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Bringing Art Back to Psychology

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We find the study of human behaviour a fascinating topic. But sometimes, as we engage with published research in this area, we lose that fascination. As social researchers interested in what people do and why they do it, we aspire to find ways to do and communicate research that preserve fascination. We want to better understand our own and others' lives, experiences and relationships, and believe that the field of psychology *can* and *should* contribute to this aim. Yet the contribution psychology *has* made to these aspirations for us is minimal. In part at least, we see this as being down to the dominant ways psychology research is *done* – issues of methodology. In what follows, we reflect on some of these issues, with a particular focus on our own experiences and research in sport. Kitrina's career as a multiple tournament winning professional golfer serves as a starting point for our discussion.

We have been working closely together for 15 years and, in most work, tend to write and speak as a (somewhat) unified 'we.' In this article, we have instead elected to employ a dialogical form of writing that allows us to preserve our own unique and personal voices, while still presenting a collaborative account. Using this format takes us back to the kinds of interactions that underlie all our collaborative work, allowing you as reader to witness the emergence and development of our co-constructed insights, understandings ... or, sometimes perhaps, confusions! These kinds of back-and-forth interactions between the two of us – different people with sometime opposing experiences, histories, beliefs or perspectives – are critical to our work. Dialogical forms like this enrich each of our personal voices, while avoiding either silencing one or the other, or homogenizing our published collaborative voice. In sharing, we hope that you might find something in our dialogue to be engaging, stimulating or provocative...

David: What was your first experience with psychology Kitrina?

Kitrina: I was aware when I was playing the Tour – that there was a field called 'sport psychology' and I was really interested in it. But as a full-time professional golfer I couldn't get my hands on it! What I could get hold of were public sport psych books, like the one by Timothy Gallwey. I read books like that and thought, yes, I can understand it alright, but I

either found them shallow or felt they weren't applicable to me. I wanted more. And that's one of the reasons I did a sport science degree – for the sport psychology in it.

David: What did you make of the psychology on the degree programme?

Kitrina: Dual things. Firstly: *Ah! Here's all the research I wasn't able to get my hands on. Isn't this great? All this has been written!* Yet I still felt it didn't fit my experiences in sport, what I saw as a Tour player. It was lots of mental skills training; I thought I can use this with the junior athletes I work with, but this doesn't help seasoned Tour professionals who've been out earning their living in golf for years. And it was all about performance – nothing about lifestyle or understanding yourself.

David: But some might say: 'Lifestyle? So what? That doesn't matter. You're there to perform – you're a professional.'

Kitrina: That's one take on it. Another side of it is that I wasn't! I wasn't there just to perform. I wanted to understand things. For example, a good friend of mine, Sally (let's call her), wanted to understand more about her emotions and sexuality. In conversations with other Tour pros it was clear they were often interested in – and looking for – answers to deeper life questions, spirituality, ethics and so on. Plus the research only seemed to apply to people that made 'regular' progression or transitions in sport. I never made regular transitions so I just didn't fit into it. When I looked at other Tour players, well, it seemed many of them didn't either.

David: That's very telling. So it's not the case that *you* are different to everybody else. Because often, when someone doesn't 'fit' with what the research says, they are excluded as an 'outlier' or 'deviant case,' some kind of 'oddball.' But then you realize: *Oh...*

Kitrina: ... *there's lots of 'oddballs' out there!*

David: There seems to be very few people who this works for.

Kitrina: The thing that troubles me most is none of those women I played the Tour with had an opportunity to engage with the psychology research so they couldn't challenge it. The people whose lives it concerns are outside the loop.

David: It's an illustration of how the 'industry' of mainstream psychology research can silence individuals who don't fit its conclusions.

Kitrina: Since I finished my PhD in 2004 I've had 12 invites to take part in sport research and none of them gave me an opportunity to input in a meaningful way that I would see as ethically desirable. One time, two sport psychologists who were writing a book asked me to write 'my story' which *they* would then analyze. Others have asked me to give interviews, which *they* would then analyze. When I asked about being involved in the

analysis and representation process, its, ‘Oh, that’s not what we do.’ So they all wanted me to take part in the research, but all under *their* terms.

David: They wanted your life on a plate, but wouldn’t allow you to the table.

