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The Science of Research in Sport and Tourism: Some Reflections upon the Promise of the Sociological Imagination

John Harris

The following paper discusses some issues relating to qualitative research in sport and tourism drawing upon the sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills. In arguing the case for a perspectival approach to data collection it explores the textual construction of qualitative research accounts. A reflexive framework highlights the different ways of telling and discusses the need for more ways to tell of culture as we move from macro to micro theoretical analyses of the social world. It has been suggested that how our research is presented is just as important as what is presented, although this is not always considered within the context of the peer review process and its associated pressures. Understanding writing as a way of knowing becomes of significant importance as we each tell our tales. In exploring the hermeneutic circle of interaction it discusses factors concerning the uniqueness and individuality of interpretive studies and also briefly considers what contribution the sociological imagination may make to meta interpretation and the synthesis of qualitative research.

Keywords: *Research Perspectives; Reflexivity; Epistemology; Ontology*

Introduction

The following paper focuses upon the importance of implementing, and acknowledging, a perspectival approach to data collection and analysis. Drawing upon the sociological imagination of Mills (1970) it argues the case for an interpretive, reflexive approach to research in sport and tourism. The positionality of the researcher

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within naturalistic inquiry is highlighted by the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 356) who states:

I am not the outcome or the meeting point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological makeup. I cannot shut myself up in the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view.

As Polanyi (1958) suggested almost 50 years ago, we must inevitably see the universe from a centre lying within ourselves. My own understanding of the science underpinning research is influenced by the work of Mills, and in particular his text *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, [1959] 1970). According to Mills (1970, p. 22) the sociological imagination 'is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connexion with larger social realities'. It is important therefore that we cease to view sociology itself as a practice but as 'an attempt to understand' (Berger, 1963, p. 15).

Beginning researchers may be pressured into deciding upon what particular theoretical approach to take. This in turn usually dictates the method(s) to be employed without ever really considering the wider context and the specifics of the subject(s) under study. Often, this leads to a 'restriction', rather than the 'release' of the sociological imagination (see Mills, 1970). It is important that we acknowledge how being mastered by 'method' or 'theory' is simply to be kept from working, and from trying to find out about something that is going on in the world. The new (re)framing of the *Journal of Sport & Tourism* would seem to make this a particularly pertinent time to consider some of the methodological approaches that influence our research. Although the main focus of this paper explores the promise of the sociological imagination, I also consider how it may contribute to the development of meta interpretation – a concept developed in the recent work of Weed (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006a).

The work of Mills has often been ignored in discussions of the scientific underpinning of qualitative research. This essay reflects upon his work and argues the case for a perspectival approach to data collection highlighting how a more developed reflexive analysis may better locate our research findings. Adhering to the views articulated by Mills (1970), the guiding principles underpinning this paper can best be summed up by the following passage from *The Sociological Imagination*:

Be a good craftsman: avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand against the ascendancy of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society. (Mills, 1970, pp. 245–246)

In recent years, we have witnessed an increasing fluidity of boundary lines, whereby conceptions move with increasing ease from one discipline to another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Yet it may also be the case that we have often failed to combine

different disciplines (sport studies and tourism studies?) in a truly integrated way. This comment does not mean that I am disregarding the many informative accounts that have helped define the field of sports tourism (e.g. Gibson, 1998; Hinch & Higham, 2001; Weed & Bull, 2004). Rather, it purports that we may still have much to learn from bringing together research from other related areas within the fuzzy and wide ranging disciplinary boundaries of sport *and* tourism. In this sense it echoes the words of Weed (2006a) who calls for research accounts that pay attention to methodological and epistemological concerns and reflect upon how they contribute to the subject area as a whole. Although many of the points made here will not be new to a number of researchers, this paper is written to highlight the way(s) in which the sociological imagination can contribute to our understanding of research and the development of scholarship in sport and tourism. Of course, I do not suggest that all research in sport, tourism and sports tourism needs to be guided by a sociological approach, but the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the contribution it can make to the subject area(s) as a whole.

