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Abandoning The Performance Narrative: Two Women's Stories of Transition From
Professional Sport

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Abstract

Despite its potential to illuminate psychological processes within socio-cultural contexts, examples of narrative research are rare in sport psychology. In this study, we employed an analysis of narrative to explore two women's stories of living in, and withdrawing from, professional tournament golf gathered through life history interviews conducted over 6 years. Our findings suggest that immersion in elite sport culture shaped these women's identities around performance values of single-minded dedication to sport and prioritisation of winning above all other areas of life. When the performance narrative ceased to 'fit' their changing lives, both women, having no alternative narrative to guide their personal life story, experienced narrative wreckage and considerable personal trauma. They required asylum – a place of refuge where performance values were no longer paramount – to story their lives around a relational narrative which reinstated a coherent identity while providing meaning and worth to life after golf.

Keywords: narrative, retirement, trauma, mental health, life history, identity

Abandoning The Performance Narrative: Two Women's Stories of Transition From Professional Sport

Over the past 30 years, considerable attention has been given in sport psychology to the retirement experiences of elite athletes and sportspeople. This attention is undoubtedly warranted given the powerful ways in which withdrawal from sport can affect an athlete's identity, sense of self, and mental well-being (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001; Sparkes, 1998; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). In reviewing the literature on career transitions in sport, Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee (2004) suggested that an important conceptual change in recent years is the realisation that retirement is best construed as a transitional phase or process as opposed to a one-off event. Thus, the process of withdrawal from sport necessarily takes place over a period of time alongside, and in conjunction with, other potentially significant transitions in the athlete's life.

A second issue highlighted by Wylleman et al. (2004) is the need to pay more attention to those transitions that are unanticipated, unpredictable, or idiosyncratic in nature as these are considered likely to cause greater psychological distress (Miller & Kerr, 2002). One such idiosyncratic transition is drop-out from sport which is characterised by a premature off-time cessation as opposed to an on-time event after a long-term career (Alfermann, 2000). A considerable problem for those researching drop out, however, is that the unforeseen and unpredictable nature of the event may require researchers to embrace alternative methodologies that allow idiosyncrasies to be identified and understood in the context of individual life course and career span.

Among athletes considered most at risk during retirement or withdrawal are those who identify strongly with the role and identity of 'athlete.' Previous research suggests that a strong athletic identity frequently leads to under-developed career and lifestyle planning and emotional and psychological distress upon withdrawal from sport (Murphy, Petitpas, &

Brewer, 1996). However, research has also shown that after a time of uncertainty and disorientation many athletes are able to construct new selves and identities (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001).

In combination, these issues suggest that transition from sport is a complex process within which a high degree of individual variation exists. In recognition of this complexity, Wylleman and colleagues (2004) have called for a 'holistic' approach to research (and practice) which explores issues across the athlete's career and gives due consideration to contextual issues and key events in other life domains. To this end, Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003a) recommended the development of alternative methodologies that encompass a holistic life span approach. Additionally, Miller and Kerr (2002) suggested longitudinal studies are necessary to minimise issues such as memory recall, bias, and decay, while maximising our understanding of the process of psychological change.

In light of these points, Sparkes and Partington (2003) have suggested narrative practice has much to offer sport psychology in that it can provide "a more sophisticated appreciation of people as active social beings and focus attention on the way personal and cultural realities are constructed through narrative and storytelling" (p. 293). In this way, narrative approaches allow researchers to focus on psychological processes that take place within the individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context. In Crossley's (2000) terms, "narrative psychology conceptualizes a distinctly human order of meaning as one intrinsically involved with language, temporality, other people, and morality" (p. 179). Through a narrative approach, which explores how individuals construct meaning within the context of their life experiences, we are thus well placed to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of the process of retirement from sport. In this paper, therefore, we adopted a narrative psychological perspective to explore the process of retirement from elite sport

because it is “through narrative [that] we define who we are, who we were and where we may be in the future” (Crossley, 2000, p. 67).

Why Narratives Matter

Implicit within narrative theory is the understanding that through creating and sharing personal stories¹, people can ‘make sense’ of their lives, communicate a sense of their previous experiences to others, and create new possibilities for life through extending and developing their identity and horizons. As Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) noted, stories “shape and construct the narrator’s personality and reality. The story *is* one’s identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life” (p. 7). Thus, narrative theorists such as Crossley (2000) and McLeod (1997) have suggested that weaving our personal experiences into story form is a necessary and important task because it helps create an identity and sense of self while bringing meaning and coherence to our lives.

It is significant that although individuals tell unique self-stories, these stories draw upon more general narratives that are embedded within particular socio-cultural contexts. Frank (1995) used the term *narrative types* to describe what he considered to be “the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories” (p. 75). According to Frank, culturally available narrative types structure, locate, and underpin personal stories, acting as a guide for the way life should be lived and providing a framework within which accounts of personal experience are created and shared. In his work with cancer survivors, Frank (1995) has shown how a *restitution narrative* powerfully shapes and constrains people’s personal illness stories. This narrative type is “filled out with talk of tests and their interpretation, treatments and their possible outcomes, the competence of physicians, and alternative treatments” and follows the basic storyline of yesterday I was healthy, today I’m sick, but tomorrow I’ll be healthy again (Frank, 1995, p. 77). In health contexts, Frank

suggested the restitution narrative is the dominant narrative type in that it is the story ill people most often tell and are expected to tell.

