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Citation:

Trinder-Widdess, Z and Nobles, J and Thomas, C and Banks-Gross, Z and Jago, R and Foster, C and Redwood, S (2023) How Do You Move? Everyday stories of physical activity. NIHR Open Research, 3. pp. 1-19. ISSN 2633-4402 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.13399.1>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

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Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Do You Move? Everyday stories of physical activity

[version 1; peer review: 2 approved]

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V1 First published: 02 Nov 2023, 3:57
<https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.13399.1>
 Latest published: 02 Nov 2023, 3:57
<https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.13399.1>

Abstract

Stories can be a powerful method of exploring complexity, and the factors affecting everyday physical activity within a modern urban setting are nothing if not complex.

The first part of our How Do You Move? study focused on the communication of physical activity guidelines to under-served communities. A key finding was that adults especially wanted physical activity messages to come from 'everyday people, people like us'. This finding also reflects a wider move to use more relatable imagery in health promotion campaigns.

Using a portrait vignette approach to create monologues, we set out to explore the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds living in Bristol, all of whom took part in varied leisure time physical activities but would also be considered to lead 'normal' lives.



We aim to demonstrate that stories of such 'experts by experience' can contribute to how physical activity is perceived and elucidate the complex interplay of barriers and enablers in everyday experiences of physical activity.


Plain Language summary

The UK government has guidelines about how much physical activity people should do to stay healthy. However, many people don't manage to do as much physical activity as the government recommends.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status  

	1	2
version 1		
02 Nov 2023	view	view

1. **Simon Roberts** , Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

2. **Hairul Anuar Hashim**, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Minden Heights, Malaysia

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

There are many reasons why people don't do enough physical activity. Reasons include where people live, what work they do or how much spare time they have.

In the How Do You Move? project, we explored the messaging about physical activity guidelines. Many people told us that they wanted to hear physical activity advice from 'people like me'.

We set out to find people who managed to stay active, despite how difficult that can sometimes be in modern life. We interviewed them about their physical activity. We then worked with them to write their experiences as personal stories.

These stories are presented in this paper.

Keywords

physical activity, stories, narrative research, qualitative research, portrait vignettes, walking interviews, mobile interviews

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Author roles: **Trinder-Widdess Z:** Data Curation, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Nobles J:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing; **Thomas C:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing; **Banks-Gross Z:** Funding Acquisition, Writing – Review & Editing; **Jago R:** Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; **Foster C:** Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; **Redwood S:** Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed. Charlie Foster's input was made while he was fully employed at the University of Bristol. He now works for Vhi Healthcare.

Grant information: This project is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research under its Applied Research Collaboration West (NIHR ARC West) infrastructure funding (NIHR200181). This project is also funded by seed corn funding from the Brigstow Institute at the University of Bristol. The views expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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v3.0 

How to cite this article: Trinder-Widdess Z, Nobles J, Thomas C *et al.* **How Do You Move? Everyday stories of physical activity** [version 1; peer review: 2 approved] NIHR Open Research 2023, 3:57 <https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.13399.1>

First published: 02 Nov 2023, 3:57 <https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.13399.1>

Introduction

Narrative is a powerful tool to explore complexity (Smith, 2010) and researchers have used narrative approaches to examine myriad experiences of physical activity. Gymnasts (Cavallerio *et al.*, 2017), golfers (Carless & Douglas, 2009), swimmers and tennis players (Franck & Stambulova, 2019), rugby and football players (O'Malley *et al.*, 2018) are some of the professional athletes whose stories have been presented in this way.

Stories are accessible to non-academic audiences (Smith & Papathomas, 2017), bringing research findings to life for people who would find other study types too dry and removed from 'real life'. Stories can also be a powerful method of influencing non-academics (Smith & Papathomas, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2013) including policymakers (Stamatakis *et al.*, 2010) and are a well-recognised vehicle for creating social change (Prasetyo, 2019; Wright & Neimand, 2018; Zingaro, 2009).

The study presented in this paper is the second part of the 'How Do You Move?' project. The first phase explored ways to improve physical activity messaging to under-served communities. In this first phase, we conducted interactive workshops with adults, older adults and young people from these communities. The full findings were published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (Nobles *et al.*, 2020).

One of the key findings from the first phase was that adults and older adults wanted physical activity messages to come from people who were relatable 'everyday people, people like us' and include people of different ages, genders and cultures. Narrative research can 'give voice' to these otherwise unheard people, revealing experiences that would otherwise go uncaptured (Quarmby *et al.*, 2021; Raine, 2013; Sools, 2012).

So in this second phase of the project presented here, we created portrait vignettes (Blodgett *et al.*, 2011) centred on the physical activity experiences of people of different ages and backgrounds, participating in a range of activities. Our vignettes are presented as monologues in the public contributors' voices.

Our approach mirrors a wider move within physical activity promotion: making use of relatable imagery, including the 'Better Health' (Public Health England, 2020), 'We Are Undefeatable', 'ThisGirlCan' (Sport England, 2021a; Sport England, 2021b), Christmas 2020 Doc Morris (DocMorris, 2020) and 'Every Move Counts' (World Health Organization, 2020) campaigns. Although lack of information is not the main reason people don't participate in physical activity (Williams & Fullagar, 2019), such campaigns can affect awareness, attitudes, intentions and behaviour, when implemented as part of a comprehensive systems-based approach to physical activity (Bauman *et al.*, 2006; Gordon *et al.*, 2006; Kubacki *et al.*, 2015). These campaigns also shift how physical activity is represented: as inclusive, more than 'sport' or 'exercise', and something that can be incorporated into everyday life.