Kitrina: I’ve been surprised how many people have wanted me – as a professional sportsperson – to take part in their studies. ‘Can we interview you?’ ‘Yes, of course. But what are your ethics? How are we going to share my knowledge?’ Most times, I’ve not been sufficiently satisfied with their answers to agree to take part. My problems have been primarily ethical: they wouldn’t allow me an opportunity to comment on their analysis or include my responses to their interpretations. I wasn’t given access to how the research would be used. They would analyze my life, they were empowering themselves as supposed ‘experts,’ and I was being disempowered as an athlete.

David: That’s very revealing. Sadly, it’s still pretty conventional practice in a lot of psychology research. It’s the way things have been done, and it’s too often the way things are still done. But you realize it’s not very pleasant when it’s you who is the person whose life is analyzed.

Kitrina: Had I not been educated in research I wouldn’t have realised. I would probably have been blind to my own marginalization. Without awareness of feminist research, participatory research and arts-based research, I wouldn’t have understood what was going on. I might have felt some tensions or discomfort...

David: ... but you wouldn’t have been able to solidify your objections into a forthright ‘no.’ It reminds me of Patricia Deegan’s article (Deegan, 1996), where she said that when you’ve just been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia you’re not in a place where you can dissent – tell the psychiatrist that its *him* who’s wrong, that he has failed to understand your life. You are totally disempowered. You’re obliged to be ‘meek and mild’ and go along with the ‘expert’...

Kitrina: ... or else they’ll say you’re deluded.

David: I think there’s a less sinister but no less real scenario in sport psychology research. If research is looking only at this little corner – the performance corner – of the experience of professional sportspeople, and sportspeople aren’t able to speak back to it, then they can’t redirect that focus. They can’t widen it or introduce new things to the frame. You’ve only been able to do so because you’ve got a PhD, you’ve become a researcher yourself – you’ve broken in!

Kitrina: That's right and it's very troubling. But we can use these insights when we do our research – it helps us think, OK, what do *we* do with this? How do we not make the same mistakes? How do we get beyond the way things have been done?

David: You said earlier the research wasn't applicable to you as an athlete. Can you say more about that?

Kitrina: I'd been a Tour pro for years – I'd already won. I didn't need mental skills to help me win. I was looking to learn about lifestyle – like understanding why what motivates you at 18 or 20 doesn't work anymore when you're 30. Even when it came to performance, the research wasn't very deep or wide. As an example, one of the most important factors for me throughout my career was *feel*. But there was nothing in the research literature on that.

David: So the research you read wasn't applicable to you as an experienced and refined professional, but was sometimes helpful to juniors and novice golfers you worked with? Did they seem to enjoy mental skills training, get something from it, maybe see their performance improve?

Kitrina: Absolutely, yes. But that is narrowing what psychology can be, just to think of mental skills training.

David: It reminds me of a paper in *Quest* some years ago (Ingham, Chase & Butt, 2002) where the authors accused sport psychology of 'tinkering around the edges,' failing to get to the important issues. But what you were saying just then, which I hadn't thought of, was if it was, say, a yoga master, they've got to some level or plane of knowing based on deep immersion in what they do. Yet the researchers have perhaps not even realized that plane or level of knowing *exists*. That whole world is outside the research agenda. It's sounding a bit like what was researched in sport – certainly then and perhaps still now – was governed by an overly narrow, procedural idea about what it is to be a successful sportsperson, that there's one way and you *must* move through *these* stages. Whereas after a 20-year career in sport you've moved onto a different plane where what you see as important is on another page, or maybe a different book altogether.

Kitrina: I would say that's true. And it's because of what you said then: its procedural. Psychology research has progressed based on what's previously been declared as what we know. Then you build a study based on what we know. You have to know something before you can research it and redefine it.

David: You can't research something that you ...

Kitrina: ... don't know is there! So something like *feel* is not researched because researchers either don't know it exists or don't think it matters. It's beyond their horizon of

interest. Most focus on what's scripted within the performance narrative, but ignore discovery and relational values (see Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2015). Feel is just one illustration of this: absent from the research literature, yet the whole way I worked at and refined my skills was based on feel.

David: I've heard you talk about the importance of feel and I've seen you give workshops and lessons on feel. But feel is right near the end of the measurable/un-measurable continuum. It's such a subtle, personal experience-based phenomena. How can you possibly observe or measure feel?