A number of sociologists, including those concerned with sport and tourism, have argued that social life is so complex, diversified, contradictory and rapidly changing, that it is impossible to develop any theory that transcends a particular time, place and culture. Many sociological theories can be perceived as 'managing and controlling', as opposed to 'empowering and emancipating'. This then marginalises or distorts the voices of the researched. At times we need to acknowledge better the specifics of time and place, and also of the studied individuals/groups themselves. All research is 'located' and it is important that researchers are able clearly to place their research within its social, geographical and historical context (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000). It is also important to know more about the individual whose words and interpretations frame just how and what is presented, for although within such work we have tended to borrow a philosophy from the natural sciences (which espouses an objective methodology), sociologically informed research should be a subjective, reflexive science (e.g. Giddens, 1976; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Mills, 1970; Van Maanen, 1988). Yet the above also needs to be located and understood within the pressures of the peer review system, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Reappointment, Tenure and Promotion (RTP) process.¹

(Re)Conceptualising Research

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) the prime goal of research is the production of knowledge. Like Dey (1993), I prefer to view data as something that is 'produced' rather than 'collected' as this acknowledges the role of the researcher within this process. Research can be viewed as an enabling process that effectively watches and monitors the obtaining of new knowledge. Checkland (1981, p. 24) suggests that behind this is 'the itch to know things, to find out how and why the world is as it is'. The most important thing is that it should broaden or deepen the current knowledge base. Yet often overlooked in many research methods texts is that research must be creative and imaginative in order for this base to be extended. Both Sport and

Tourism Management/Studies have historically been dominated by research methods texts where qualitative research is given minimal lip service or serves as an add-on part to the main focus of the text. Decrop (1999) notes how positivism is still the prominent paradigm in many areas of tourism research and Sparkes (2002) has made a similar observation concerning sport-related research. Weed (2006a, p. 19) also recently identified a 'positivistic hegemony within sports tourism research' in his comprehensive review of the field. Yet we have also begun to witness a much better availability of qualitative accounts to help prepare sport and tourism students for the research process (e.g. Andrews *et al.*, 2005; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Other more general research methods texts in the subject(s) have also been developed to give a more balanced overview of quantitative and qualitative approaches (e.g. Finn *et al.*, 2000; Gratton & Jones, 2004). It is important to state that I am not suggesting that sport and/or tourism researchers have failed to engage with many of the issues touched upon within this paper. A cursory look at either of these areas will highlight examples of reflexive studies that recognise and critically interrogate the role of the researcher in the research process (e.g. Doron, 2005; Obel, 2004; Weed, 2006b). My main interest, and the argument developed here, concerns research that investigates the relationship between sport and tourism and the way(s) in which the sociological imagination may contribute to this. There are few studies in sports tourism, or research accounts that in some way look at the relationship between sport and tourism, which critically reflect upon the role of the researcher in the research process.

When we talk of methodological problems there is often an overemphasis on the framework that shapes our research. Some researchers, with their insistence on developing complex techniques and employing impenetrable jargon, seem to fail to recognise what research should really be about. Mills (1970) argued that the language researchers use should not be too complex. Research has the potential to be a fantastic, enabling process (Checkland, 1981) and a way of learning more about the social world. Yet we are faced with a situation whereby research as a general term is often very much misunderstood. We can draw parallels here with the general perception of the word 'physics', and the wall that stands between what physicists do and what most people think they do (Zukav, 1979). According to Zukav (1979, p. 30):

Physicists themselves are partly to blame for this sad situation. Their shop talk sounds like Greek, unless you are a Greek or a physicist. When they are not talking to other physicists, physicists speak English. Ask them what they do however, and they sound like the natives of Corfu again.

Research is best learnt by 'doing' – becoming familiar with the site, and subjects of the enquiry. This becomes especially important in social scientific studies of sport and tourism, where the aim is usually discovery – to find out more about how and why a particular social world is as it is. There has been much debate about the nature of research (see especially, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000). The interest in this debate stems largely from Kuhn's ([1962] 1970) work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which provides a historical appraisal of scientific development. The central tenet of Kuhn's thinking is that generations of researchers adopt a particular paradigm, and

engage in their scientific work, until enough conflicting data force a 'paradigm shift'. Across many sub-disciplines of sport and tourism, scholars have begun to focus more on how knowledge is constructed. Work looking at critical research approaches in Sport Management, for example, reflects the dominant discourse and refers to research paradigms (e.g. Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005). Another recent collection of works (in a special issue of the journal *Sport in Society*) focusing on sports tourism also used this terminology (see Gibson, 2005). I prefer to use the word perspective to paradigm as these are less well-developed systems than the latter and can be more easily moved between (see also, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It is sometimes overlooked that Kuhn himself did not see the concept of paradigms as strictly applicable to the social sciences, since he saw the latter as being made up of a number of different views, in which none were dominant. Anderson *et al.* (1985, p. 3) offer a useful appraisal of why perspective rather than paradigm seems more appropriate:

There is however, an important ambiguity involved in the idea of perspectives. The expression itself, taken from painting, suggests 'points of view' taken with respect to the same subject-matter. In other words, the relationship between 'points of view' is a complimentary one, each linked to others by the fact that they are about the same subject.