A complex system of interconnected factors influence whether an individual engages in physical activity

(International Society for Physical Activity and Health (ISPAH), 2020; Rutter *et al.*, 2019; World Health Organization, 2018). A report in the World Health Organization bulletin identified 45 interrelated factors across five themes: societal, socio-political, transport and environmental, individual and biological (Rutter *et al.*, 2019). They are socioeconomically patterned, with people living in areas of highest deprivation the least likely to achieve the recommended levels of physical activity (Sport England, 2020).

Against this complex, multifaceted backdrop, it's important to understand these factors in the lives of real people, how they are experienced, and sometimes overcome. Stories are an ideal vehicle for this exploration. Through written stories and films, we illustrate the realities of participating in leisure time physical activity (Smith *et al.*, 2013) in an urban environment.

We chose narrative forms to present our findings and support dissemination efforts because stories are at once personal and social (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), allowing an exploration of system-level issues through the lens of personal experience.

Methods

How Do You Move?

How Do You Move? was a collaboration between the National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration West (NIHR ARC West) and Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC), an arts charity based in Knowle West, Bristol. The study received ethics committee approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Bristol (Ref. 80322). Our public contributors gave written and oral informed consent to participate in this project. They were offered the opportunity to use a pseudonym in their story if they wished, but all six were happy to be identified.

This article reports the second part of the *How Do You Move?* project. The first part explored the preferences of under-served communities when messaging physical activity guidelines to the public (Nobles *et al.*, 2020).

Patient and public involvement

Our public contributors were deeply involved in the production of their stories (see Working with public contributors) but not in the design of the project itself. However, this story-based phase of the study was undertaken as a result of public participant feedback in the first workshop-based stage of the study (Nobles *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, two of our public contributors (Abiir and Vince) had participated in the earlier workshop phase of the study. Our public contributors were also involved in dissemination of the results, including local media appearances and a launch event.

Sampling

We used critical case sampling to recruit our public contributors. This involved selecting contributors whose experiences were likely to 'yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge' (Patton, 1990), who:

- Were from a range of backgrounds

- Represented different ethnicities, genders and ages
- Participated in various types of physical activity
- Lived lives that could be perceived as ‘ordinary’

KWMC’s close community links in Knowle West and wider Bristol were key in identifying public contributors. KWMC recommended individuals who were physically active whose experiences would make an interesting narrative, while meeting the criteria above. We also identified prospective public contributors from the community workshops conducted in the earlier part of the project (Nobles *et al.*, 2020). Everyone we invited to participate chose to take part.

Working with the public contributors

To involve our public contributors in a meaningful but not onerous way, we tailored our approach to their availability. We discussed what involvement would entail before they agreed to take part, their preferred ways to be involved and time commitment. We anticipated each person’s total involvement would be no more than 10 hours.

We were careful to ensure those who participated were happy to have their names, stories and images shared. All contributors were offered the opportunity to remain anonymous. They all stated that they wished to be identifiable and actively wanted to participate in academic endeavours (for example refining their stories and reviewing this article). As such, all public contributors are acknowledged formally in this document (AS, BB, LB, NP, SP & VW).

As our public contributors were happy about being identifiable, we could produce live-action films. This responded to the ‘someone like me’ theme in our earlier research (Nobles *et al.*, 2020).

Empowering the public contributors to tell the stories they wanted was key. It was essential they felt ownership of their stories, and that their words and experiences were represented with what they considered to be authenticity. They shaped the content of their stories and subsequent films through iterative processes, described in sections ‘writing the stories’ and ‘producing the films’. Public contributors were paid £20 an hour for their time to recognise the importance of their involvement.

Data collection

The first stage of data collection was in-depth narrative interviews between April and May 2019. The interviews were designed to be informal, using a semi-structured topic guide. Questions explored what physical activity meant to contributors, how their attitudes to and levels of physical activity have changed throughout their lives and their physical activity drivers, barriers and benefits. See Table 1 below for the full interview guide.

The interviews were conducted in one of two ways, depending on the contributors’ preference and external factors such as weather. Two were conducted as walking (or mobile) interviews (King & Woodroffe, 2017). This approach can breakdown

Table 1. Interview questions.

When we talk about ‘physical activity’, what does that mean to you?
Is physical activity an important part of your life?
To what extent would you say that you are physically active?
What helps you, or makes it harder , to be physically active?
How does physical activity fit into your day-to-day life?
Have you always been physically active?
What caused this to change over time?
What are the benefits to you, if any, in being physically active?

perceived hierarchies and allow a more natural flow of conversation. The walks took place in locations chosen by the public contributors that were relevant to them and their story. As Smith and Papatomas (2017) note, mobile interviews can result in ‘a deeply embodied, multi-sensorial, spatial, and contextual understanding’ of the participants’ lives.

Otherwise, interviews were face-to-face. All interview locations, whether walking or not, were chosen by the public contributor. Interviews lasted 40–80 minutes and were recorded and manually transcribed verbatim.

Writing the stories

We used portrait vignettes to portray the stories. These draw out lived experiences, presenting them as a first-person narrative, whilst embodying the character and tone of the individual (Blodgett *et al.*, 2011).

The writing process was iterative, with further meetings between researchers and public contributors, as well as emails to refine the stories. Using the transcripts, the interviewing researcher (JN, CT or ZTW) developed an outline, drawing on the sentiments, experiences and phraseology from the interview. Public contributors worked closely with the researchers to ensure the content felt an authentic representation of their story.

Incorporating the public contributors’ feedback, the researchers developed the outline into a full story of approximately 1,000 words. Further refinements were made through several iterations with the public contributor. The researchers also met regularly throughout to ensure consistency in approach and representation of findings across the stories. The final portrait vignettes were approved by the public contributors, who remain the ‘owners’ of their stories.

Producing the films

We worked with our public contributors to develop short films (3–3.5 minutes) of four out of the five stories that were created. Unfortunately, we were unable to make the fifth film due to time and budget constraints.