With a focus on returning to previous health, restitution-type stories adequately guide and structure some people's personal illness stories provided that a 'cure' (i.e., a return to health as it once was) is found. For some people, however, a 'cure' is not possible and the storyline of the restitution narrative therefore becomes untenable. At these times, there is a potentially damaging lack of alignment or 'fit' between the person's experience and the storyline of the restitution narrative. McLeod (1997) clarified this point in observing that

The stories that, for the most part, construct our lives are 'out there', they exist before we are born and continue after we die. The task of being a person in a culture involves creating a satisfactory-enough alignment between individual experience and 'the story of which I find myself a part.' (p. 27)

In McLeod's terms, mental well-being requires a degree of *narrative alignment* between one's experience, the stories one tells, and the narrative types available within one's culture. In contrast, failure to achieve a "satisfactory-enough" alignment creates narrative tensions that can lead to development and adaptation difficulties and mental health problems (see Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 1993; McLeod, 1997). At these times, Frank (1995) and Smith and Sparkes (2005a) suggested, individuals need access to alternative narrative types to guide their personal stories. Through telling new stories that follow the contours of an alternative narrative type (which more closely aligns with personal experience), these authors suggested that individuals are able to preserve or reinstate a positive sense of self and mental health.

Narrative Types in High Performance Sport

Douglas and Carless (2006) have utilised Frank's (1995) concept of narrative types within the context of high performance sport and identified a dominant narrative type among women golfers which they call a *performance narrative*. Douglas and Carless describe the

performance narrative as a story of single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self. Within the plot of the performance narrative, winning, results, and achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the storyteller's mental well-being, identity, and self-worth. The storyline of the performance narrative is consistent with the "sport is life and life is sport" (Dacyshyn, 1999, p. 217) refrain that indicates the central place sport is often afforded in elite athletes' lives. It also has broad similarities with the *performance discourse* which Ingham, Chase, and Butt (2002) suggested permeates the culture of sport. According to Douglas and Carless (2006), the storyline of the performance narrative is mirrored in existing sport literature where optimal athletic achievement is often considered to be the entire life focus of the top performer (e.g., Crosset, 1995; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003b) and it is expected that the top professional athlete has, and must have, such a narrow focus on achieving optimal performance that "it is impossible for him (or her) to be much else" (Werthner & Orlick, 1986, p. 337).

On the basis of the narrative theory discussed above, we suggest that the dominance of the performance narrative type may make it difficult or impossible for some athletes to achieve, in McLeod's (1997) terms, "a satisfactory-enough alignment." When the storyline of the dominant narrative fails to align with one's personal experiences, narrative theory suggests that mental well-being and sense of self will be threatened. For example, during career phases where an athlete experiences success in terms of career trajectory, winning, and achieving, she may develop an exclusive but (relatively) unproblematic athletic identity which compliments performance (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). However, a story of one's life focussed solely on the terms of the performance narrative may result in serious problems for a person whose life experiences for some reason no longer fit the storyline of the performance narrative. This scenario is likely, we suggest, at times of disruption such as transition out of sport through serious injury or retirement.

The Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research was to explore how two professional women tournament golfers – who storied their careers along the lines of the dominant performance narrative – experienced transition from professional golf. Drawing on in-depth life history interviews with these women over a period of 6 years we sought to explore and understand the ways in which their experiences in professional golf, and subsequent withdrawal, were shaped, constrained, and affected by their alignment with the performance narrative. Through an analysis of their stories both before and after withdrawal, we hope to shed light on how an alternative narrative type helped these women rebuild a positive sense of self, identity, and mental health in their lives after golf. This approach has the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of career-end transition in sport because it affords an opportunity to: (a) explore the actual process of retirement from a life span perspective, (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Stephan et al., 2003b), (b) acknowledge diversity through accounting for idiosyncratic transitions (Miller & Kerr, 2002) and finally, (c) provide an appreciation of the role of socio-cultural and historical factors within an athlete's psychological processes (Douglas & Carless, 2008b).

Method

Participants

The two women we focus on in this paper, Berni and Debbie (pseudonyms), were in their mid-thirties at the time they withdrew from professional golf. Both women, before turning professional, played elite amateur golf, won multiple national tournaments, and represented their respective countries. As such, both women would be considered among the most successful amateur golfers in Europe. Due to their success, both women received a great deal of media coverage and were well known for their achievements in golf. Given the quality of competition that amateur golfers are exposed to if they play international golf, and the

support given to this small group of players, it is common for women who win and represent their county in amateur golf, as both these women had, to go on to become successful tour professional golfers. After turning professional both women played on the Ladies European Tour. During this time, Debbie became a winner and was written about as a player “seen to be fulfilling her potential.” In contrast, Bernie failed to win. After approximately 6 years of playing the tour, both Bernie and Debbie stopped playing without giving prior notice of their intention to withdraw or to leave the tour. As such both women could be considered ‘drop-outs’ from golf (Alfermann, 2000).

Recruitment

As a former tour player herself, the lead researcher (Kitrina) knew both players before the start of the research in her role as tour player, board member, player representative on the tour council, and golf coach/performance consultant. On several occasions before the commencement of the research, both Bernie and Debbie asked Kitrina for advice on a variety of golf-related issues. Drawing on the notion of ‘sisterhood’ cultivated by the Ladies European Tour, at the heart of these meetings were relationships of care, trust, and mutual respect. Given a trusting relationship already existed; Kitrina proceeded to invite both women to take part in a larger study exploring motivation and persistence among women professional tournament golfers (Douglas, 2004). Both players accepted the invitation and, following ethical approval by the Local NHS Healthcare Trust Research Ethics Committee, initial interviews took place in 2001.