Kitrina: When I teach, I ask people to *be aware* – a bit like Mindfulness. So I'll say, 'Notice what you are feeling. Because I can't teach you about feel – you have to experience it for yourself. The only way you can really refine a shot is if you know the feel you're trying to get.' So I try to guide people in discovering what a good shot feels like in their body and then help them remember that feel.

David: That resonates with my experience of yoga. In one class recently the teacher said: 'The best teacher in the room is your own body.' That isn't the expert-at-the-front model where all the knowledge has been gathered, is held by the 'expert,' who then instructs others how to do it.

Kitrina: Often when I give psychology sessions for County teams or whatever, they want me to deliver something in that way – as a 'package' that someone has to follow, rather than help the individual discover their own feel, their own game, their emotions.

David: Its like the map has been drawn, the route already planned, concerning where these athletes – these people – need to go. Then *we* are going to guide *them* along *this* route rather than saying, actually, we don't know yet what route is going to be right for you. It's our job to support and guide you to find that – divine it, almost – from within yourself. The task for educators is to help people connect with knowledge held within their bodies, their minds, their being in a holistic sense. So you teach feel by giving people a guided experience that they can feel! That's something unique that arts-based research has to offer: it gives audiences an experience they can *feel* at a visceral, emotional level.

Kitrina: That felt sense is something I missed in the portrayals of elite athletes I found in sport psychology research. I saw myself, and people like me, 'flattened' by what was written about them – sometimes even by the way I wrote 'scientifically' about myself. They are unemotional portrayals. It seems to me the more we bring artistic methods in, the more we expand the self, the body, the identity of the person. When we've used songs, films,

stories, performances its ‘filled people out,’ it brings them alive. What about your work around same-sex attraction in sport? How did arts-based approaches help with that?

David: Absence characterizes that experience for me – especially in sport. It’s a whole realm of human experience that until very recently didn’t appear to exist – gay and bisexual men in sport were rendered absent. Even now, there aren’t many out gay or bisexual men in sport. Of 10,000 competitors in the 2012 Olympics, only three men were out as gay. There are still – apparently – no gay or bisexual men in professional football in this country. So, like the golfers you talked about, as a gay or bisexual man you can’t speak back to these representations because you’ve been rendered absent. Combine a feeling that you’re the only one with what has historically been a hostile culture towards non-heterosexual men and it clearly takes quite a lot of ‘*Oomph!*’ to speak out. Songs and stories have been the only way I’ve really been able to make that aspect of myself present, to ‘speak back’ in a meaningful and manageable way. Writing songs was how I was able to represent a ‘me’ that felt true and authentic, challenging public stories about ‘people like me’ that simply weren’t true to my experience.

Kitrina: In *Mathew and Me* (see Carless & Douglas, 2014) you moved beyond stories to include songs and performance as part of your research. What did they add to the process?

David: The more logical, rational, literal the means of communication, the more I’m writing from my conscious mind. *What I know that I know*. With scientific forms of communication I have to know what I want to say before I can even attempt to communicate it. As I move into stories, it becomes: *I don’t know what I’m going to say yet, I don’t know where it’s going to go*. Even if it’s based on an event that’s actually happened, I don’t necessarily know what’s going to work its way into the story. So I’m finding, discovering, exploring the story – beginning to access insights from beyond my conscious mind. As I go into poetry, a lyrical form, it’s further down that line. When I work in song, it’s right down there – what comes from my conscious mind seems to be minimal. Playing the guitar, making noise, melody, combining some words, seems to allow me access to knowledge from somewhere else. Perhaps it’s my subconscious, my unconscious or my body. We know from trauma research (e.g., van der Kolk, 2014) that the body can ‘hold’ memories – certainly of trauma. But if it can hold traumatic memories, why can’t it hold in a more subtle way other memories or understandings? Through song writing, I think I’m accessing that stuff: *things I didn’t know I knew*. But when I listen back to the song, well part of me did know it because here it is in the song!

Kitrina: Another thing, thinking about what you were saying then, is – when you move into music, art, film or performance – paradox can be sustained in a way that the written word doesn't readily support. So you can be sad and happy, fearful and joyous, all in the same moment.