A film producer from KWMC met with each public contributor during summer 2019 to create a storyboard (see Figure 1 for an example) and plan locations. To help structure and focus the filming, the researchers created individually tailored questions based on the portrait vignettes. The questions were designed to elicit responses from the contributor which would capture the key themes of their written story to ensure consistency.

Filming generally took place at only one location for each contributor because of time and budget constraints, with the public contributor choosing the most appropriate location and activity from the storyboard.

The footage was edited into a first version by KWMC, with several rounds of feedback from the research team to ensure stylistic consistency. The researchers also helped focus the films to ensure they were short, aligned to the portrait vignette, and presented key themes without repetition. The final films were approved by the public contributors. See Figure 2 for a summary of the steps taken to create the stories and films.

Results

Public contributors

We recruited and worked with six public contributors. A total of five stories were written, with one story providing the account of a married couple (Stephen and Nikki). Table 2

provides further information about the public contributors involved in the project.

The stories

Stephen and Nikki's story: 'Finding the time to do it is hard'

Husband and wife Stephen and Nikki both work in the UK National Health Service (NHS), and both have experienced physical and mental health challenges in the last 10 years. Physical activity has helped improve their wellbeing.

Nikki - I might start swimming again. Running's been too hard for me, mentally and physically – it often made me feel dreadful. I used to get myself into silly situations – I went from the Couch-to-5k, to a 10k, to a half marathon all within nine months. I wasn't doing it because I enjoyed it, I was doing it because it gave me a sense of purpose - I was achieving something. I became obsessed.

It took me a long time to realise it wasn't a good thing, and I also felt really guilty that running wasn't something we could do as a family. It was only in February this year, after a spell of not running, that I took a step back and asked, why am I doing this? When I started running three years ago, I did it because I wanted to make myself feel better – not because I wanted to run a half marathon.

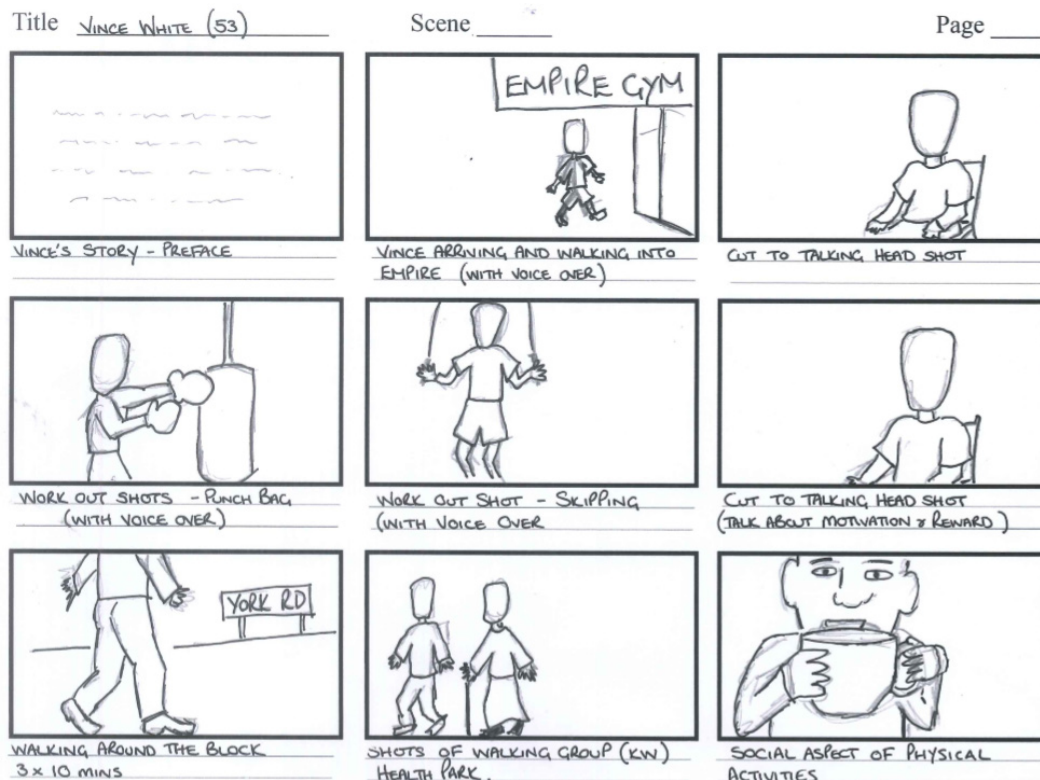


Figure 1. Storyboard for Vince's video.



Figure 2. Flowcharts showing the written story and film creation processes.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics and primary physical activities of public contributors.

Name	Age	Gender	Family status	Ethnicity	Work status	Physical activities	Source
Abiir	30s	Female	Single with young children	Somali	Freelancer	Cycling, walking	How Do You Move? workshops
Ben	80s	Male	Married with great grandchildren	White British	Retired	Walking, gardening	KWMC
Lesley	50s	Female	In a long-term relationship with teenage children	White British	Works full time	Running	KWMC
Nikki	40s	Female	Married with young children	White British	Works full time	Running, swimming, walking	KWMC
Stephen	40s	Male	Married with young children	White British	Works full time	Football, cycling, walking, tennis	KWMC
Vince	50s	Male	Single	White / Black British	Not currently working	Boxing, badminton, walking, tai chi	How Do You Move? workshops

Stephen - I guess both of us were fairly active up until about 10 years ago. And then we had kids. It really hits you – it's a real boom – we had free reign of our lives and time before that, we could do whatever we liked, whenever we liked. But when you have kids, twins in our case, your priorities change.

