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The problem with truth in qualitative interviews: reflections from a narrative perspective

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This paper considers the narrative complexity of the telling–listening process that unfolds in qualitative interviews in sport and exercise sciences. Acknowledging the narrative complexity of memory itself, it critiques the perhaps implicit assumption in many researchers' minds that interviewees' responses to interviewers' questions are to be taken as 'the truth' in some simple, straightforward manner. By the same token, it concludes by arguing that truth is ultimately no less problematic an issue in quantitative research than it is in qualitative research, merely problematic in a different way.

Keywords: truth; interview; narrative; qualitative research; memory

Why is 'truth' an issue?

Researchers of every stripe are in search of a greater understanding of a given phenomenon or theme. Explicitly or otherwise, they are hoping to get closer to The Truth. In what follows, we want to reflect on this issue of *truth* as it pertains to qualitative research; more specifically, to interviewing – the method most commonly employed by qualitative researchers in sport and exercise sciences (Culver *et al.* 2003, Smith and Sparkes 2009). But why might truth be an 'issue'? Truth becomes an issue, we believe, the moment we find ourselves wondering what it is the people whom we interview are telling us. In other words, how accurate a picture does the information that they share about their lives permit us of what, deep down, they are thinking or feeling on whatever topic we are keen to understand – be it the rigors of training, coping with a disability, or the allure of extreme sport? Put bluntly, are they telling us 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but'?

Our own experiences as researchers have tended to be with interviews of a particular type; *lifestory* interviews (see Randall *et al.* 2006). Though these experiences constitute the backdrop to our considerations here, a lifestory interview is admittedly a special case, for it involves someone engaging in 'a fairly complete narrating of [his or her] entire experience of life as a whole' (Atkinson 1998, p. 8). Except perhaps in a therapeutic context, the bald, open-ended invitation to 'tell me the story of your life' – to engage in what psychologist, Mark Freeman, calls 'big story' narration (2006) – is hardly one that most of us are accustomed to receiving. Indeed, it can represent a 'narrative challenge' (Wallace 1992, p. 123) sufficiently intimidating to shut us down

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before we even start, whether due to modesty about ‘tooting our own horn’ or genuine befuddlement as to where we should begin. Instead, it is ‘small stories’ that we tend to traffic in most often (Bamberg 2004, see also Phoenix and Sparkes 2009): narratives of specific incidents or experiences whose shapes are not pre-cast inside our heads so much as they emerge in the course of our conversations with others, which as we shall see is exactly why ‘truth’ becomes an issue. For stories are told in particular situations to particular listeners for particular reasons. And *stories* – not ‘facts’ and not mere ‘information’ – are ultimately what we are hearing in a qualitative interview, small stories (episodes, subplots, chapters) excerpted from the story of one’s life as a whole. Accordingly, any insights into truth in *lifestory* interviews as such are relevant to truth in interviews of any kind, regardless of the topic under investigation.

The problem of truth

In a post-modern era, the very concept of ‘truth’ is something of an embarrassment, however much its ghost may haunt us or however much it has functioned down through history as a Holy Grail. Classical philosophers were inspired by the vision of conquering it through logical inquiry. Scientists, meanwhile, have been confident about attaining it through the scientific method. For ourselves, however, truth is problematic in relation to memory itself – above all, episodic memory or autobiographical memory (Neisser 1994). For psychologist David Rubin (1995), autobiographical memory – as opposed to semantic memory or procedural memory – ‘is what we usually mean by the term memory in everyday usage’ (p. 1). It is memory of us and for us, memories we have of ourselves over time. It is memory, not of the past as such, but of *our* past (Wheeler 2000). Concerning qualitative research in sport and exercise sciences, this is absolutely the key. For the material from which our participants are drawing when they talk to us about their lives is, in the end, their recollections.

‘Recollections’, though, – be they of competitions won or lost, entering a gym for the first time, or being dropped from a team – are scarcely full-scale replicas of events we have experienced or witnessed. They are not videotaped recordings of what actually took place, stored within our brains with computer-like efficiency and retrievable exactly as experienced at the time. They are approximations. They are expurgated versions, refracted from ‘the original’ through a narrative lens, both at the beginning, when initially experienced, and whenever they are brought to mind thereafter – above all, when we seek to put them into words for the benefit of others. ‘Language reveals, but it also conceals’, notes Donald Spence (1982, p. 54). It ‘muddies more than it mediates’ (p. 77). ‘Any description’, he says, ‘is bound to misrepresent the complete memory’ (p. 57). Much of the substance of our memories is therefore ‘lost in translation’ as they make the transition ‘from the private language of experience into the common language of speech’ (p. 83).