David: You don't have to label the emotion to explore it. You don't even have to know what the emotion is to write about it. That's one of the key things for me about working in artful, aesthetic ways: *I don't have to have mastered this knowledge to communicate it.* I don't have to have fully grasped something to address it. I think much of what is most important in psychology is ultimately 'un-graspable.' We will never find neatly packaged answers to the most important psychological questions. The answers to the big questions are too slippery and amorphous, uncertain and messy. But it's really important stuff! If we rely only on forms of communication that need us to have mastered a topic to write about it, to bring it to the table, then we're really limiting what the field can be. We need ways of working with complex ideas, thoughts and feelings that allow us to get into big topics without oversimplifying or over-generalizing. Artistic approaches allow me to attempt this in a modest and humble way that respects inherent uncertainty. *Let me share this with you, the audience, and maybe – together – we can reach a better understanding of the topic.*

Kitrina: Within that it's significant that the arts – some arts, anyway – are readily accessible, they offer a language that people can understand. The language of science is often exclusive and, to many people, inaccessible. The great thinkers of the past – da Vinci for example – often used arts and science in tandem to understand better.

David: But in recent decades, the primacy of science has pushed artistic ways of knowing and communicating out of psychology. We've lost something through that.

Kitrina: That's become clear to me particularly through our film-based projects – they show something different, something that is missing from our social science journal articles.

David: Can you say a bit more about that – how has that been the case with, say, *Gwithian Sands?* (Douglas & Carless, 2014)

Kitrina: The words say something about that woman's life, but there's more to her life than is expressed in the words alone. It's something about being in Cornwall, the place, and the feel of the place at those moments in time; the trace of her life on the landscape and the landscape on her life. That's difficult to get at in words, or even through music. The film gives an added layer of feel for what's going on.

David: I think it *is* feel that the images bring. It would be very easy to give a 'pat' picture of Cornwall – through stereotypical images of the coast for example. But the images

you used are mysterious and rich in texture: grainy shots of sand sculptures formed by wind blowing on pebbles, colours washed out, cloudy skies. It looks like it could be the surface of the moon. It's very abstract. But the form and texture of those images does communicate something other-worldly about her life – something unsettling or discomfoting.

Kitrina: It connects things in a way that I can't put into words. Like the shot of the pebbles all in a row – there's something about life that's like that, but it's not expressed in the words or even the music. Film is also a format that people can easily access at this point in history. Music is accessible, but issues of genre and taste can put people off. But a film that combines stories or songs with images allows a better chance of drawing people in.

David: YouTube films are timely – it's how billions of people are taking in information at this point in history. Different to even ten years ago when no one was streaming films to their phone! It's a genre and media that has massive potential for public engagement in comparison, say, to poetry. Of all the art forms, film is right at the top in terms of engagement and music is close behind.

Kitrina: We're combining two readily accessible genres – most people know how to watch a short film and absorb music, but may not feel comfortable with a poem or play. But it's not just about what it does for audiences – it's also about what it does to *us* as 'research instruments', how it enriches our understanding of other people. When we're aware of sounds and textures, visions and colours, we take those things with us from our fieldwork. We're able to create a richer portrayal of what it's like for a 75-year-old woman who suffered polio when she comes home to her upstairs flat with two bags of shopping. Saying it like that in words doesn't give anything like the depth of feeling that the song *One Step at a Time* (Douglas & Carless, 2005) does. But without an aesthetic sensibility towards sound, vision and feel you couldn't have communicated all that in song.

David: It goes back to what research is supposed to be. For me it's about discovery and exploration. We're not supposed to just find what we expected to find! To me, it's suspicious when researchers do that. We *should* be surprised! But for that to happen we need to relinquish some control. When I do a thematic analysis, I'm almost totally in control. When I pick up a guitar, I'm letting go of the reins. Working artistically there's a sense of taking a plunge, of being open to the chance of surprise. It's the aesthetic things that are the clues on the treasure hunt, the scent that I follow. And sometimes they lead to something significant. At the very least they help me destabilize myself.

Kitrina: Destabilize our assumptions – which is a good thing! Yet nearly everything about scientific psychology involves holding on to the reins, maintaining control. I suspect

we need to move beyond that if we are to resolve the big issues we are currently facing in sport and in psychology...

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