I spent the best part of seven years being inactive. Work doesn't help. We both work in the NHS, so for 40 hours a week I'm not doing an awful lot, it's mostly sat on my backside kind of work, you know. It might pay the bills, but it doesn't do our health any favours. If I'm not with a patient, I feel like I've got to sit at my desk and do the notes or do some research. We weren't doing 150 minutes of exercise a week, put it that way.

Not for one second did I think I'd get prostate cancer, even though my family has been riddled with it. But I did get it, three and a half years ago, and it was quite advanced. I was off work for five and a half months, and I lost a lot of weight during that time, but as soon as I went back to work, my physical health got quite bad.

It's great to be office-based and having people looking after me and all that, but I needed to be out and about doing something – I couldn't just sit down all day. I really considered leaving my job, I wanted to improve my health. Anyway, I had a chat with my manager, and he told me about our cycling scheme – basically, you can get an electric bike through work, and I thought yeah, that sounds alright.

I don't go anywhere now without that bike. I ride to work every day on it, something like nine miles all in, come rain or shine. Some people know me as the guy with the electric bike! I am lucky that I can build the cycle to work into my day – I know it's not like that for everyone.

Nikki - For me, I've got to make my life as easy as possible, it's one of the main ways that I can manage my bipolar. If there are too many time pressures, that's a real trigger for me, so I drive the kids to childcare – we don't have any family nearby – and then go straight to work.

I always plan to do something when I have a day off, but I'm knackered, constantly, and it doesn't always happen. I miss it. I miss being as active as I used to be.

I've been trying at work to make sure that I get out at lunch time – even if it's just for a walk round the block, to get away from my desk. We both know how beneficial physical activity is for us, finding the time to do it though is hard. The kids are a really good motivator for us, we want to be good role models, so we get out most evenings for a walk after tea.

The social aspects of it are also a huge motivator for us, Steve probably more so. I loved going to parkrun – before my knee injury – and seeing people that I recognised, there's a real sense of community at things like that, you know. If I see a

colleague at parkrun, it gives us something other than 'work stuff' to talk about in the kitchen.

Stephen - Yeah, Nikki's right, I entered a few guys from work into a football league on a Wednesday evening. Just charging around with blokes half my age... it's good for my wellbeing. I struggle most of the time to keep up with them, but I love it. Like Nikki said though, fitting it in is hard. Luckily football doesn't start until 9.30pm, so we can make that work – it just means I don't get to sleep until after midnight! It's worth it though.

One thing I do have to say is that we don't live like saints. We both try to be as active as possible, it's something that's important to both of us, although our diets haven't really changed since trying to get healthier. We go to the pub, we eat takeaways still, we might eat out.

I'd probably say I do 150 minutes of activity each week – it's just difficult to know what is and isn't classified as 'physical activity'. I don't think of my cycling to work as 'physical activity'. I guess if you compare me to my peers, I'm fairly active for a 49-year-old geezer.

Abiir's story: 'cycling gives you freedom'

Abiir (Figure 3) lives in Easton in Bristol and has four young daughters. She spent her childhood in Germany and is now a keen advocate for increasing cycling in the Somali community.

When I think about walking and cycling it seems more natural than like an activity. It does keep you physically active I guess, but I don't see it as something you do separately. I just walk or cycle everywhere I need to go. For me being active is not just to lose weight or to be healthier, it makes me a happier person. It cheers me up and I have more energy.

I've always really enjoyed cycling. We lived in a small village in Germany and there was just one park so there's only so



Figure 3. Abiir on her bike on the Bristol and Bath Railway Path, Bristol, UK.

much you can go there. Cycling was the only fun thing to do and we had these amazing areas where we could cycle on separate paths. Our parents never used to check where we were, we went quite far and it gave you freedom. That's the word, cycling gives you freedom. You can go wherever you want, you don't need money or a bus ticket or nothing. You just need your bike and you can go.

I only recently started cycling again. I walked a lot but I hadn't cycled for 12 years, the whole time I've been here in the UK, and I had never done road cycling. I thought it would take a long time to learn again and one of my worst fears was I was gonna fall down, but I didn't. I didn't! I never thought it would be that natural and easy. I started after I went on a community cycle ride with Zoe Banks-Gross. She's a cycle instructor in my local community. She motivates people because it's so natural to her, she makes you think you can do it too.

I feel like cycling has changed my whole life. I have four small children and I was stuck at home. But when I was cycling to meetings it was a whole different life, an active life! It's easy to say 'no, I can't do it, I've got kids' but once you say 'yes' you'll find out it isn't as hard as you thought.

Wherever I go I think about it beforehand, like how should I travel to this? I just keep in mind to be physically active. Before I didn't even notice how many times I was taking the bus or a taxi. Now when I plan a trip I think how to get the most out of it. Is it better to walk, is it better to cycle, which way would I get most physical activity?

And walking and cycling are much cheaper! Before when I went out with my kids I had to include taxi money. Now I don't take taxi money even though they moan the whole way. They still sometimes ask me if we can take an Uber and I tell them that we don't do that anymore!

I don't have a car. Before I started cycling that was one of my main goals, to get a car, but now I've decided I don't want that anymore. In our community driving is, I don't know, sort of an achievement and people think using walking as a form of travel is embarrassing. A lot of people's excuse for driving is 'I haven't got time', 'I've got to work', 'I've got to drop the kids off.' But I think if you planned it you would find a way to drop your kids off and go to work without that car.

I always struggled with my weight but now I feel I don't have to worry as much because I'm cycling. I used to struggle with doing my household stuff. I had to mentally prepare myself just to change the bedding, do the dishes, laundry, but now I find that easy.

I do get stared at a lot and it is uncomfortable. When I'm on the bike people look at me like 'what is she doing', especially on the road. But then I would probably stare too if I saw a woman with a hijab on a bike. We're just not used to seeing that and I wish we were. I think if I didn't like cycling and then people stared at me that would make me give up, but because I

enjoy it, it doesn't matter. They'll get used to you. And you're not drawing attention to yourself for the wrong reasons, they're okay reasons, you're cycling, you're keeping healthy.