This is especially so when attempting to describe experiences of physicality. For example, Sparkes and Smith’s (2008) research with male rugby players following a spinal cord injury (SCI) illustrates how it was initially very difficult, if not impossible, for many of the men to articulate their subjective experiences of the neuropathic pain that they encountered following SCI during their rehabilitation period. Douglas, one of their participants explained, ‘I spoke to the doctor about the pain, and my friends asked me if I was in pain. I couldn’t express what I felt though, there weren’t the

words, and it hurt so much' (p. 682). Douglas's pain was, it seems, unspeakable. As Sparkes and Smith point out, unspeakable pain is able to resist and destroy language, subsequently ensuring that the communication of subjective meaning and personal experience was either momentarily or permanently silenced. Such an intense physical sensation like pain, therefore, remains beyond words, inaccessible, and its lived reality or 'truth', if you like, is most certainly lost in translation.

If certain aspects of physicality are beyond words, then what does this mean for the lifestory interview? Or, to continue with our example of pain, how does the interviewer gain some purchase on what pain is like for Douglas when his private language of experience is unable to reach the common language of speech? As Sparkes and Smith (2008) suggest, over time the body and narrative rejoin. Physical pain finds a voice and starts to tell a story. This is not to assert, however, that such words are a transparent window into the self and all that it has experienced. Rather, what is witnessed during the interview is a performance of memory talk serving particular personal and social functions through the stories that are told to explain who we are, what we are, and where we are in life at a particular time and place. In other words, as illustrated by the example of pain and injured rugby players, there is a self-defining function to autobiographical memory in that it organises our knowledge about ourselves. Furthermore, Atkinson *et al.* (2003), in their discussion of truth and qualitative research, note that what counts as experience – like memory – is organised through a variety of conventional resources and repertoires, including the narrative resources that people have access to. Thus, for them, 'In interview derived accounts ... "telling the truth" is a far from simple matter' (p. 132). Indeed, not only are the personal stories that we tell shaped by cultural narrative resources, they are also shaped by the passage of time.

It is not just language, but time itself that plays a role in recollection. Our memories of the past are recalled amidst present agendas and present concerns, and always in the light of what we anticipate in the future. And since both – our experience of the past and our perception of the future – are continually changing, 'the past' *per se* is a moving target. Moreover, our interpretation of it can hinge intensely on the context in which we recall it. A lifestory interview constitutes, for instance, a rather different kind of context for remembering and interpreting life events than does a session of psychoanalysis, a chat with our chums, or hearing some love song on the radio that reawakens images of a long-dead affair. It has a greater intentionality about it, with more pressure felt by us perhaps to consider the significance of a given incident in relation to our life as a whole. This is illustrated in the following extract taken from a lifestory interview that is part of a project exploring the experiences of mature bodybuilders (see Phoenix, *in press a, b*).¹ The participant in this instance is Bob (a pseudonym), who at the time was 72 years old and still regularly competing in natural bodybuilding competitions. Here, Bob is recalling his past – in particular, the relationship he had with his deceased father. Two important observations can be made from Bob's comments: first, how he re-evaluates this relationship in the past from his position as an older man in the present; second, how the re-evaluation process is intentionally connected to the context of the interview itself – i.e., the broader aims of the project that he has been informed about beforehand:

The first thing that I noticed about the weight training, Cassandra, was that it made me feel good. And everybody wants to feel good. I felt that when my father and I had our many arguments and all that friction was going on between us, I felt terrible, but I found

that the weight training counteracted that. It made me feel good. I'm sorry, I'm very sorry now that I did not have a good relationship with my father. I deeply, deeply regret it but I have a funny feeling that I kept the weight training going because it made me feel good. I felt in those days that my father was putting me down for some reason or another. I would love to know why. Maybe it was because I was no longer amenable to his discipline. When I was young, I had done what my father told me, but when I hit my teens, 16, 17, 18 you're becoming a young man, you're beginning to think for yourself, you want to lead your life the way you think it should be lead, not the way your father is dictating to you. I think he found that hard to cope with. I was the oldest son in the family. I think he found that difficult to deal with. I felt sorry for him, I feel sorry for him when I look back. The man didn't know how to cope with a teenage son, and the son didn't know how to cope with this highly disciplined father. Consequently, there was friction ... I felt he was trying to make me feel small, and the fact that I was able to do weight training and feel good about myself counteracted that. And that has carried on through the years and I still feel good, I still get that same feel good factor when I train now. I think the relationship, the bad relationship that I had with my father had some bearings on me getting so deeply involved into the weight training thing, the bodybuilding thing.