Data Collection

Data here refers to formal and informal interviews, published biographical information, and the lead researcher’s reflexive diary and field notes. At the commencement of the project, formal interviews were conducted. In common with life history research, during the first interview each participant was asked ‘the grand tour’ question (Wolcott,

1994), that is, to provide an account of her life, in her own words and, thus, each woman's experiences were explored in an open-ended manner. Probes and prompts were given in order to provide or clarify meaning, and to gain more depth. During these interviews Kitrina adopted the position of active and empathic listener. Interviews were tape-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim before being independently checked to reach consensus where words or phrases were difficult to understand. At this time, identifying names, places, and dates were changed to preserve anonymity. Before proceeding with the analysis, each participant was sent a copy of her transcript for comments and to verify it as an accurate account of the interaction. Few changes occurred following this procedure.

Follow-up interviews were held with Berni in 2003 and 2005 and these were supplemented with several telephone interviews, during which comprehensive notes were taken. In 2003, Kitrina met with Debbie twice but for ethical reasons decided against conducting further tape recorded interviews given Debbie's health at this point. At this time, Debbie's involvement in the main study was suspended and her data were not included in reports of the main study (Douglas, 2004). After her health had improved, interviews with Debbie were resumed in 2006 through 2007. Follow-up interviews across the 6 year period focussed on events in each woman's life at the time, the causes and meaning of these events, and each woman's hopes for the future.

Finally, both women took part in a feedback session when they were asked for their comments on the accuracy and authenticity of the findings and whether any issues had been omitted or misrepresented. Any concerns were considered by the researchers and addressed in revised versions of the research findings. Consistent with the interpretive paradigm, we believe these actions added to the trustworthiness of the findings, their authenticity, fidelity, and believability, and contributed to the validity of the findings.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Both researchers first read each interview transcript in an attempt to become immersed in the data and allow concepts and themes to be developed in an inductive manner. Then, discussions were held where themes that had been identified in the data were examined in more detail. During these meetings the second author acted as a “critical friend” encouraging reflection, critique, and exploration of possible insights, interpretations, and explanations arising from the data. Next, a content analysis was conducted to identify themes, typologies, or instances of paradigmatic categories evident in the data. In this analysis we followed the process detailed by Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 12) where “the original story is dissected, and sections or single words belonging to a defined category are collected from the entire story.” At this stage we began to make tentative connections to various theoretical concepts that we identified in the data before preparing an interim case report of each participant’s experiences which was updated as further interviews were conducted. These first two forms of analysis continued in a cyclic manner across the 6 year period.

Finally, we conducted what Sparkes (2005) calls a *narrative analysis of structure and form* in recognition that “the formal aspects of structure, as much as the content, express the identity, perceptions, and values of the storyteller” (p. 195). In conducting this analysis, we adhered to the process described in detail by Lieblich et al. (1998) as a *holistic analysis of form* which focuses on the organisation and plot of each narrative to identify the distinct structures that hold it together. Through this approach we explored themes that held across stories or delineated types of stories and, in Smith and Sparkes’ (2006) terms, assumed the role of *story analyst* in order to link the participants’ stories with relevant theoretical constructs. Thus, following Creswell (1998), our interpretation focused on reconstructing the biographies temporally to identify processes and critical moments that shaped each woman’s life.

Accordingly, we now present an analysis of Berni and Debbie’s narratives in three

sections: (a) *living the performance narrative*, which relates to their involvement in elite and professional sport; (b) *narrative wreckage*, which focuses on the factors preceding and accompanying withdrawal from sport, and (c) *asylum*, which explores how, following withdrawal from professional sport, each woman achieved identity construction and personal development through the adoption of an alternative narrative type.

Living the Performance Narrative

For a period of time, Berni and Debbie's life stories followed closely the contours of the performance narrative type as described by Douglas and Carless (2006). During this time, which stretched from their initial involvement in golf through turning professional, several shared characteristics were evident in both women's life stories.

First, both described positive feelings from their earliest involvement with golf, which they associated with being 'good at golf'. Debbie, for example, was able to recount in detail her father's reaction to her first ever golf shot as a small child which culminated in him saying: "I think you're very good at this!" Significantly, as their golf careers began to develop, these positive feelings became more exclusively associated with achievement in terms of scores and results. Within these accounts, both women used metaphors and evocative descriptions to communicate the powerful ways winning affected them. Phrases like "floating on air", "just so happy", "ecstatic", "on a high", "a lot of satisfaction", "excitement", "heightens all your awareness", and "you're so confident as well, you *know* you are good" communicate a feel for their experience of successful performances. In each woman's story of her journey from beginner to elite level, positive feelings through golf became increasingly intertwined with winning prestigious matches, competitions, and tournaments.

A second characteristic of both women's stories, and integral to the performance narrative type, was the ascendancy of a *glorified self* as described by Alder and Alder (1989). The beginnings of this process were evident in their descriptions of their earliest golf

memories which linked being 'skilful' with gaining recognition and social esteem among family and friends. In Debbie's words,

It makes you feel good that people want to watch you because you're good, gives you a buzz, you can show off how good you are, you know, "Look at me!" People clapping, cheering, it puts tension in the air, I like that, I get off on that, it pulls you along, it lifts you, it like makes it all worthwhile.

Similar to the athletes in Alder and Alder's (1989) research, as each player began to win more prestigious events, the recognition and esteem received spread to a wider social circle which included coaches, parents, selectors, colleagues, and ultimately sponsors, fans, and the media.

A third hallmark of a performance narrative evident within Berni and Debbie's stories was a tendency to assume a totalitarian belief that winning is, and must be, the primary focus for all professionals. Debbie, for example, stated "I just can't understand people who don't want to get to the top" while Berni described how,

I never believed people who say that they don't dream about winning tournaments. For a long time I've dreamt of winning the British Open, dreamt of playing in the last pairing with Annika Sorenstam, you know, [I've] seen so many putts drop.