Zoe suggested I do the [Life Cycle UK](#) cycle instructor training. I was thinking no way, that sounded ridiculous at first, but I gave it a go, thinking just at least try. When I got there, it was quite intimidating because the people doing the course with me, they were like the typical cyclists and I wasn't! But it really helped me to be more confident cycling on the roads. Now I never have to question myself, because I know where I'm meant to be and I feel like the cars respect me more now.

I wanted to become an instructor so I could run women's cycle groups. I just wanna encourage more women like me, who think it's not possible. I wanna show mums that they can cycle with their children, it's not just for the dads, so children without a father figure won't be missing out. It was always my dad who took us out cycling and my mum never even suggested to come with us, it was like women are meant to stay at home. Because it starts with the parents, if they cycle they would be more able to let their children cycle, and if you cycle when you are young then you just continue cycling and we could replace all these cars.

[Watch Abiir's film](#)

Vince's story: 'The hardest bit is getting started'

Vince (Figure 4) lives in Bedminster in Bristol and has strong links to Knowle West and Hengrove where he grew up. Despite health issues, he's used the support available in South Bristol to help maintain both his mental and physical wellbeing.

I've done some kind of exercise for most of my life, from when I was a kid. When different sports were on the telly, Wimbledon, the cricket, the World Cup, I used to have a go. Not to any standard of professionalism!

I don't work at the moment, but I like to keep busy and fill my time productively, otherwise you can get into a syn-



Figure 4. Vince at the Empire Fighting Chance boxing gym in Bristol, UK, during filming.

drome of isolating yourself. It can escalate into ‘I don’t feel confident about going out’.

It’s just a question of getting the mind-set going and the routine really. Once I start something I continue it unless it’s something I really don’t wanna do. You just suddenly find yourself turning up weekly.

At the moment every week I do badminton, box fit and a walking group. I started doing the badminton and box fit through Bristol Active Life Project. I do the box fit at Empire Fighting Chance in Easton. That’s helped to keep my fitness up over the years, and they do a lot of work in the community, from mental health to helping young people.

With the walking group, it’s not just about going out walking. It’s about the social aspects of it as well, the wellbeing and feeling connected and meeting up with a group of people. You meet up with them regularly and you’ve got things in common. You can talk about what’s going on for you.

I used to do the walking group twice a week, but because of juggling commitments I had to stop doing the Tuesday walk. It was getting to the point where I was over-committing myself.

I’ve always kept busy though. I’ve had health issues but I’ve overcome them by keeping myself occupied, exercising, doing sport and learning about history and nature, which keeps me well. I’ve been ill on and off for over 30 years, but I’ve always got back to doing the things I normally do in the end.

Sometimes when I’m turning up for something, I’ll be a little bit apprehensive and I’ll think ‘Oh no, I’m not up for it today’. But that’s probably the best day to go because once you’ve done it you get rewarded with feeling so much better. Even though I might feel apprehensive in the beginning the wellbeing factor at the end far outweighs that negativity.

It’s so easy to give up, and that’s what happens to people. They start making excuses for themselves. ‘I ain’t going to go this week’ or ‘I ain’t got time’. I think you should be able to find time for 30 minutes a day doing exercise, even if you do it in three 10-minute sessions where you walk round the block. You don’t have to have a fancy gym membership. You can do it right where you live. And some of the other activities are really cheap. The badminton’s £2.50 a session.

Where I live, people say there aren’t good facilities, but there are lots of things if you wanna engage. The hardest bit is getting started. Part of my walking duties is to bring people in and talk to them and make them feel at ease and befriend them. Because I know what it’s like to walk into a room full of strangers. It can be quite daunting.

I found out about stuff going on in my area just by looking on notice boards and listening to my GP. She was looking out for my welfare and encouraging me to do voluntary work so I wasn’t isolated at home.

I realise a lot of people couldn’t do all the different things I do because they’ve got busy lives, working and stuff like that. So I can’t be seen to be preaching ‘This is how you’ve got to do it’.

But some men, especially as they get older, they can get in a rut and the worst thing you can do is get stuck in front of that TV in your armchair, just vegetating.

I’ve never been the man stuck in the armchair, but I got involved in the [Man Alive Group](#) recently. This is organised by Knowle West Health Park and Bristol Active Life Project, both organisations that have inspired me and helped me over the years. With Man Alive, we go out on trips and activities, there’s a grant that pays for some of the expenses. It’s for men around the area, to stop loneliness.

I’ve also trained to be a community health champion, with my mum. So I know about the five Ways to Wellbeing and other public health stuff, and try to coax people I know, to help them. I’ve kind of got it mapped out now, the kind of lifestyle that I like to lead and carry on in old age. So it’s not a five minute fix, it’s for life.

[Watch Vince’s film](#)

Lesley’s story: ‘Running gave me a whole new group of friends’

Lesley (Figure 5) works full-time managing a large university department, as well as juggling family life with her partner, two teenage daughters and two dogs. She came to running later in life and is now an active part of the running community in Staple Hill, Bristol.

I was 45 when I began my journey to fitness. I’d done a couple of Races for Life, walking them with friends. One summer a few friends said they were going to do [Couch to 5k](#). They were people that looked like me, so bigger people. I agreed with one friend that we’d do it together and although family life got in the way for my friend, I decided not to use this as an excuse and instead joined a free Couch to 5k group on my own.



Figure 5. Lesley running at the Pomphrey Hill parkrun, South Gloucestershire, UK.

I had another friend who wanted to do Couch to 5k but I decided to go to the sessions alone as I was embarrassed being so much bigger than her. I thought, 'Oh, she'll be so much better than me'. Even though I was a middle-aged woman with a professional job, I was worried about looking silly.