Bob's comments show how the passage of time, and indeed the interview itself, calls for a degree of reflection regarding his past. This reflection and recollection offers space for him to re-evaluate the relationship with his father. One that was experienced as being filled with conflict in the past is seemingly re-storied through an increasingly sympathetic orientation as to *why* their relationship was difficult. Moreover, the example above illuminates how, at this moment in time, Bob's interpretation of this relationship becomes connected with what Zilber *et al.* (2008) refer to as the *intersubjective context* of the interview. Intersubjective context is defined as that which 'relates to the immediate relations and to the interaction within which the identity story is narrated' (p. 1051). For them, any prior knowledge about the aims of the interview, where and when the interview takes place, who is present, the power relations between the parties and so forth – all of these shape how the storyteller's life is constructed, communicated and understood amid the interview setting. Aware that the overall purpose of our meeting was to explore his experiences of bodybuilding across the life course, it is perhaps not surprising that on this occasion Bob intentionally considers his relationship with his father in terms of its impact upon his involvement in bodybuilding. Thus, the intersubjective context, along with the 'moving target' nature of the past, is of importance when considering the notion of truth.

Furthermore, memory itself can hardly be considered an exact reflection of our life as lived. At best, memories are trimmed-down, summed-up, backward-looking *facsimiles* of actual events; more specifically, of the astoundingly restricted set of such events that we have ended up preserving out of everything that has comprised 'our life' to date – most of which, if preserved at all, lies buried deep below, more or less decayed, in what has been referred to as the 'compost heap' of memory (Randall 2007). For by no means do we retain in excruciating detail every single thing that we have experienced or suffered (nor could we function if we did); only those things which, for whatever reasons, we deem essential to hold onto. And what we succeed in holding onto are, once again, never the facts as such but only narrative renderings, and often rather sketchy ones at that. They are stories, and not 'true stories' either, if by Truth is meant 'objective truth' (Miller 2000, p. 15) – which is to say, technical correspondence to original occurrence. By its very nature, and by necessity, our memory as a whole is a dynamic amalgam of fact and fictionalisation – a matter of *faction*, if you will.

Such *faction* can be discerned in the following excerpt from an interview with Lauren (a pseudonym), who had described herself as a high level athlete striving for international success in track events. However, during a trip to Australia with her friends, Lauren jumped from a 50-foot waterfall, landed awkwardly in the water and suffered a traumatic and chronic injury to her thoracic vertebrae (see Phoenix and Howe, in press). Following an assessment of her injury, she remained in an Australian Spinal Cord Injury hospital for four months following the accident, during which time her friends flew back to the UK to resume their studies. Recalling a two-day period spent in a general hospital prior to being transferred to the SCI unit, she said:

I was in that hospital for two days having different scans to make sure there was no internal bleeding. Those two days felt very long, I can really remember the pain. I can remember the evenings. I just couldn't sleep at all. I was so tired because I was having no sleep and the pain was excruciating, so that was probably the worst time. I also felt a lot of guilt, I felt very, very guilty to what I might be putting everybody through in terms of worrying and how silly I had been because I was so close to losing mobility in my legs. That went through my mind a lot, 'what if', especially for those few days. During those days, I felt a range of emotions. I was worrying because I was in so much pain. I just wanted anything to relieve this constant pain. I couldn't sleep at night because I was in so much pain. I couldn't move either because my back was so unstable that if they had moved my legs, I could have been paralysed. I couldn't move and that was very uncomfortable. Then I was just worrying about what I was putting my parents through because obviously they were back at home very concerned, what I had put my friends through because I had cut my holiday short. I was in this hospital by myself, I was so very lonely. I remember wishing that I was just back at home with my friends and family. Also, as I was in so much pain and I was on so much medication I wasn't a hundred percent aware of the environment. I was on so much medication it knocked me out really trying to control the pain, so I was in and out of sleep all the time.

Lauren's memories of these two days can be summed up via the following themes: pain, insomnia, guilt, worry. It is these aspects that remain salient to her storytelling. For whatever reason, they have survived the process of trimming down the abundance of detail embedded within this period – what she ate, how many doctors she saw, how many scans were performed, who (if anybody) she shared a room with and so forth. Rather, pain, insomnia, guilt and worry become known and (re)experienced in the very act of re-calling and re-telling. Moreover, the extent to which Lauren's story is comprised of *faction* is further reinforced by the 'fact' that she was heavily drugged, 'knocked out' and not 'a hundred percent aware' of her surroundings for much of the time during this period.

