a drive towards research rigour, cohesive research, ethical standards and researcher responsibility, and within which innovation and creativity is encouraged and often lauded—although perhaps this could be better supported with additional resources! What's more, border crossings between quantitative and qualitative approaches remain, perhaps, under-utilised, and careful consideration must be given concerning the type of border crossing desired. Whilst discussion is relatively easy between disciplines, ('interdisciplinary' research, or the 'true' mixing of disciplines, is about more than simply listening to the work of others; it requires expertise in other fields, coherence between different ontological and epistemological standpoints, and development of shared concerns across disciplines (Thorpe et al., 2020). In short (and despite what many research funders and University managers would have us believe), it is not easy.

Simultaneously, however, numerous challenges for the future exist. For example, the push towards interdisciplinarity and uniform standards of rigour can perhaps overlook nuance and difference in the research foci and theoretical underpinnings within and between different academic disciplines. Similarly, we must be aware that the increased focus upon research standards, whilst largely helpful, runs the risk of regressing back to the damaging paradigm wars of the past, particularly if different approaches are pitched in adversarial terms based upon philosophical rationales. Different approaches must co-exist, because our worlds consist of a variety of phenomena that are most appropriately studied using a variety of different approaches.

The relative merits of each approach must be precisely recognised, rather than caricatured, if the qualitative research community is to continue to make meaningful contributions to knowledge production and support positive social change. Similarly, the rapid pace of change in the field, driven by investment in and normalisation of interdisciplinarity, technology and the drive for creativity and 'impact' presents the risk of overstating originality, of fragmentation and the introduction of unnecessary complexity. We must therefore give careful consideration of the need for novelty (as opposed to the want for novelty) in a field already rich in methodological resources. This richness simultaneously presents an array of possibilities, however, and the future will offer huge potential for qualitative social scientists to reach wider and more diverse audiences. In so doing we will be better placed to contribute towards fulfilling the responsibility of social scientists to maximise the social impact of our research, and in addressing issues of inequality, marginalisation, and exclusion. It is a challenge that we should relish!

Note

1. Although perhaps ironically, not always in academic publishing!

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