It took me a couple of goes at Couch to 5k to complete the course. I tried using an app but I found it difficult on my own. I was very unfit and running for just a minute was tough. I didn't make it to the end of the course and I was really annoyed I hadn't made time for myself to stick with it.

Then after three months, I'd got my head in the right place and decided 'I'm going to do this'. The Couch to 5K was incredibly hard and the only reason I stuck with it was because it was a big group. There were probably 15, 20 people every week. Each week the run leader told you what you'd be going to do next week and I'd think, 'I'm not going to be able to do that.' But each week I did.

At the end of it, I ran a parkrun and it was just unbelievable. These days I run about three times a week, mostly parkruns and with groups – it's very rare for me to run on my own. And I've also become a Couch to 5k run leader, so I'm helping other people on their own running journeys.

I wasn't particularly sporty at school but I enjoyed PE. But when I was 14 my body shape changed and I became deeply self-conscious. I would do anything to get out of running.

And that stayed with me until my mid-40s. Before I started running, my self-esteem was shockingly low, but I didn't realise it. I've got a professional job, I manage a big team. But I wasn't taking care of myself or making time for me.

The other thing that I hadn't realised was how I'd lost touch with friends and become isolated. My life was just family and work, my social circle had become really small. But running gave me a whole new group of friends who I run and socialise with.

In December '16 I did my first 10k and loved it, and then I really got into running. I was the fittest I'd ever been, had the most self-esteem. Everything was going brilliantly and that was to do with diet and exercise.

Then in May '17 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I didn't have any symptoms, I just went along for a routine mammogram. I had an operation, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and targeted therapy, lasting 18 months. My consultant said: 'If you can stay active, it will help with your mental wellbeing and your physical wellbeing.'

I've got two dogs, so during treatment I walked them every day. When I was well enough I ran/walked at parkrun and when I wasn't I volunteered to keep me active. Being part of a community of so many people telling me 'Well done!' was just amazing. It made getting through my treatment a lot easier.

There is a whole community of people running, people with different fitness levels. In the groups I go to, there are people who are a lot quicker than me but they still run with me, and when I'm leading runs I always run with the slowest person to give them moral support. I was surprised how diverse these running groups are. I think I've met more people from a wider variety of backgrounds than I ever have before.

The groups I go running with are just so inclusive. That also surprised me. Once you start going running with a group, you realise how encouraging everybody is. There's no rivalry. It's not a team-based activity, it's just people who enjoy running and want to go out together. I've got to the point now where, if I wanted to, I could find someone to run with every day of the week. Looking back, I'm disappointed I didn't start doing all this sooner.

I can't imagine not being part of the running community now. I try not to be a running bore but I think I am. It's changed my life. I'd got into a bad habit of not talking about myself or my life or any of those things. Now just going out with a group and having somebody share something, you suddenly go 'Yeah, that's me!' It's just the best therapy.

[Watch Lesley's film](#)

Ben's story: 'The exercise is just a by-product'

Ben (Figure 6) is a community activist in Bedminster, Bristol. He's retired and spends a lot of his time working with local people to improve the neighbourhood, particularly to make it more pleasant and accessible for walking.

I loathed team sport as a child. I hated the social pressure and the need to be 'good' at sport. I struggled to see the point. I mean, why are so many people rushing around after this leather ball?

I was still active though. I'd always be playing out with friends, walking to my grandparents, you know, when the streets were safe for it – there wasn't any 'stranger danger' or any of the traffic there is now. I think kids have lost a great deal because they are imprisoned inside – it's no longer seen as safe to play out.



Figure 6. Ben pointing to a Sunflower Walkway sign in Bedminster, Bristol, UK.

Ever since retiring 25 years ago, I've done a lot of walking. Walking is my way of getting around. I don't drive anymore, and walking is often quicker and easier than getting the bus. So more than anything, the exercise is just a by-product. But I enjoy walking, it gives me time to think about things... to problem solve. It's built into my lifestyle rather than it being something extra that I try and do. I suppose for someone of 80, I'm not doing too bad – but I certainly don't think of myself as an athlete, put it that way. The activity helps keep pushing back the tide....

I'm also involved in a lot of community projects. Most of our community work tries to improve the walkability of the local area. If we create a pleasant environment, then it should increase people's propensity to walk, or at least the chances of that happening. For example, we'd noticed that a lot of people were driving short distances in our community, you know, walkable distances. But we also knew that people are curious beings, they like to see what their neighbours are up to, and that's when we started the [Front Garden Awards](#).

It's a simple project and we've managed to keep it going for the last 18 years – it doesn't cost much. We walked around the local area and gave people whose garden seemed reasonably well kept a window bill, a sort of poster to put in their window. Over time, we noticed these window bills starting to go up in people's windows. Not everyone was happy though - we got asked by other residents why they hadn't received an award! It encouraged people to spruce up their gardens, and make the streets look more appealing. Now we give out about 2,500 Front Garden Awards each year and about a third go up in windows.

Everywhere you look, there are things preventing people walking in their local area. I talk to a lot of people around the community – it's part of the reason I do this work, I enjoy the social aspect of it – and this gives me a good idea of the problems people face.

Dog dirt on the pavements stops parents from taking their prams out. Clutter on pavements and overhanging bushes make it difficult for people in wheelchairs to get around. I wanted to take my brother-in-law to the pub a few years ago – he was in a wheelchair at the time – and I kept having to push him in the middle of the road because we physically couldn't get down the pavement. That's not right, you know, people ought to be able to walk on the footway, that's why it's called the footway. Imagine being an elderly resident or having a physical impairment, it just becomes easier to stay inside, which then becomes the norm, and people end up being socially isolated. We've got to do better.