What might be seen here as technical unreliability does not mean, however, that memory is deficient in some fundamental sense. This is how memory works. Without its capacity for selecting, summarising and spinning, without the element of imagination and invention such processes entail and without the ability to distil (if not to decompose) vast portions of our past, our memory could scarcely accomplish what it manages to accomplish with, all in all, outstanding skill: the provision of a repertoire of revisable factions which equip us with a feasible sense of Self, a self capable of adapting to the complexity and flux that normal life involves (Randall, in press). 'Self', on this view therefore, is 'not a static thing nor a substance' but 'a single, unfolding and developing story', says narrative scholar Donald Polkinghorne (1988, p. 150). Paralleling this assessment is that proposed by psychologist Dan McAdams, who brings a narrative perspective to Erikson's notion of 'identity'. Identity, he insists, 'is a life story' (McAdams 2001, p. 643), by which he means an 'internalized

and evolving personal myth that functions to provide life with unity and purpose' (McAdams 1996, p. 132).² Note McAdams' use of the term 'myth'. In sum, insofar as it is memory on which we lean when fielding an interviewer's queries, then the truth of our responses – in the technical sense at least – is at issue from the start.

We could go on from this, of course, and talk about the trouble with truth in autobiography per se (see Pascal 1960, Eakin 1985, Zinsser 1987), in biography (see Edel 1959, Oates 1986), in historiography (see White 1980, Carr 1986) and indeed in ordinary life. As discourse analysts, sociolinguists and the like have persuasively explored (Linde 1993, Bavelas *et al.* 2000, Ochs and Capps 2002), our interactions with one another every day involve nothing if not a continuous process of 'narrative editing' (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, pp. 113–116) and 'narrative smoothing' (Spence 1986) as we spin our stories, big and small, around the contents of our lives. Let us return, though, to the central question: What is someone telling us in a qualitative interview? How reliable a portrait do their words provide us of what, at bottom, they are thinking or feeling on whatever we would like to understand? Once more, are they telling us 'the truth'? The answer is clearly No. They are not telling us 'the truth', where truth is conceived as exact correspondence to previous events. It may be as *truthful* as they can manage; and indeed, it may open them to a truer, deeper understanding, later on, of whatever they are recounting or reflecting on. As the compost heap analogy helps us to appreciate, the significance of past events tends to change and grow with time. In any event, it is certainly not 'the truth' in some pure, unvarnished sense – a technical sense – that our participants are reporting to us now. It is not 'the facts' that they are conveying to us in some direct, unmediated manner. Rather, it is the *interpretations* of such facts as they have chosen to recount. Another way of putting the point is that it is not their *history* we are hearing, but their *story* (Miller 2000, p. 19) – some portion or version of the underlying narrative they have been telling themselves inside their minds about who they are, where they have come from and where they are headed.

Truth and qualitative interviewing

What we have been stressing up to now is that the person being interviewed can never tell us 'the whole truth' about their life, nor even about some experience or episode therein, for memory is by definition a factionalising faculty. As expressed by Jerome Bruner (2002), one of the pioneers of narrative psychology, 'memory and imagination supply and consume each other's wares', and 'fuse in the process' (p. 93). It is always possible of course that, for whatever reasons (e.g. to protect themselves or someone else, to throw the listener off), interviewees may indulge in outright lying when replying to our probes, deliberately glossing over vital details, dramatising others, or generally refusing to give us 'honest' answers. And certainly, it is possible as well that our interviewees are, in some sense, 'emotionally unbalanced' or 'mentally ill', in which case their answers will be not so much dishonest as distorted or deluded. These possibilities (all possible) aside, there are other, more mundane reasons why what 'ordinary' tellers tell their (ordinary) listeners is not to be taken as 'the truth'.

Literacy, environment and temperament

For starters, try as they may to say exactly what they mean, they will be constrained by the degree of self-insight that they have managed to acquire to date, not to mention

by their level of literacy overall, by their ability to match words and phrases to their inner thoughts and feelings. And no matter how literate they are, there will inevitably be refraction – or ‘slippage’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964) – between thought and word. Related to literacy is the ‘storying style’ (Randall 1995, pp. 308–328) that they typically employ when talking about their experiences, regardless of who may be listening. In addition to their propensity for expressing themselves in, say, a literal or linear manner versus a metaphorical or meandering one, their storying style involves the overall *narrative tone* – ranging from ‘blissful optimism’ to ‘biting negativism’ – (McAdams 1996, p. 136) that characterises whatever they recount (p. 136), whether it concerns episodes from their past or experiences they anticipate in the future. When interviewed about their perceptions of self-ageing, for instance, young athletes can be extremely negative about the prospect of growing old, casting it according to what structural analysis (Lieblich *et al.* 1998) reveals to be a *tragic* plot-line – or what cultural studies scholar, Margaret Gullette, in *Aged by Culture*, calls the ‘narrative of decline’ (2004, p. 17). Witness the following extracts from interviews undertaken by Cassandra (see Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006a, b, 2007, 2008, Phoenix *et al.* 2007):