Viewed in this way, different perspectives bring different aspects of an object into view and provide different angles on the same thing. Therefore certain theoretical approaches should not be seen as disconnected by the boundaries between them, but viewed as being characterised by considerable overlap. Given the elasticity of this overlap, I prefer to refer to such work as interpretive, as this is seen to be a more inclusive term and points to the key features of family resemblance amongst various approaches (see especially, Sparkes, 1992, 2002). Work from this position is based on an emic perspective and an ideographic approach to the research act. Scholars such as Mills (1970) and Van Maanen (1988) have argued that we need to know more about studies that recognise the researcher as central to the research process. This is also acknowledged in the meta interpretation approach advocated by Weed (2005a, 2005b), yet is something that is often missing from qualitative accounts. Weed (2005c, p. 239) has also noted how 'methodological and epistemological considerations tend to be glossed over in many refereed journal articles'. This is where the application of the sociological imagination can add much to our understanding of the research process and the (re)presentation of qualitative accounts.

In his undergraduate text on research methods for Leisure and Tourism, Tony Veal (1997) highlights how the interpretive model places more reliance on the people being studied to provide their own explanation of their situation or behaviour. The roots of interpretivism can be found in the German intellectual tradition of hermeneutics and the Verstehen tradition in sociology, the phenomenology of Schutz, and critiques of scientism and positivism in the social sciences, influenced by Berlin, Louch and Winch (Schwandt, 1994). It argues for the uniqueness of human enquiry, celebrating the permanence and priority of the real world of subjective first person experience. The focus is on looking at the whole way of life of particular groups, focusing on the interests and purposes of people. By attempting to see the world from the participant's

point of view, the aim is to try and understand how individuals construct social reality (see also, Berger & Luckman, 1966).

The interpretive perspective is probably best characterised by the adoption of an idealist-internalist stance. From this it is noticeable that the knower and the process of knowing cannot be separated from what is known. We may view this as hermeneutical, in that the researcher 'constructs reality', and what is then presented is one interpretation of the data. Hermeneutic theory highlights how an individual can only interpret the meaning of something from some perspective, a certain standpoint, or praxis (see Patton, 1990, 2002). This may become more prominent in an era where a rejection of grand claims to ultimate truths, and the dominance of any one particular theoretical approach, increasingly characterises qualitative research (see also, Lincoln, 1993; Richardson, 1991). Ellis and Bochner (2000), for example, show how accounts based on autoethnography trace the journey rather than just the destination. In applying this to research in sport and physical activity, Sparkes (2002, pp. 104–105) notes how using this approach is an attempt to 'accept and nurture my own voice(s) and to acknowledge the multiple subjectivities and positions I inhabit'.

Richardson (1991, p. 173) pointed to a changing period in our conceptualisation of research characterised by 'doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory a universal, and general claim to authoritative knowledge'. Here, searches for 'grand narratives' are now being replaced by more local small-scale theories, which are fitted to the specifics of any study (Lincoln, 1993). However, we often continue to see certain pressures to follow a particular 'established' theoretical approach. It is often overlooked that the rejection of 'grand theory', is not just a recent conceptualisation, but is also evident in the work of Mills (1970). This paper argues that theories are best read in narrative terms as 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen, 1988).

Schwandt (1994) suggests that it is not possible to specify the criteria for 'good' qualitative research, and that trying to do so is exclusionary, in that it is not responsive to the contingent, contextual and subjective character of qualitative study. In work of this kind, the principal research tool is the researcher him or herself, and from an interpretivist position, the researcher is the research tool *par excellence* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The researcher is perhaps best viewed as being a *bricoleur*, a kind of professional do-it-yourself person (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 17). He/she produces a *bricolage* – 'a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provides solutions to a problem in concrete situations' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

In light of recognising the positionality of the researcher at the heart of any research, it can be described as heuristic, in that personal experiences assume a central place in any study. As Patton (1990, p. 73) posits 'heuristic research emphasises the phenomenological emphasis on meanings and knowledge through personal experience', exemplifying the way in which the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative inquiry. Tsang's (2000) narrative exploration of identity in high-performance sport is a useful example of the way(s) in which the researcher assumes, and wrestles with, multiple identities within the research process. Such an approach challenges traditional 'scientific' concerns relating to objectivity and detachment and continues to be a concern for many scholars as they try to publish their work in journals that continue to remain resistant to such an approach.

Interpretive understanding is acquired through regular and intimate involvement, maintained over time and under a diversity of circumstances. Interpretive analysis should consider, and critically reflect upon, the role of the researcher within the research process highlighting her/his centrality to this. It is noticeable that there has been little consideration of the ontological and epistemological issues framing sports tourism research. Downward (2005) has provided the first in-depth account dealing with ontology and epistemology in sports tourism. In arguing the case for a critical realist approach he suggests that this can inform policy and management decisions in sports tourism. Although this work contributes much to (re)conceptualising important ontological issues in the subject it does not make reference to the role of the individual in 'constructing reality' and how different ways of knowing are based upon the positionality of the scholar.