These are just some of the other reasons why I do so much community work. We've set up clutter patrols – a group of people, mostly retired, who meet every month or so to walk our local streets and look out for obstructions. You see what I mean about physical activity being a by-product, we are always out and about! The police sometimes come with us, and the local waste company. When we identify an issue, we can

either raise it with enforcement in the council or we can talk it through with the people creating the obstruction.

Recently, we noticed that shops were leaving their A-boards in the middle of the pavement, meaning a pram or a wheelchair couldn't get past. So we just spoke with the shopkeepers. Most of them thanked us for pointing it out – it works that the message comes from us rather than the council, we're their customers at the end of the day. It's harder to sort the problem when the council are responsible, like overhanging bushes - Public Health don't do bushes, Transport don't do bushes. There is a real lack of communication between the departments.

Although the voluntary and community sector is resilient, and frustration is common, it's fragile, it needs to be nurtured and cared for. It takes a long time to build strong relationships with a community.

I think we've shown though what the community can do, when it comes together, to improve the walkability of the local environment. I'm happy with our progress, and my gut-feeling tells me we are doing something worthwhile.

[Watch Ben's film](#)

Discussion

Stories speak for themselves

The How Do You Move? stories demonstrate how social, cultural, environmental, and structural factors ([International Society for Physical Activity and Health \(ISPAH\), 2020](#); [Rutter *et al.*, 2019](#); [World Health Organization, 2018](#)) shape physical activity behaviours.

Each public contributor describes how their responses to their situation, often against challenging odds, have led them to embrace physical activity and often to promote its benefits to others. However, we do not offer an analysis of the stories' themes, leaving these to the reader's own interpretation. Creating the stories was an analytic process, so, as [Quarmby *et al.* \(2021\)](#) put it: 'We leave the responsibility for interpretation and meaning-making to the reader.'

Why monologues?

Narrative approaches offer 'a more complex exploration of people as both social and individual beings' ([Smith, 2010](#)), making them appropriate for interrogating the complexity of every day physical activity experiences.

We considered a range of possible narrative methods for creating the stories, including creative non-fiction, but decided that creating portrait vignettes was the best fit for the project aims.

Portrait vignettes allowed us to present our public contributors' experiences in a format that feels authentic. Authenticity, however, can be slippery. As [Gubrium and Holstein \(1998\)](#)

suggest, narrative researchers ‘no longer view storytellers and their accomplices as having unmediated access to experience, nor do they hold that experience can be conveyed in some pristine or authentic form.’

Beyond wider social and cultural influences, storytellers are influenced by the story-receiver, in this case three able-bodied, middle-class, white and relatively active researchers (see Table 3). None of the public contributors had a prior relationship with the interviewing researchers.

The context in which the stories are delivered also influences what is told, in this case within the confines of a project to investigate the communication of physical activity guidelines, with contributors selected for their physical activity experiences.

While claims of authenticity must be treated with caution, we strove to represent our public contributors’ voices in a way that felt ‘true’ to them. Smith (2010) describes how narrative theory has developed as a response to a ‘crisis of representation’ in more traditional research forms. As Raine (2013) describes: ‘As previously disadvantaged groups questioned the positivist assumptions of conventional research, narratives allowed new voices the authority of subjective experience.’ However, Sools (2012) observes the ethical conundrum of ‘giving voice’: “‘cleaning up” the rather difficult to comprehend text for communicative purposes, or presenting the text as close to actual speech as possible?” Narrative research can mean ‘cleaning up’ and processing participants’ experience by researchers, whose ‘authoritative voice’ (Raine, 2013) then replaces the storyteller’s.

As monologues, we wanted to use our public contributors’ own words and keep our intervention to a minimum. We only changed the order of events to improve sequentiality and edited out some parts to create a more coherent narrative, leaving their ‘voice’ as intact as possible.

Experts by experience

We hope these stories demonstrate our public contributors’ physical activity expertise by experience. They all embody a duality of being at once ‘normal’ and therefore relatable, but also exceptional in terms of their responses to their circumstances. They are ambassadors for physical activity both knowingly and unknowingly, simultaneously being ‘someone like me’ while also demonstrating extraordinary commitment

in pushing for change and supporting others. Their expertise is rooted in their everyday, real-world, non-professional experience, alongside their ability to successfully navigate the modern sedentary urban environment.

Using film

Arts-based research recognises that ‘life and experiences of the world are multifaceted, and that art offers ways of knowing the world that involve sensory perceptions and emotion as well as intellectual responses’ (Greenwood, 2019). Film in particular ‘has the potential to add a whole new dimension to our understanding about all facets of movement culture’ (Kluge *et al.*, 2010). Humans are a visual species: visual storytelling is more powerful and accessible than words alone. Physical activity as a theme is also profoundly embodied.

These stories are intimately connected to place and movement in that place. As Finley (2008) says, ‘arts-based methodologies ... relocate inquiry within the realm of local, personal, everyday places and events.’

Engagement with the stories

The films are publicly available on YouTube and the University of Bristol data repository (see data), and were launched at an event in January 2020 (NIHR ARC West, 2020).

Versions were also created and shared *via* the social media accounts of ARC West and KWMC. The subtitled social media versions were offered as downloads and were shared with local GP surgeries as content for their reception screens. The films have been shown to the World Health Organization global physical activity guidelines group.

The audio from the films was also an important tool to engage radio stations: interviews, including audio clips, were given to BBC Radio Bristol and Bristol Community fm (BCfm). Media coverage allowed for a richer discussion of the factors influencing physical activity.

The pitfalls of telling individuals’ stories

By presenting individuals’ stories, we place individuals at the centre of this exploration and there is a danger we play into the narrative of physical activity being a matter of individual choice and willpower (Petersen & Lupton, 1996; Williams & Fullagar, 2019). To acknowledge this, our interview questions sought to uncover the external (for example, environmental or social) barriers that these individuals faced, and our portrait vignettes aimed to foreground these.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics and primary physical activities of researchers.