Growing old for me means stuff like becoming less physically fit ... It’s more the physical things, like getting fatter, being less able to play a high level of hockey and go for runs, getting injured more often and stuff like that. My body will actually kind of worsen. Specifically for hockey, I think of sharpness, just sprinting off the mark. I can see them kind of worsening. (Neill, age 21)

I don’t want to be waited on hand and foot, but I know that it comes to an age where you just have to rely on other people because you can’t physically do it. I suppose at that age, when your body can’t do anything because you’re really frail and really, really old, it’s kind of, it sounds horrible, but it’s like waiting to die kind of thing. Especially, if you’re on your own and there’s no one else around. If you’re just lonely, I think it would be so much worse because you’d have nothing to aim for. You’ve finished your life ... Old age, that’s quite a scary thought. (Louisa, age 21)

The tone of the stories that interviewees tell will reflect as well the various *narrative environments* to which they have been party throughout the years – from their family of origin to the community in which they grew up, to their schooling and profession, their gender and culture, their language and race. Simply put a ‘narrative environment’ is any context in which we talk about our lives, whether to others or ourselves (Bruner 1990, p. 94; see also Gubrium and Holstein 2009). Ranging from open and inviting to rigid and restrictive, such contexts inevitably shape the ways in which interviewees go about telling and interpreting their experience. In this respect, American interviewees may by and large talk quite differently about their lives – more assertively or un-self-consciously perhaps – than Canadian ones, Cuban ones, Chinese ones and so on (certainly if the interview is carried out in English). Returning to our example of young athletes Phoenix and Sparkes (2006a) propose, for instance, that the negativity that pervaded their stories was connected, in part, to the sporting environment in which they situated their senses of self. Specifically, the manner in which the participant’s body–self relationships and habitus had been developed over the years in relation to sports performance and the disciplinary practices utilised to achieve successful performance outcomes had implications for how they anticipated the process of growing old. Indeed, aware that performance tends to decrease with age in high level and elite sport, and given the relatively short span of a sporting career in

relation to other occupations, the young athletes involved in this research displayed an affinity towards stories which focused on the visible and embodied signs of this decline, and on what the future might hold for their own bodies in terms of performance. It would seem, therefore, that individuals immersed in the sub-culture of sport may find themselves propelled to certain forms of telling over and above others. In addition to stories about self-ageing, in other words, similar sentiments have been offered regarding the 'forms of self-telling' (Bruner 1987, p. 16) or 'narrative templates' (Abbott 2002, p. 7) towards which athletes seem most drawn, in relation to injury (Sparkes 1998, Wainwright and Turner 2003), to illness (Sparkes 2004) and to becoming disabled through sport (Sparkes and Smith 2002, Smith and Sparkes, 2004, 2005, 2007).

Shifting from the issue of culture to that of temperament, what an interviewee says about their life (as well as *how* they say it) will hinge as well upon their basic personality – whether it be high in 'neuroticism' or low in 'openness to experience' and so forth (McRae and Costa 2003). But temperament is not necessarily a constant thing. The degree of neuroticism one displays, for instance, depends to some extent on who one is interacting with – a point of huge importance to qualitative research in sport and exercise sciences and one we will come back to in a bit. Relevant as well is what is happening in the interviewee's life at the time the interview is done. If their ongoing ankle problem re-emerged with vengeance the night before, or they lost a big race the previous week, or won Gold at the Olympics, surely such circumstances – regardless of their 'type' – will have an impact on their mood, and thus on the answers they supply to the interviewer's questions. Someone with a normally sunny outlook on the world could see the glass of life as disturbingly empty, making the 'data' we collect from them on such a day an unfair reflection of how they usually are. What is more, their mood can change appreciably as the interview itself continues, depending on the line of questioning that the interviewer follows and on the memories and overall self-storylines that are thereby triggered, insofar as mood and memory, emotion and narrative, are intimately entwined (Nussbaum 1990, Schweder 1994, Singer 1996).

Examples of the issues we are raising here were experienced when Cassandra met with a female bodybuilder who, the evening before the interview, had been the victim of an attempted car jack. Visibly shaken, her eyes darted nervously as she waited to cross the road and collect Cassandra from outside of the railway station. In contrast to meetings months later, on that day she seemed timid and anxious. Furthermore, the episode impacted upon how the participant responded to a number of questions asked during the interview. For instance:

Cassandra: Is there something that is typically you, or can you describe a situation for me when your character has been very important?