In the Field

Types of work that utilise an observational approach, involving a relationship between the researcher and those researched, are known by a number of names, including field-work, ethnography, case study, qualitative research, and field research. Ethnographers each have their own tale to tell, but tales should be more than *just* stories, for as Atkinson (1990, p. 106) posits, 'thought of initially as a type of story, the journey of discovery and self-discovery/revelation constitutes an account of personal development. It has features of a quest – a sort of voyage of search, adventure and exploration'. The strength of ethnography lies in its potential to capture the finer details underlying the cultural context in which the observer is located. It offers an opportunity to 'dig deep', and explore the nuances of the studied individuals.

One of my favourite ethnographic accounts is the research of Winlow (2001, p. 5) who notes how his work on crime, violence and changing masculinities is 'inescapably bound up with my personal history at a number of levels'. In contextualising the research Winlow (2001) reflects upon his being a product of the very culture he tries to describe but also distanced from it through his career in academia. Yet far too few researchers actually honestly depict *how* their study evolved. This is where a greater recognition of the sociological imagination and the relationship between biography, history and society would seem to offer something to the area.

The 'restrictive' shackles of some dominant theoretical approaches constrain, rather than cultivate a 'release' of, the sociological imagination (see Mills, 1970). The importance of time and place in relation to the tales told is highlighted in the work of Van Maanen (1988) who argues the case for confessional tales in telling stories of the research experience. Such work develops the views of Mills (1970) who argued against adherence to any particular theoretical 'model' and urged researchers to work from, and reflect upon, their own role in the research process. Ethnographers all share with each other the common problem of 'getting in' – gaining access to a particular setting or group of people. As Janesick (1994, p. 211) has noted 'access and entry are sensitive components in qualitative research, and the researcher must establish trust, rapport, and authentic communication patterns with participants'.

These early encounters lay the basis for the development of trust, thus enabling the researcher to better capture the nuance and meaning of each participant's life from their own particular point of view (Janesick, 1994).

There are a number of insightful accounts based upon ethnographic research in both sport and tourism. Sugden and Tomlinson's (1998, 1999a) work into power and corruption in world football is a good example of critical ethnographic research. The impact of hosting the World Cup finals, and the intricacies of the bidding process, has far reaching implications for sport, tourism and sports tourism. The same authors have written about the research process and the way(s) in which organisations can 'conceal a multiplicity of sins behind official histories of themselves' (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1999b, p. 386). In explaining their rejection on the dependence upon any particular standpoint epistemology they write about the problems encountered undertaking critical research and some of the key issues that surround 'digging the dirt and staying clean' (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1999b). Such accounts can offer perceptive commentaries on important contemporary issues.

Asking Questions

Some form of interviewing has been with us for many years, at least as far back as the ancient Egyptians who were said to have conducted censuses of their people (Babbie, 1992). An interview is deemed to be the favourite 'digging tool' of the sociologist (Benney & Hughes, 1956), and has been described as an art (Fontana & Frey, 1994); an encounter (Goffman, 1967); and a face-to-face interactionary performance (Babbie, 1992). An interpretive approach may favour 'depth interviews' where interview outcomes depend on both participants. 'Structured' interviews are standardised, incorporating pre-designed questions in a sequential format. Standardisation hereby facilitates the comparison of individuals through the provision of a common focus. From a positivistic viewpoint this is said to result in an improved reliability and validity. 'Unstructured' interviews meanwhile, are viewed as being free flowing, allowing for spontaneity. Such an approach uses open-ended questions, and follows the interviewees' lead. Such an approach is ideographic, sensitive to individual characteristics, and flexible in orientation, recognising the individuality of each interviewee.

Viewing one method as being direct and reliable, and the other as being unstructured and less valid, does not fully convey the dynamics of interviews. Wilson (1996, p. 98) believes that the term 'less structured' is preferable, and that we should think of dimensions of structure as variable, ranging from highly to less structured methods. The purpose of such 'less structured' inquiry is to give greater depth. This, Burgess (1980) connotes, is because it is based on a sustained relationship between the informant and the researcher. She/he also needs to reflect upon what is being said, consider what each statement means, and decide how best to ask the informant to clarify certain points. What is increasingly recognised as being important in interpretive accounts, is the potential of reflexive, confessional tales to provide a more rounded account of the research process (see Sparkes, 2002; Van Maanen, 1988). There are some good examples of sport-related research that provide insightful accounts of

the research process and the place of the researcher within this (e.g. Tsang, 2000; Sparkes, 2002; Weed, 2006b). Tourism-related researchers have also produced similar tales from the field (see the edited collection of Phillimore & Goodson, 2004, for a useful overview).