In providing a personal account of their own beliefs, Berni and Debbie's stories also illustrate how a dominant narrative can silence alternative stories. Despite Berni alluding to some players not dreaming about winning, their beliefs are dismissed because *not* dreaming about winning is incomprehensible within the culture of sport. In taking this approach, alternative and future options are denied as players restrict themselves – and others – to believe winning is the only goal. From this perspective it becomes impossible to imagine playing golf for comradeship, travel, or for the enjoyment of the game, because the sole focus must be to win.

A fourth characteristic of both women's stories concerns the way in which their identity came to be constructed almost exclusively through – and in the context of – golf

performance. This was evident in both women's decisions to prioritise golf above other developmental and social activities. Debbie, for example, described how golf took priority over her education:

Mum said, "What's this Debbie's not going to college? She *is!*" And then mum and dad had a bit of an argument and dad said, "Look, she's really good at golf, if we stop her, if we make her do both, each will suffer. She won't pass her A-Levels, she won't be as successful at her golf, so we've got to let her choose and we've got to stand by her." So I chose golf.

These types of choices, over time, point to each woman coming to value the athletic role over other roles and identities. Berni, for example, described being a professional golfer as being "a big part of me" and, when asked if it was the biggest part, replied "Ah, probably yes, but reluctantly." In light of these kinds of remarks, we suggest that both women had developed what Brewer and colleagues (1993) described as an athletic identity. In terms of identity construction, Sparkes (1997) noted that "the problem of identity is the problem of arriving at a life story that makes sense (provides unity and purpose) within a sociohistorical matrix that embodies a much larger story" (p. 101). From this perspective, we suggest, both women were able to create a coherent identity through exclusively telling performance stories which aligned with their life experiences and the dominant performance narrative in sport.

However, Berni's use of the phrase "but reluctantly" in the preceding excerpt hints that telling exclusively performance-type stories is not without its costs. When Berni was asked to talk further about this reluctance she reflected on some of these costs:

It is quite frightening in the last couple of years. Through playing golf and being away I've missed the wedding of my favourite cousin, the birth of my nephew, the funeral of a very close friend and however much I say that friends and family are more important, I've never had to prove it and am quite grateful I haven't.

This excerpt captures a degree of narrative tension in terms of the fit between the self that is constructed within the performance narrative type and self that the narrator desires to become. Alder and Alder (1989) suggested it becomes impossible for athletes to resist putting sport before other life domains because the lure of glory and celebrity is so powerful. In the excerpt above, Berni illustrated this point but also highlighted a degree of conflict between her need to be a 'dedicated athlete' and her need to value family-oriented roles. Thus, in keeping with Alder and Alder's research, these examples illustrate how a glorified self gains ascendancy at the expense of other dimensions of self but that this process is not without tensions.

Narrative Wreckage

Frank (1995) and Smith and Sparkes (2005a) suggested that reliance on a single dominant narrative can be problematic when a person's experiences no longer fit the narrative type. In sporting contexts, both retirement and serious injury have been shown to be potentially problematic periods when an athlete is likely to struggle to reconcile or make sense of the dramatic life changes (see for example, Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2001; Sparkes, 1998). Richardson (1995) warned that when "the available narrative is limiting or at odds with the actual life, peoples' lives end up being limited and textually disenfranchised" (p. 213). At these times a risk is *narrative wreckage* (Frank, 1995), when a person's experiences no longer fit the contours of available or dominant narrative types. As a consequence, McAdams (1993) and McLeod (1997) suggested, sense of self, identity, mental health, and personal development are threatened as the narrative fails to provide a workable template for her life.

Evident within both Berni and Debbie's life stories was a stage when their expected career trajectory was disrupted through being unable to fulfil the requirements of the performance narrative (i.e., to win and achieve success in terms of results). While the reasons behind this change differed between the two women, as we will explore below, the result, from the perspective of narrative theory, was the same: the performance narrative ceased to

provide a workable template for life, identity, and sense of self and, as a consequence, both women experienced narrative wreckage. At this time, neither Berni nor Debbie was able, within the constraints of the dominant performance narrative, to construct a coherent story by which to make sense of their current life circumstances. In Sparkes' (1997) terms, neither woman could find meaning and unity in her life story and, as a result, both women experienced significant personal trauma and suffering.

Berni: Failure, Shame, and Humiliation

The first signs of narrative tension in Berni's life story slowly grew throughout her professional career. Although she had been a successful international amateur, success in the professional game eluded her. After turning professional Berni had consistently missed cuts, failed to keep her player's card at tour school, and failed to earn money. As a result, she described experiencing stress and anxiety about her golf career which she believed had led to "unexplained" physical health problems and depression. Despite her lack of tournament success, however, Berni's story did not change. In short, the story she constructed promoted a view that winning would solve her problems. In keeping with the performance narrative, her stories during this phase, as they had been earlier in her career, were about working harder and harder in an effort to improve. Eventually, however, the gulf between the stories she was telling herself (and others) and her experiences became too great:

At the end of the day I can say "if I improve my game, fitness, and organisation then that's all moving me forward" but what actually shows up, the tangible evidence, is the results. So, you know, I can stand in the car park talking to a member telling them I am happy with my game as long as I like, but if I've just missed four cuts in a row I am not going to be convincing either probably to them or to myself.

In this excerpt, Berni communicated a growing unease and dissatisfaction with the disjuncture between her story – of working towards future success – and the “tangible evidence” which suggested she was not improving.