Participant: I think maybe last night. I managed to hold it together. I do think I'm quite a strong person and when I saw this man running at me, I knew he wasn't getting me and I was able to jump in the car and keep it all together. I've held it together until now. I was feeling a bit weepy this morning and then I thought 'no'.

This random episode from the night before went on to inform the participant's contributions to discussions about empowerment, public space, exercise participation (the attack had occurred as she returned alone to her car following an exercise class), and the relationship with her husband – who had since volunteered to drive her to and

from the class. Furthermore, the incident remained a shared story which seemingly strengthened the bond between researcher and participant as she continued to send email updates to Cassandra about further CCTV sightings of the villain and so forth, in the months that followed. This brings us to our next point regarding interviews as both event and relationship.

Interview as event, interview as relationship

The sorts of changes in mood just noted hinge in many ways, of course, on the rapport that emerges between interviewee and interviewer in the interview event itself. For an interview is precisely that: an *event* in the interviewee's life (not to mention the interviewer's too). And it is always possible that it could be a turning-point event, a 'nuclear episode' (McAdams 1988) that is transformative in nature – in the limited sense, at least, of revising their understanding of a particular episode in their lives thus far, a possibility outlined by researchers Sally Chandler and Ruth Ray (2002) in their discussion of the kind of 'dynamic reminiscence' that can take place within groups, in a piece fittingly titled 'New Meanings for Old Tales'. Indeed, a more nuanced, more layered understanding of a particular memory from the interviewee's past (one laden, say, with anger, guilt, or grief) could contribute to transforming the sense they have of their life as a whole, opening them to a more positive narrative by which to live (Freedman and Combs 1996), and nudging them to 're-contextualize' (Gearing 1999) or 'restore' (White and Epston 1990, Kenyon and Randall 1997) who they experience themselves to be.

But not only is the interview an event; it is a *relationship* – albeit, one restricted to the time and context in which the interview takes place. It is a relationship between two human beings who inevitably would each like the other to perceive them in a certain way – to like them, respect them, praise them, pity them and so on. Indeed, through their experiences of conducting qualitative research in sport and exercise contexts, Smith *et al.* (in press) examine how researchers may orient to boundaries within research encounters and perform boundary crossings and re-crossings. For them, highlighting the complex relationship between interviewer and participant, they propose that the event of the interview raises questions pertaining, in particular, to 'how close is too close?' and 'how far is too far?' Specifically, how might touching a participant's hand and confessing that you too have a history of depression not only change the relationship between researcher and participant forever, but completely alter the dynamics of the interview itself – whether for better or for worse?

Moreover, like any relationship, that between interviewer and participant has the potential to *co-author* one's story (in this case, the interviewee's) in a distinctive direction. Every interview thus entails a kind of 'wildcard' factor, for neither party can possibly know beforehand the direction that their interchange will take. To illustrate this point in action, let us return to the project that explored the experiences of mature bodybuilders. 'Is there anything in the future that makes you feel uneasy' was a question featured in Cassandra's interview guide. More often than not, it elicited answers associated with loss of physical function, an inability to train and perhaps even suffering from Alzheimer's disease, as a parent/friend had. However, when that same question was put to Alfie, a 54-year-old natural bodybuilder and active campaigner against street drugs, he replied:

I don't really get uneasy. I mean there are certain chapters in my life where it's not right in a sense, because of my stance on drugs. It's upset a lot of people, and I lost my job

because of it. I mean the worst thing that happened to me, probably the most uneasiest thing was when a couple of guys from out of town came and had a gun to kill me. That was very, I felt very uneasy. I thought I was going to die. I was scared.

This example illustrates the uncontrollability and unpredictability that is present in every lifestory interview. In addition to this wildcard dimension, however, the relationship which develops as the interview unfolds has the potential either to close the interviewee down and push them to resist the interviewer's intrusions into their world or, alternatively, to open them to fresh perspectives on particular issues they may be facing in their lives. 'That question makes me think of things I haven't thought about in decades ...'. Or, 'what you said just now helps me make sense of something in my past that has puzzled me for years ...'. Once more, 'my past' is a moving target. 'When it comes to our life stories', McAdams (1993) reminds us, 'nothing is ever final. Things can always change' (p. 278). As a factor in such change, the relationship of interviewer and interviewee could go either way. Sometimes it develops in a warm and easy manner, with a natural chemistry emerging between the two. Sometimes – or indeed at another time within the same interview – it is cool and stiff and awkward, with the interviewee ill at ease, feeling that their words, indeed their stories, are being judged and found wanting – a perception that could intensify any reticence they may have and shut them down even further in their telling. Spence (1982) is right, then, to remind us of the incredible importance of the teller's 'changing assumptions about the listener' (p. 42).