'Research is often serendipitous' (Lever, 1983, p. ix) and cannot be neatly fitted into a linear model of steps or stages (Burgess, 1984). Wax (1971, p. 10) pinpoints the need to be flexible in our approach likening strict adherence to any method, technique or doctrinaire to 'confinement in a cage'. If the researcher finds him/herself in a field situation where a particular method, theory, or technique limits the researcher, (s)he will do well to 'slip through the bars and try to find out what is really going on' (Wax, 1971, p. 10). The role of the researcher is a tricky one in the respect that she or he is striving to make what is being studied familiar, but must also continue to treat it as if it were strange. This has been insightfully described as the pull between 'surrender' and 'discipline' (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). The aim for sport and tourism researchers, undertaking ethnographically informed research, is to produce what Atkinson (1990, p. 180) described as 'a fully mature ethnography' – one that shows a reflexive awareness of its own writing, the possibilities and limits of its own language, and a principled exploration of its modes of representation. This of course resonates with the guiding principles of consciousness, craft and commitment advocated by Mills (see, Loy & Booth, 2004).

Such accounts require using the sociological imagination and will differ on the idealised conceptualisation of how most textbooks on research methodology believe that work of this kind can be done. Although there may be many differences in the backgrounds and training of sport researchers to their tourism counterparts it is likely that they would have been schooled in textbooks dominated by a positivistic approach to research. As highlighted earlier in this paper, the dominance of a positivistic philosophy has characterised research in sport (Sparkes, 2002), tourism (Decrop, 1999) and sports tourism (Weed, 2006a). The quality of any ethnographic tale depends, in part, upon the relationship between researcher and researched. Adherence to any strict theoretical format or 'model', as Mills (1970) saw it, limits the opportunity to explore fully the research environment. I would argue that, even with the numerous important developments within qualitative research, there has been little reflection upon the role of the researcher in many accounts of sport and tourism and there continues to be a paucity of critically reflexive tales that focus on the relationship between the two.

A Note on Reflexivity in Research

Geertz (1988), amongst others, has commented on the difficulty for the writer in sorting out how to 'be there' in the text. This, it is generally acknowledged, is even more difficult than 'being there' in the field. All interpretation of the world is based upon our previous experiences (Schutz, 1962) and it is perhaps impossible to separate oneself as a researcher from the historical and cultural context (Gadamer, 1975). What is central to any discussion of reflexivity within sport and tourism research is that the researcher, like his/her informants, is a social animal.

Usher (1996, p. 32) emphasises the significance of this, and notes that 'we all have an individual trajectory which shapes the research we do, the questions we ask and the way we do it'. Researchers are also socio-culturally located, each having our own social autobiography. This, Usher (1996) believes, directs the kind of reflexive questions that need to be asked but rarely are. By reflexive, I am referring to the process of research and its possible implications for the validity of the main claims and conclusions. Reflexivity is a form of intellectual autobiography whereby the researcher reflects in-depth on the whole research process, her/his own place within it, and critically analyses aspects of it. Given the acknowledged subjectivity of interpretive accounts, the authenticity of the research product may (in part) be ascertained by readings of the autobiographical account of the research process (Humberstone, 1997). Giddens (1976) suggested that the real significance of reflexivity is that it is synonymous with self-awareness. Self-awareness may come about, in part, through developing the sociological imagination and questioning our own role as researchers (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mills, 1970; Sparkes, 2002).

Increasingly, scholars are asking what significance should be granted to the fact that the production of social scientific knowledge about the world is itself a social activity (Woolgar & Ashmore, 1988). Usher (1996) notes that interpretations are always circular and uses the example of reading a book, whereby the meaning of the book depends on the meaning of each of its chapters, yet each chapter's meaning depends on the whole book. This determination of meaning in the interaction of part and whole is called the hermeneutic circle of interpretation which, according to Usher (1996, p. 19), means that 'knowledge formation is therefore conceived as circular, iterative, spiral – not linear and cumulative as portrayed in positivist/empiricist epistemology'. Gadamer (1975) characterised research within the hermeneutic circle as a 'fusion of horizons'. 'Horizon' refers to the standpoint or situatedness (in time, place, culture etc). This fusion results from seeking knowledge while grounded in a perspective arising from one's situatedness, a perspective that cannot be bracketed during the process of enquiry. The resulting fusion can be conceptualised as an enlargement of one's own horizons. This of course echoes the call for a greater recognition of the relationship between biography and history put forward by Mills (1970).