One strategy Berni adopted to allow her to continue her professional career was writing to tournament sponsors to gain entry to events. Although doing so made it possible for her to play more tournaments, it also had drawbacks in that she had to repeatedly create a story for the sponsor that was more optimistic than she actually felt. Describing how writing these “begging” letters made her feel, Berni said:

It is humiliating. You feel that you can't be totally honest. You don't want to write to a sponsor and say let me play a tournament because I played badly at tour school last year and I really need your help, which is the truth, but instead you write and say, “It didn't quite work out for me but I know that I am a good player and if you could just give me this opportunity then everything will be all right.” You have to sound a lot more positive than you feel.

Although her experience is “begging”, “humiliation”, and “failure”, the above illustrates that her story type, once again, remained constant. The growing problem, therefore, became the disparity between how she felt, which was not positive, and how her story was presented to others as optimistic and therefore, at best, economical with the truth or, at worst, dishonest. What she felt was the truth – that she was a failure in performance terms – is not a story she could tell, because as illustrated earlier, her dream was to win. Further, as Berni was embedded within sport culture, she was influenced by the expectations of those in that culture. As we illustrated earlier she had a totalitarian view, including a belief that a golfer who fails to perform should not be on tour.

Unable to voice what she considered to be an un-tellable truth, Berni continued to offer the more acceptable story of “I know I am a good player” and “it didn't quite work out.”

Her perception that she was being dishonest caused a moral dilemma but, such is the importance of winning, her story shows that ‘the end justifies the means’:

As long as I stay in golf I have an opportunity of doing well and thereby justifying everything I've done. Whereas if I leave, it, uh [pause] not quite it's been for nothing but, you know, the investments have been so big. [The] previous 15 years have to have been for something, have to have a point.

Kitrina: If you still haven't succeeded how will that make you feel?

Um, pretty worthless. Yeah. It means that I don't really think that I make a contribution to the people around me and to, not exactly to the world, but I am trying to think of a smaller, you know, if I wasn't here I don't think it would really matter – OK – a feeling that my life or what I do has [pause], at the end of the day if I wasn't here or if I hadn't even been here it wouldn't really matter or, you know, have made any difference.

Several researchers have suggested there is a strong link between a golfer's rank, tournament record, self-worth, and social esteem (Crosset, 1995; Ravizza, 2002). In this regard, when Berni achieved success as an amateur she felt good about herself, and others responded positively towards her. In contrast, for a player who endorsed the values of the performance narrative, failing to win on the professional tour, over a sustained period, had the opposite effect; bringing humiliation, shame, and loss of self-worth to the extent that a future devoid of success would mean she would see herself as “pretty worthless”. Here, the gravity of her situation was spelled out clearly when Berni said that without winning in golf her life would have no point. In her words, “if I hadn't been here it wouldn't matter.”

Debbie: Depression and Self-Harm

Though the biographical particulars were different, Debbie came to a similar position regarding her worth as an individual after becoming pregnant and deciding to have the baby.

Here, her story is one where she had to make a choice: “When I got pregnant, I thought, well, its career or babies and I decided to have the baby.” Lenskyj (1986) suggested dominant cultural and societal values concerning what it is to ‘be a woman’ are in tension with the role of ‘being an athlete.’ Western cultural expectations hold that “good mothers are selfless and sacrifice their own wants and needs for those of their children” (Collett, 2005, p. 340) to the point that, “to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being 24/7, to her children” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 4). Thus the social expectation of what it is to be a mother – to be ‘available’ and to prioritise the needs of the child – is, we suggest, wholly incompatible with the demands of the performance narrative which necessitates an exclusive focus on one’s self and achievements sport. A common result of this perceived incompatibility is that many female athletes, like Debbie, believe it is impossible to combine a career in professional sport with having children. From this position, being a ‘good mother’ would require Debbie to abandon the performance narrative thereby, as she saw it, sacrificing her career in professional golf.

It wasn’t until after the baby was born that the implications of this perceived incompatibility became evident in Debbie’s life. Reflecting 2 years later on the arrival of her son, she told, with remarkable honesty, how

I didn’t want my baby. I resented him because my golf career was over. I’d care for him, I wouldn’t want to hurt him or anything, but I blamed him for my golf – I felt I was out of the environment I knew and I felt lost. I tried to hide it. I couldn’t cope. I wouldn’t talk ... I didn’t think I could make any contribution to life.

Thus, instead of embracing motherhood, Debbie found herself unwilling to relinquish her golf career and, caught up within the constraints of the performance narrative, mourned the loss of her career and blamed her son for this loss.

This moral dilemma, and the emotional turmoil it caused, was compounded by Debbie's unease with voicing her feelings. In her words, "the last thing I could say is I don't want my baby." In short, cultural expectations concerning motherhood served to render Debbie's story un-tellable. Eventually, Debbie decided to break her silence by sharing her feelings with the hope of gaining the support and assistance of close friends:

Finally, I said to two close friends that I couldn't cope, that I was struggling. Their reaction was totally unexpected: they said I was selfish, I'm not a good mother [pause]. I walked out. They found me in the next village, I don't know how I got there, I just walked out. I couldn't cope, I was very tearful and they took me to see the doctor. He said it was post natal depression and just bunged tablets at me.