In qualitative research in sport and exercise sciences, for better or worse, the interviewer *is* 'the instrument' for gathering 'the data'. And as we have found in the course of our own research, every interviewer – even when armed with the same set of questions, the same script – will tease out a slightly different (maybe greatly different) version of an interviewee's life (see Randall *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, depending on his or her interests or intuition, each question that an interviewer sprinkles among the scripted ones can open rather different narrative avenues for the interviewee to wander down in telling about their lives. Inescapably, listeners shape what tellers tell; thus, the 'interview effect' (Miller 2000, p. 17) can in no way be dismissed. Overall, the precise path that tellers take with their narrations, and how the versions of the various stories they relate are thereby slanted, is in the end contingent on the listener, with his or her distinctive 'listening stance' (Spence 1982, p. 42). This variable contains built-in complexities, however, insofar as it can be further broken down into, not just the listener's perception of the teller and the teller's perception of the listener, but also, and in keeping with the concept of 'the looking glass self' (Cooley 1964), both the listener's perception of the teller's perception of the listener *and* the teller's perception of the listener's perception of the teller. And so it goes. Such variables come down even further, of course, to quite specific matters. Besides each party's gender (obviously), they include each one's between-the-lines alertness to the other's posture and appearance, gestures and expressions; each one's assessment of the other's interest in and attentiveness to what the other is saying; and, overall, each one's *reading* of the other.

Regarding the listener, inasmuch as 'learning to listen' (Anderson and Jack 1991, Chase 2003) is a never-ending process, a work-in-progress, then even with seasoned qualitative researchers the potential for 'error' is real. The vagaries intrinsic to reading between the lines could impact seriously on the line of questioning that gets pursued if (or when) the interviewer misreads the intention behind a mumbled remark, a

sentence cut short, a shrugging of the shoulder, or a furrowing of the brow. On how many occasions have interviewees no doubt sighed to themselves: 'I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant'. Returning to the teller, perhaps particularly the *older* teller, what is being 'read' includes the listener's age and life experience, culture and education; his or her reaction to the listener's gender and culture (not to mention talents as a listener); and his or her assessment of the listener's familiarity, if not empathy, with the teller's world – including the various larger stories and back stories by which that world has been shaped but which it is difficult to fully divulge. In the end, an interview is an open system, with the direction of that openness determined by the ever-changing perceptions which each – interviewee and interviewer – will harbour of the other.

Qualitative interviews versus quantitative instruments

It is worth stepping back for a moment from how the interview process itself affects what interviewees tell us and talking briefly about *quantitative* research in sport and exercise sciences. Such a digression is needed, we believe, insofar as quantitative methods have dominated this field to date and qualitative methods have always required more defending, with defenders feeling secretly inferior for basing their conclusions not on 'hard data', like numbers and statistics, but on opinions and stories. Indeed, it could be argued that many qualitative researchers within sport and exercise sciences – certainly those who bring a neo-realist or post-positivist perspective to what they do – are in the grips of 'quantitative-envy', insofar as they implicitly assume 'the existence of an objective reality' and take as given that what participants share with them 'represent aspects of that reality' (Miller 2000, p. 12). Moreover, in their role as interviewers, they strive to remain as neutral or impassive as they can and to refrain from viewing their interactions with interviewees as constituting 'a relationship' at all. Be this as it may, regardless of the quantitative instrument employed – a pen and pencil survey or a Yes-No-Maybe questionnaire – both the contents or design of it and the process of administering it, we suggest, lead to a skewing (or contaminating) of the data that is gathered with its aid, whatever notions of 'objectivity' one may entertain. In other words, the *instrument effect* is every bit as critical to consider as the interview effect. The human element is no less at work, and neither method – qualitative *or* quantitative – is an exact science.

The same sorts of variables that affect the direction an interview unfolds will affect the answers that are given to an instrument: the subject's mood at the time of administration; events occurring in his or her life beforehand or anticipated later (reappearance of injury, losing a race, winning gold); and the subject's age itself – inasmuch as older adults, for example, can be much less likely to take test-taking seriously in the first place: *Why bother? What's this got to do with real life?* And crucial, once again, is the level of literacy that the person brings to understanding the words and phrases with which each item in an instrument is crafted. For no matter how accessibly and precisely its creators may believe those items have been worded, one is bound to be puzzled at some point by what a given question or phrasing really means; or by what one thinks about it once its meaning seems clear; or by whether it reflects what one is thinking or feeling *all* of the time or only *part* of the time, with all of oneself or only part and so on. Here, too, the point can be made that, whereas an interview elicits information in an open-ended manner, an instrument does so in a closed-ended one.