My own initial 'training' in research took place as an undergraduate student in what was originally a Teacher Education college. When I enrolled at the institution it had evolved into a Higher Education establishment that provided degree courses such as the Sport and Human Movement Studies programme on which I was a student. A traditional and positivistic sport science framework that focused on notions of objectivity and truth largely guided research although one lecturer talked of research as a way of telling stories. Later on, as a PhD student at another institution I encountered many similar viewpoints highlighting positivistic approaches to research but was encouraged, and supported, to develop my work in an area that I felt comfortable with. I was not forced to follow a particular theoretical approach and this, in part, was how I came to appreciate and value the work of Mills (1970).

It is impossible to escape our 'pre-understandings' and that it is through the interplay between the interpretive framework and the elements of action that informed

analysis of research data takes place. In this respect I concur with Whyte's (1955, p. 280) view that 'the actual evolution of research ideas does not take place in accord with the formal statements we read on research methods'. The ideas grow, in part, out of our immersion in the data and as a reflective practitioner, one who is continually thinking about the process of research and his/her own place within it (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996). Schutz (1962) suggests that an individual's actions represent a visible manifestation of his/her subjective interpretation of the world of daily life. Research is often an expression of personal interests and values and can be delineated as a 'creation' through representation. A creation guided by an individual's own understanding and ideals, therefore, can only ever be partial. Hereby, what personal reflexivity draws attention to is that the 'self' that researches has an autobiography, marked by its particular significations. As Hollinshead (1996, p. 71) articulates:

Qualitative researchers always ought to think historically, interactionally, structurally, reflectively and biographically when they probe the lived experiences of the here and now.

Usher (1996, p. 38) argues that these are 'socio-cultural products' which are part of the practice of writing and which have effects on both the form and outcome of research. It is apparent that we cannot separate experience and method and this comes down to the essence of human experience. Personal experience methods are human methods, which permit researchers to enter into and participate with the social world in ways that allow the possibility of transformation and growth (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). What is also important is the way that we write of these experiences. Increasingly our work is now read in narrative terms, as 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen, 1988). Our ways of writing about the social world have also changed considerably (see especially, Sparkes, 2002) yet the author continues to be absent from many qualitative accounts of sport, tourism and sports tourism. Of course, this is not to say that all researchers fail to acknowledge their positionality and the situated limits of the (re)presentations they offer. Pritchard & Morgan (2003), in their work on postcards as cultural texts, situate their analysis within the context of their own shifting identities and lived experiences. Here the writers are aware of the fact that their interpretations are based upon particular perspectives and recognise that what they present can only ever be partial and must be situated within a certain time and place.

Textual Constructions and how to tell Stories

For many years, just how studied groups and individuals were (re)presented within the text was considered unproblematic. Today, just *how* information is presented is equally as important as *what* is presented. Originally, within ethnographic works, concern lay only with issues such as how access was gained, the relationships built in the field, and how data were stored and retrieved. Through bringing in formal ancestors from cultural anthropologists, writers of realist tales utilise terms such as 'key informant' and 'participant observation', thus embedding the fieldwork with a presumably common set of assumptions (Van Maanen, 1988).

Richardson (1994, p. 516) highlights that it is important that we do not simply view writing as a 'mopping up activity at the end' but acknowledge that writing is itself a way of knowing. Our findings are inscribed in the way we write about things and are not detached from the presentation of observations, reflections and interpretations (Atkinson, 1991). I agree with Van Maanen's (1988) exhortation that we need more not fewer ways to tell of culture. Richardson (1994) encouraged researchers to explore their own processes and preferences through writing and called for individual voices to be more fully present in the work. More than a decade on from Richardson's (1994) call we have witnessed significant developments in many aspects of qualitative research relating to both sport and tourism (see especially, Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Sparkes, 2002) including the use of more critically reflexive frameworks and alternative modes of representation.

A special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* in 2000 focused upon issues of representation in qualitative research. Within this collection Sparkes (2000) uses autoethnography to highlight a different way of 'telling stories' and also reflects upon how this type of work was perceived within the peer review process. In this article he notes how studies that do not conform to 'traditional' or 'accepted' modes of representation are often treated with disdain by reviewers and are not perceived as being 'real research' (Sparkes, 2000). Sparkes (1997, 2002) has also used ethnographic fiction as a way of (re)presenting the stories of a gay Physical Education teacher and utilised this approach as a way of speaking for the absent other. Yet whilst there may have been some significant developments in work focusing on either sport or tourism there remains considerable scope to develop accounts focusing more on the relationship between sport and tourism.