The "totally unexpected" reaction of Debbie's friends was, we suggest, entirely consistent with cultural attitudes towards motherhood yet entirely inconsistent with the sport culture in which Debbie had been immersed since childhood. Thus, Debbie found herself in a situation where whichever course of action she chose (being a 'good mother' or a 'good professional golfer'), her life story would inevitably clash with the values of one of two powerful narratives. Given these constraints, and the tensions her situation created, it is perhaps not surprising that Debbie became seriously unwell. As she put it, "I just couldn't live life. I couldn't get off the sofa. I was manic, shaking, hearing voices, terrible." Seven months after her son was born, seeking escape from her turmoil, Debbie attempted suicide. Following this incident, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

Asylum

Until this point in their life stories, Berni and Debbie constructed an identity and sense of self that was almost entirely dependent on success in professional golf. Shortly before withdrawing from professional golf, Berni felt "if I hadn't been here it wouldn't really matter" while Debbie believed "I couldn't make any contribution to life." These kinds of remarks

suggest that neither player perceived an alternative route to self-worth outside golf. According to McLeod (1997), “Even when a teller is recounting a unique set of individual, personal events, he or she can only do so by drawing upon story structures and genres drawn from the narrative resources of a culture” (p. 94). In this regard, we suggest that, although Berni and Debbie indeed recounted unique personal experiences, the construction of these experiences were powerfully shaped and constrained by the storyline of the performance narrative in which they had been immersed since childhood. In other words, the performance narrative was the primary resource available upon which each woman could base her life story. But both women had now reached the point of narrative wreckage, where the performance narrative no longer worked in the context of her life experiences. To reinstate mental health and well-being – to be able to get on with her life – it became necessary for each woman to rebuild her identity through creating an alternative story which more closely fit her current life experiences.

Both women achieved this, we suggest, by telling completely new life stories which drew upon a different narrative type. We consider the narrative type underlying both women’s stories following a period of asylum to be a *relational narrative*. Lieblich and colleagues (1998) define the term *relational* as involving “an emphasis on interpersonal dimensions rather than the separate self” (p. 87). According to Douglas and Carless (2006), the relational narrative focuses “on care and connectedness over and above the masculine values of separation, individuation, hierarchy, and competition” (p. 24). Inherent within this type of story is a sense of “offering self to others’ needs” (Josselson, 1996, p. 8) through an empathic and attentive other-orientation instead of a self-orientation. Importantly, as we show in what follows, the process of coming to tell relational stories required the abandonment of the performance narrative which was only possible once each woman had removed herself completely from the culture of elite sport.

Berni: Cancer and Caring

Berni's unforeseen withdrawal from the professional tour was triggered midway through the season when her mother was unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer and an operation was immediately scheduled. Reflecting later on this event, Berni described being "stunned" and feeling "disbelief" when she heard of the severity of her mother's illness. Ellis (2001) has described a metamorphosis that can occur in an individual when a loved one is in need. Similarly, this kind of experience has been described by Denzin (1989) as an epiphany; a difficult and often painful time which marks and changes an individual. Berni described this epiphany in her life as,

a time when I didn't want to be away from home. And I remember I'd been playing in Sweden the week before her op and I came home the day before the operation and a week later I realised that my clubs were still in the flight bag, I hadn't even got them out. I began to prioritise.

Here Berni communicated a feeling of the metamorphosis that occurred in her life when she didn't even think about golf the week of her mother's operation. In the context of her life in elite golf to date, where golf had been her first and perhaps only consideration, this action, or lack of it, allowed her to create a story by which she showed that these pivotal and dramatic events surprised even Berni herself. While putting her golf performance before family had previously caused her considerable moral tension, this action provided her with an opportunity to create a story which wasn't based on golf results.

In the weeks that followed her mother's operation, Berni cared for her mother as well as for her father. During her mother's recuperation Berni also cared for her niece and her nephew. As her mother's condition improved, Berni took on work locally and was quickly promoted. Approximately 18 months later she enrolled in a coaching degree course and

accepted a job teaching at a local golf club. Four years later Berni was able to reflect on these events:

Mum's illness was a catalyst, definitely. Those years in the pub were time out from golf. You realise there is so much more to golf than playing tournament golf. Doing this [teaching] would have felt like second best [while playing the tour]. I wasn't ready, I needed time away to realise how lucky I am. Now I *want* to do it. I didn't want to do it, everything revolved around my score, you know, if I shot 68 everything was great and if I shot 75, ugh! Whereas now, it's really exciting when people you help start to improve and I'm enjoying coaching. Every Tuesday I've been straight into the ladies locker room to look at the results and see who's done well every week. I know someone will be round to tell me they shot 67 and someone else to say they need a lesson. I'm happier and more content. I enjoyed pro golf but I wasn't content because it didn't live up to my expectations – everything depended on winning.

Sparkes (1997) suggested that “As individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives they engage in a dynamic process of claiming identities and constructing lives” (p. 101-2). The events and actions, recounted above, provided Berni with an opportunity to reconstruct an alternative story about her identity and sense of self. First, she identified her mother's illness as a necessary catalyst of change. She then went on to highlight the importance of “time out from golf” and how she “needed time away” from the game. We suggest this time provided her with a kind of asylum in an environment where winning wasn't important. Asylum therefore provided her with both new kinds of experiences to story *and* access to alternative valuable stories that were not available within elite sport culture. By caring for her mother, and subsequently working as a golf coach, Berni was able to bring together a story that more closely aligned with her experience. Her story ceased to resemble a performance narrative, to favour instead the storyline of a relational narrative with an

orientation towards others. Berni's stories suggest that this shift in orientation led to her finding happiness and contentment, not in what she achieves in performance terms, but by caring for and helping others with their needs and aspirations.