While the former invites interviewees to expand upon their stories relating to sport and exercise in whatever way they wish, the latter restricts them to responding in particular ways to particular statements, carefully planned beforehand to elicit a person's (*any* person's) innermost feelings on matters deemed by the instrument's designers to be central to self-stories in general. The administration of the instrument itself, one might argue then, is a closing-in experience, indeed a closing-down, while that of an interview is an opening-out and an opening-up.

Finally, there is the whole issue of the data's interpretation – an issue that, in the end, is as open with respect to quantitative data as it is to qualitative data. The challenge of divining the significance for an interviewee of a metaphor they used, a hint they dropped, an anecdote they trotted out in reply to a certain prompt, has its counterpart in the challenge of deciding how to read a 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe' response to a particular question in a questionnaire, and what to make of what was happening in the mind of the person whose pencil circled one and not the other. Did they think about what they were doing at every stage, or grow impatient at a certain point and end up going 'eeny, meeny, miney, mo'? As one source puts it, 'ultimately, all methods of data collection are analysed "qualitatively", insofar as the act of analysis regarding research into sport and exercise is an interpretation' (Fielding and Fielding 1986, p. 12; cited in Groger and Straker 2002, p. 182). 'The analyst', Spence (1982) reminds us – in this case, the *data* analyst – 'can only use what he is told' (p. 79). Overall, insofar as words and their comprehension are central to the utility of instrument and interview alike, there is no hard bottom of 'objective reality' to be reached beneath either of them. The Uncertainty Principle, so to speak, is inevitably at work: the very act of observation interferes with whatever we would observe. This is supported by Smith and Deemer (2000) and Smith and Hodgkinson (2009), who argue that all observation is theory-laden. There is thus no possibility of theory-free knowledge because there can be no separation between the researcher and researched or the observer and observed. That is, who we are is crucial to how we see the world around us. We cannot get at the truth 'out there' by methods that are somehow independent of our interest in, or knowledge of, it.

What can be concluded from all of this? Both quantitative research and qualitative research, we submit, afford us slice-of-time insights into a participant's world. The central difference concerns the thickness of the slice – in terms of time (5–10 minutes versus 2–3 hours) as well as substance. Our perception is that the slice is considerably thicker in the case of the qualitative interview and considerably more dynamic. An interview has the possibility (though in no way guaranteed, given its reliance on the talents of the listener) of permitting us a much more layered, more nuanced, more truly 'real-time' picture of an individual in the midst of his/her unique unfolding narrative, making meaning in and of that narrative during the interview itself.

We are certainly not proposing that quantitative research is of scant consequence in granting us insight into how, for instance, issues pertaining to exercise and sport might operate in someone's inner world. We have been reminded periodically, for instance, that qualitative research and quantitative research inhabit two quite different epistemological paradigms (see Griffin and Phoenix 1994, Groger and Straker 2002, Levy 1993). One is not inherently more reliable or more valid than the other as a means of gathering information. On the contrary, in the effort to access a person's experience of a given theme or topic, each has its distinct brand of reliability and validity, and one can supplement the other. Based on our own experiences as researchers, we are not about to disagree. All we wish to underscore is that, whichever method

we employ to gain a glimpse into a person's world, what we are glimpsing, ultimately, is not the history but the story. What we are gathering is not raw 'information', where that concept is understood as something that is somehow simply there, inside a person's mind, waiting to be gathered. Nor is it the raw 'facts' of a person's life. Rather, it is their interpretations, their *stories*, of those comparatively few facts of which, for whatever reasons, they have retained some recollection. The advantage of qualitative methodology in sport and exercise research – and an important one it is – is that those interpretations have the opportunity to unfold and deepen in the midst of, indeed *because* of, the unfolding interactions that occur within the interview relationship itself. That relationship, however much it may be judged as injecting needless static into the data-gathering enterprise, confounding matters hopelessly with the interview effect, (potentially) permits us deeper, more realistic insights into our interviewees' lives, and into the narratives in terms of which they understand – and live – those lives. Regardless of the method we employ in doing research with 'human subjects', 'truth' will be a problem. But it is no more problematic in one than in another, merely problematic in a different way.

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Notes

1. This project is funded by The Nuffield Foundation Small Grants Scheme.
2. Within narrative research, not all scholars adhere to this viewpoint. They are cautious of assertions that 'the identity *is* a narrative', or 'the narrative *is* identity' and indeed problematise such claims (see Smith and Sparkes 2006, for further elaboration). For example, Eakin (1999) proposes that the notion of narrative *being* us, *being* our identity is unlikely. He argues that if we are to accept an expanded notion of selves and identities which incorporate neural, psychological, social and cultural self-experience, then the ability of a story to stand for all that we believe in is doubtful.

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