There are numerous ways of telling our tales. Van Maanen (1988) offers three main types (realist, confessional and impressionist), which, although as he himself acknowledges, are not all encompassing, would seem to offer a good point of departure. This paper focuses largely on the case for confessional tales within sport and tourism research because for many years writers remained as faceless, dispassionate, neutral voices in their texts. Eisner (1988, p. 18) noted how 'we talk of our findings, implying that we discover the world rather than construct it'. Such writing loses the personal self behind the voices and 'the author', 'the subject', or 'the researcher' are inscribed upon the text. All these linguistic conventions are, paradoxically, 'rhetorical devices designed to persuade the reader that we, as individuals, have no signature to assign our work' (Eisner, 1988, p. 18).

A construction of the text, in this sense, gives the impression of a researcher who is distanced and dispassionate, concerned only with 'managing the data' and the reader is faced with what seems to be an 'author-evacuated text', where the author is everywhere, but nowhere (Geertz, 1988). These realist tales, as Van Maanen (1988, pp. 45–72) notes, are the most common type of tale told. It was (and often still is) believed that the researcher should remain distant from his/her work – a translated teller of the tale, who remains away from the object of study (Woolgar, 1988).

Realist tales are said to 'swallow up the fieldworker'. This supposedly increases the 'objectivity' and 'validity' of accounts, demonstrating the perceived neutrality of both

the researcher and the final text (Van Maanen, 1988). However, it is important that we do not overlook the fact that ultimately we each bring our own individuality and personality into the text. This interpretive omnipotence, as demonstrated (in)famously by Malinowski's (1922) claim 'It is I who will describe or create them', articulates the part that the author can play in constructing the text. The fieldworker is required by realist conventions to stand before 'the bar of disciplinary standards' (Punch, 1986), as a sober, civil, legal, dry, serious, dedicated, straightforward transcriber of the world studied (cited in Van Maanen, 1988, p. 55). Realist tales are characterised by their claim to put over the point of view of the researched. Often this is attempted/achieved through closely edited quotations, whereby the aim herein is to convince the reader that the views put forward are those of the researched, not of the author. This involves a great deal of typographical play, stage setting plans and contextual framing, yet we need to see more of the writer's own incorporation into the texts, for given the centrality of the researcher to any qualitative work, her/his non-show seems strange.

Confessional tales would seem to have an important part to play in allowing the subjective experiences of the researcher into the tale. Denzin (1994, p. 504) has suggested that 'the postmodern sensibility encourages writers to put themselves into their texts, to engage writing as a creative act of discovery and inquiry'. One of the ways in which the writer is most visible in the text is through what Van Maanen (1988) terms a confessional tale. Confessional tales are characterised by their highly personalised styles and their self-absorbed mandates. The writing of such tales is also useful to show how particular works come into being. Confessionals differ most markedly from realist tales in the respect that an intimacy is established, and the development of a personal character is inscribed within the text. It is important to note that confessionals do not replace realist tales and more often than not they stand alongside them (e.g. Weed, 2006b).

Weed (2006b) provides a detailed account of watching the football World Cup in the pub. In this study, Weed (2006b) combines an 'author evacuated' discourse with an 'author involved' narrative to analyse the increasing importance of the pub as a sports spectator venue. He clearly states how and where his interest in the research subject developed and also gives some biographical information to give the reader an idea of just who is undertaking the research. Obel (2004) also provides an interesting confessional account of her experiences researching Rugby Union in New Zealand, a place where the sport is positioned as the national game and its players are amongst the most famous people in the nation. In this account Obel (2004) honestly depicts how the study evolved and recalls accidental contact with two people that provided her with access to international rugby players. Doron's (2005) study provides a good example from the tourism literature where the author critically reflects upon research in India and explains some of the background shaping the work noting that he had (at different stages) been a traveller, tour guide and anthropologist. Within the confessional tale, the writer conveys the impression of someone who goes back and forth between that of an insider's passionate perspective, and an outsider's dispassionate one (Van Maanen, 1988). Of course part of the problem with confessional tales involves issues connected to 'identifying' the author(s) within the (double) blind peer review process.

Yet a word of caution also needs to be expressed here. Recently even those with an interest in, and enthusiasm for, qualitative research have expressed dismay at the amount of 'navel-gazing' within academic conferences and some scholarly accounts. Although this paper argues the case for putting people back into research it also recognises that clearly conceptualising and understanding the place of many 'alternative' forms of representation is likely to take some time and will be the focus of much debate (see especially Sparkes, 2002, pp. 225–234). Although we will all have different views on this, the great possibilities for future research concerned with the relationship between sport and tourism lies in the fact that no one position has yet assumed an hegemonic positioning. Weed's (2006a, p. 23) call to researchers to 'contribute to the construction of an edifice of sports tourism knowledge that is epistemologically and methodologically diverse' offers a promising framework for such development.