Debbie: Hospitalisation and Breaking Silence

Although the particulars of Debbie's story differed to Berni's story, the same underlying theme of needing time away from the culture and values of elite sport was evident. For Debbie, removal from the world of elite sport was extreme and total as she spent approximately 1 year in a psychiatric hospital. Like Berni, Debbie's stories of this time encapsulate a change of narrative type away from the values of a performance narrative towards the relational narrative type. Thus, Debbie's story shifted away from a focus on the self, and her own problems and difficulties, towards a consideration and desire to help others. This process is illustrated in the following excerpt in which Debbie described her slow recovery from mental illness:

It took me 2 years, you know. We can do it, with the help of family, although I suppose not everyone has that, people who care, counsellors. My mental health counsellor, Alice Morton [pseudonym], was fantastic. I would see her once a week. It took Alice a year before I would tell her what was on my mind. Now I just want to tell others about what happened to me, I'm not ashamed, I don't mind if people know what's happened to me. I said to my husband, I would like to get my story out. We were trying to think of who to write to. I think it might help other people. We think we're the only ones, you feel so alone and you can't talk.

McLeod (1997) suggested that individuals whose stories do not fit dominant cultural narratives are often silenced as their stories are deemed un-tellable. In his words,

The culture we live in supplies us with stories that do not fit experience, and experience that does not live up to the story. It may also fail to supply us with

appropriate arenas for narrating whatever story it is we have to tell. The common theme across all of these circumstances is the experience of silence, of living with a story that has not or cannot be told. And, taking into account the fact that storytelling is a performance, an event that requires an audience, very often the existence of a personal ‘problem’ can best be described as a response to *silencing*, the unwillingness of others to hear that story that in some sense ‘needs’ to be told (p. 100).

The experience of being silenced is, we suggest, central to understanding Debbie’s experience of narrative wreckage and subsequent mental illness. Debbie’s story of putting golf before her baby, while being sanctioned by the terms of the performance narrative, was simply too dangerous to tell within the context of cultural expectations of motherhood. When she did find the courage to tell this story to close friends, their rejection served to reinforce the unacceptable nature of her story and perpetuate her silence. In the excerpt above Debbie illustrated how difficult it was to break this silence – how, even with the benefit of a “fantastic” counsellor, it took “a year before I would tell her what was on my mind.”

A second important element in Debbie’s story is the demise of her (glorified) athletic self to be replaced by a relational focus characterised by an overriding consideration of others. Similarly, her story now focuses on people who care about her as a person rather than individuals who are in awe of her sport talent. Considering the stigma associated with mental illness and attempted suicide, the courage behind Debbie’s willingness and desire to speak out to provide help to others who may, like her, “feel so alone,” and those who “can’t talk,” should not be underestimated. In many ways, her current relational orientation is a complete contrast to the performance-obsessed self focus that was promoted in the earlier parts of her life story. Debbie’s moral stance – of bearing witness to a life changing experience for the benefit of others – has much in common with Frank’s (1995) descriptions of cancer survivors

who struggle to tell, and find an audience for, their personal illness stories in an effort to help those in similar situations.

Reflections

We have presented two elite women golfer's stories of living in, and withdrawing from, professional golf. We have suggested that immersion in an elite sport culture exclusively dominated by a performance narrative shaped these women's lives and identities around the values of single-minded dedication to sport and a prioritisation of winning over and above all other areas of life. We described how, when the performance narrative ceased to 'make sense' in the context of their life experiences, both women, having no alternative narrative upon which to base their personal life stories, experienced narrative wreckage. To repair the suffering and trauma they experienced, we noted how both women required asylum – a place of refuge where performance values were no longer paramount. This period of asylum opened space for the women, in White and Epston's (1990) terms, "to re-author or constitute themselves, each other and their relationships according to alternative stories or knowledges" (p. 75). The alternative type of story by which both women created meaning and coherence in their lives can, we suggested, be characterised as a relational narrative. Through telling her life story around the contours of a relational narrative, and enacting these values in her daily life, each woman was able to reinstate a coherent identity which provided a sense of meaning and worth to life after golf.

In the introduction we identified three ways in which our approach would contribute to understanding of career-end transition in sport. First, through taking a longitudinal perspective which followed the participants' experiences over a 6 year period, we have been able to attend to the process of retirement from a life span perspective. Our findings extend previous research exploring athletes' prospective view of retirement (e.g., Torregrosa, Boixadós Valiente, & Cruz, 2004), as well as research taking a retrospective view (e.g., Kerr &

Dacyshyn, 2001), by providing an in-depth account that spans life before, during, and after withdrawal from sport. Our findings support McKenna and Thomas's (2007) characterisation of retirement as "an enduring, emotional process with many ups-and-downs" (p. 32). Berni and Debbie's stories show the complexity of this process which occurred in conjunction with other pivotal moments and events in their lives outside sport.

Second, through focussing on two women's experiences of "dropping out" of professional sport, we have been able to acknowledge diversity and provide understanding of idiosyncratic transitions. The longitudinal approach was once again important in this regard as it allowed us to document these idiosyncratic processes as they occurred. Had life stories been collected only retrospectively, it is unlikely we would have become aware of the powerful ways sport culture influenced the stories that the participants told and, within this culture, how difficult it is for alternative stories to be created and shared.

Third, we have been able to highlight how the personal process of withdrawal is necessarily affected by socio-cultural and historical factors. In particular, by linking the participants' stories to culturally available narrative types, we have been able to shed light on the consequences of the dominant performance narrative within elite sport culture and the way this acts to shape and constrain athlete well-being and identity both before and after retirement.