The Sociological Imagination and its (Potential) Contribution to Meta Interpretation

Weed (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006a) has put forward the case for the use of meta interpretation in sport and tourism research. This is an area where I believe a greater recognition, and awareness, of the sociological imagination has an important role to play in framing and 'locating' data. When viewed within the context of meta interpretation a better positioning of the author(s) will undoubtedly help in 'making sense' of the data presented. Concerned with understanding the dynamics and processes of human behaviour, the real contribution of meta interpretation lies in the extent to which it can be synergistic (Weed, 2005b). The sociological imagination surely has a function to play in enabling researchers to pay greater attention to the 'transcendent-instrumentalist dimension of their research' (Weed, 2006a, p. 23). As Andrew Sparkes (2002, p. 11) notes, knowledge is not only contextually and historically bound but is 'constructed through a process of reflexive mediation' where the author's experience should be central. Accounts that do not adequately acknowledge the interplay between biography, history and society fail to offer a particular locatedness that makes good use of the sociological imagination, or in the words of Mills (1970, p. 245), do not demonstrate the tools of being 'a good craftsman'. Of course meta interpretation is concerned with far more than I attempt to highlight here, but it may be that the specific 'locatedness' of research accounts is one area that needs to be developed further and better contextualised within and around the idea of meta interpretation.

Concluding Remarks

There are many ways of knowing. Mills (1970) highlighted the primacy of the individual scholar and the new focus of the journal would seem to offer encouragement for researchers to use the sociological imagination to further develop research within sport and tourism. We do not need to 'label' our work, or subscribe totally to the views put forward in different accounts, to learn something from them. According

to Richardson (1994) in some ways this knowing is easier, because it recognises the situational limits of the knower. Therefore, although all knowledge is partial, embodied, historically and culturally located, this does not mean that situated knowledge is bad (Richardson, 1990). Rather than getting bogged down with discussions of validity and reliability it would be more appropriate to refer to the 'authenticity' of such accounts, as our aim is to gather an 'authentic understanding' of people's experiences (Silverman, 1993, 1998). In relation to the above, Weed (2005a) suggests that we should be more concerned with 'research quality' and aim to contribute to the development of the body of knowledge in the area.

In light of what has been put forward in this paper, and the focus upon utilising creative thought and recognising the situational limits of the knower, the image of the writer as a solitary figure 'struggling with a recalcitrant muse' (Brodkey, 1987, in Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) seems a perceptively appropriate delineation. Research in sport and tourism, as I see it, should be conceptualised not as an objective 'truth', but as the subjective experience of individuals, and the inter-subjectivity of meaning between individuals. Gibson (1998, p. 46) noted that scholars have often failed to bridge 'the artificial academic divide' between the disciplines of sport and tourism and also noted how 'there are two distinct communities of discourse'. A more nuanced integration of two distinct disciplines offers much to the development of knowledge within sport and tourism. It allows for the freedom and flexibility to challenge traditional ideologies and can also add to the work already developed in sports tourism, particularly as evidenced in the special issues of *European Sport Management Quarterly* and *Sport in Society* (see especially, Gibson, 2005; Weed, 2005c). Weed's (2006a) comprehensive review of the sports tourism literature also provides a useful marker outlining the state of the subject to date.

This paper has discussed the many possibilities of interpretive research and has problematised the situated limits of 'knowledge'. It has argued the case for a perspectival approach to data collection highlighting the uniqueness and individuality of interpretive accounts. The science of qualitative research is much more complex and diverse than the majority of research methods texts suggest and although the work of Mills (1970) has not achieved the prominence of others, his work offers an interesting base upon which to build our interpretive understanding. As part of the further development of research in sport and tourism it would be interesting to read more confessional tales detailing field experiences as researchers begin to develop their own sociological imagination in the telling of such tales. Hamilton-Smith and Bricknell (1993, cited in Wearing *et al.*, 2005) stated that there can be no quality research without quality in the researcher's understanding of the ontology and epistemology shaping her/his research actions. Beyond this, better 'locating' the researcher may also contribute to the development of meta interpretation and the overall synthesis of research accounts.

Notes

- [1] The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is something relevant to many scholars in the United Kingdom whilst the pressures of the Reappointment, Tenure and Promotion (RTP)

processes are key concerns for academics in the United States of America. Both of these may be associated with the pressure to 'publish or perish'.

- [2] I am conscious that my own background and schooling in sport means that although my focus for this paper is on the relationship between sport and tourism as this work has developed I increasingly use examples from what may be broadly be defined as sports-related research to highlight key points. I do this when I have been unable to locate relevant sports tourism research, or accounts focusing in some way on the relationship between sport and tourism. In such instances I have tried, where possible, to link in examples from tourism research also but want to acknowledge my own positionality here in and recognise that I may have failed to locate certain research that would support and/or challenge some of the points made.

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