There are two particular limitations of this research. First, as Smith and Sparkes (2005b) observed, a narrative analysis of structure and form can fail to illuminate "the manner in which narrative structures may be dynamic and fluid, composed in the spaces between performer and audience, and thus situated in accomplished social action" (p. 234). We recognise that presenting any participant's spoken stories in written form risks making them appear somewhat fixed and context independent. In effort to guard against this potential weakness, we engaged in repeated interviews which allowed us to explore how an

individual's stories might change over time and in different social contexts. We suggest, however, that further exploration of the dynamic and fluid nature of narratives over time and in differing social contexts might be a fruitful topic for future research.

A second potential limitation is that by identifying and focussing on specific narrative types we risk "creating yet another general unifying view that subsumes the particularity of individual experience" (Smith & Sparkes, 2005b, p. 234). To counter this risk we emphasise that performance and relational stories are not the only kinds of stories sportspeople might tell about their lives and agree with Frank (1995) who recommended that alternative narrative types can and should be proposed. In Frank's terms, our focus on specific narrative types should not detract from the uniqueness of the story any individual tells, because no actual telling conforms exclusively to one narrative type. Although both participants exhibited a preference for a particular narrative type at a particular time, their stories developed and evolved in response to new narrative resources and life experiences. We hope that the stories presented here raise awareness of possible alternatives to the dominant performance narrative and that they may be used as listening devices to allow these alternatives to be heard.

Implications

The preceding analysis of Berni and Debbie's narratives provides several insights that have practical implications for sport psychologists. First, Berni and Debbie's experiences suggest that the overriding influence of the dominant performance narrative can be damaging to the individual, serving to foreclose other aspects of life and limit identity development. While this may come as no surprise to practitioners, few narrative templates are available to challenge the dominant narrative and show alternatives to be possible. One strategy to address this issue is to make alternative stories more accessible in consulting and educational settings. As examples of alternative stories, discovery and relational narratives show how it is possible

to have worth without success and to experience career disruption without suffering and trauma (see Carless & Douglas, in press; Douglas & Carless, 2006.).

Second, and implicitly linked to the dominance of one narrative type over others, is the experience of silencing. For many athletes, whose lives have revolved around training, discipline, and a focus on the metaphorical ‘top of the mountain’, telling alternative stories can come to be considered impossible for three reasons: (a) an absence of alternative narrative templates, (b) the de-valuing or disbelief of alternative stories, and (c) tellers of alternative stories being construed as a ‘failure’ and therefore ‘worthless’. These individuals, in effect, are silenced in that they perceive their own story to be un-tellable or unworthy. Crossley (2000) and McLeod (1997) suggested that when individuals feel impelled to silence – to suppress or distort stories of their experience for fear of the negative reactions of others – one result is a number of emotional responses linked with depression and poor mental health. In contrast, in telling our story we have an opportunity to make sense of events, to find acceptable resolutions of moral dilemmas, and to construct a coherent and meaningful identity and sense of self (Crossley, 2000). In short, opportunity to share stories of our lives which are met with understanding, support, and empathy, is an important aspect of mental health and personal development (McAdams, 1993; McLeod, 1997). In this light, our findings highlight the need for sport psychologists to listen closely to athletes’ voices and, in particular, to value and invite those stories that may be dangerous to tell. Clearly the numbers of athletes who reach the metaphorical ‘top of the mountain’ is dwarfed by the numbers who try and fail. To have only one outcome to a dream, and to thereby experience one’s journey in sport as a ‘failure’ when winning ceases, Ingham and colleagues (2002) suggested, is to deny many individuals the opportunity to experience life in sport in its fullest and healthiest sense.

Third, several issues that are faced uniquely by women surfaced in this research as potentially dangerous stories. In particular, it is shocking that both these women, despite being

talented, successful, and highly regarded golfers, reached a point in life when they felt “worthless,” that they were unable to “make a contribution to life,” to the point that one attempted suicide. Given the male-dominated structure of professional sport – even in women’s professional sport most coaches are male and most organisations are run by males – some scholars have suggested that the needs and values of women are not understood, appreciated, or even acknowledged. Kissling (1999) and Marshall (1995), for example, have noted that abortion, infertility, bulimia, hysterectomy, and pregnancy are taboo subjects that are rarely investigated or reported. According to Crosset (1995), women in golf tend to not perceive any link between such dilemmas and the traditionally masculine culture of sport which is often organised around male values, physiques, and needs. Instead, women interpret any tensions as a consequence of their own making in that they chose to play sport and therefore blame themselves for any problems. Arguably, a culture of ‘individual blame’ is a further characteristic of the performance discourse; with regard to the perceived clash between ‘being a mother’ and ‘being an athlete.’ Crosset (1995) has noted, “Sport culture is intolerant of problems surrounding motherhood and places the blame for not performing in the character or the talent of the athlete” (p. 221). In this regard, we hope that Berni and Debbie’s stories draw attention to the ways in which the dominant performance culture in sport can influence, and even close down, women’s opportunities for growth and development of self through, for example, the exclusion or relegation of relationships, child birth, and motherhood.

We conclude with the hope that our use here of a narrative psychological approach has illuminated some of the complexities surrounding the ways in which individuals experience life in, and withdrawal from, elite sport. As suggested by Crossley (2000), this approach has linked psychological processes at the individual level with historical, socio-cultural, and moral issues in elite sport. We suggest that awareness of the issues raised in this paper might help practitioners provide athletes with opportunities to adequately narrate their lives and

experiences in a healthy and life-affirming manner regardless of performance outcomes, results, rank, or fame.

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Footnote

¹The terms “narrative” and “story” are used interchangeably by some authors. While acknowledging this ambiguity, we follow Frank (1995) in using “*story*” when referring to actual tales that people tell and *narrative* when discussing general structures that comprise particular stories” (p. 188).