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Public contributor interviewed	Credentials	Physical activities
Clare Thomas	40s	Female	White British	Abir	PhD	Cycling, walking
James Nobles	20s	Male	White British	Ben, Stephen and Nikki	PhD	Running
Zoe Trinder-Widdess	40s	Female	White British	Lesley and Vince	PGCert	Running, walking, Pilates

Despite the upstream factors exposed in the stories, the individualistic interpretation was clear in media coverage following the launch of the videos. In interviews with local radio stations, the presenters positioned the stories as inspiring tales showing how to incorporate physical activity into daily life. However, the radio discussions offered opportunities to highlight the wider context of the physical environment, working practices and other factors affecting physical activity levels. As such, the stories provided a mechanism for a rounded, public discussion about physical activity.

Considerations for future application

In Table 4, we provide considerations for those who wish to adopt a similar methodological approach.

Conclusions

With *How Do You Move?* we wanted to explore ‘everyday’ physical activity experiences and tell unheard stories, perhaps also shifting the locus of physical activity expertise.

The stories bring to life the well-documented factors that influence physical activity, including transport and environmental,

societal, socio-political, individual behavioural, and biological factors (Rutter *et al.*, 2019). Many of these factors inhibit people’s ability to be physically active.

We see many of these barriers played out in our stories: the built environment features in Abiir and Ben’s stories; cultural expectations are present in Abiir, Vince and Lesley’s; physical and mental health are universal themes, but especially in Nikki and Stephen’s. Readers will identify others.

Even when these barriers are overcome, people may still struggle to maintain their physical activity levels and a healthy relationship to it. Our stories show that, even for people who manage to meet physical activity guidelines, their relationship with physical activity can nevertheless be complex. For all our public contributors, their journey to being physically active has not been smooth and can even occasionally be detrimental to health.

Personal experience can be more powerfully persuasive than more rational or weight of evidence-based arguments. In storying the factors influencing physical activity, we hope to elucidate

Table 4. Reflections and considerations for those who wish to take a similar approach.

Reflection or consideration	Notes
1. Be methodologically agnostic	Consider a flexible approach to the methodologies used. In the <i>How Do You Move?</i> project, we used elements of co-production and patient and public involvement. We adopted different approaches such as portrait vignettes and walking interviews, to create a project that matched our aims, the needs of our public contributors and the resources we had available. This approach is also known as methodological bricolage.
2. Find a community partner	Collaborating with the right community organisation was key. Find a partner, such as Knowle West Media Centre, that is embedded in the local community and that values and enables co-creation with that community.
3. Identify public contributors	The partner organisation, if they know their community well, will help recruit public contributors that meet the project’s criteria. If you are doing other community-based research, as we were for the first part of the <i>How Do You Move?</i> project, then public contributors may present themselves through that. Ensuring a good demographic mix, within the scope of the community you are working with, is vital to ensure a range of voices and experiences.
4. Whose story is it anyway?	The stories will always belong to the public contributors: it is their life experience after all. They should feel ownership of the final story. They should be equal partners in the production process and have the final say on what is included. This does not necessarily mean that they write the story themselves, but they should feel part of the editorial process. This means involving them to the extent that they are willing and able, without putting pressure on them or the process becoming too onerous for them.
5. Consider film for storytelling	Creating films alongside written accounts creates a more accessible format and gives the stories the opportunity to reach a wider audience. Public contributors should shape the content of the film, choosing the location and the themes that the film focuses on. Researchers can help direct the content through creating tailored questions for each public contributor that focus on areas that the researchers want to foreground. It is helpful to have a researcher present during filming. The researchers can also shape the narrative and focus by being involved in the editing process, but final sign off lies with the public contributor.
6. Get the stories to a wider audience	Creating stories and films does not guarantee an audience. The <i>How Do You Move?</i> stories have been shared in many ways – and this work is not yet complete. In 2020 we launched the films at a public event and sent out a press release to local media to coincide with this. We used audio from the films as an additional tool to encourage radio coverage. We created social media versions with subtitles which can also be shown in settings where audio cannot be played, such as doctors waiting rooms. The films have also been useful tools in meetings with key organisations such as the World Health Organization.

what constitutes, influences, prevents and enables physical activity for everyday people.

Consent

We confirm that we have obtained written, informed consent to use images, videos and data from the participants included in this document.

Data availability

The published stories are close to the verbatim versions of the transcripts from the interviews, so the transcripts are not being published separately.

Repository: How Do You Move?

<https://doi.org/10.5523/bris.1zx0oxh6rbenh27ow8cpduri11>.

This project contains the following underlying data:

- 1. How Do You Move video summary for data.bris. (A description of the project, videos and consent.)
- Abiir Cropped – New title.mp4. (Abiir's final film file.)
- Appendix L – Participant Information Sheet – Phase 2 Adults v2.0 – AMENDMENT. (Participant information sheet for the interviews for the personal stories in the study.)

- Ben Barker New Titles.mp4. (Ben's final film file.)
- How Do You Move video consent form v2.docx. (Consent form for creation and dissemination of videos.)
- Lesley – Park Run Lesley – New Titles.mp4. (Lesley's final film file.)
- Readme.txt. (Read me file containing project description, consent, funding and links information about the study.)
- Vince White – New Title.mp4. (Vince's final film file.)

Data is available under the terms of the [CC0 1.0 Public Domain Dedication](#).

The video outputs are also available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL73QdP0j2-eKqCirePnR45hTkX-oYeFaM3>.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank our public contributors, Ben Barker, Lesley Barry, Nikki Petch, Stephen Petch, Abiir Shirdoon and Vince White, for participating in this project and sharing their stories with us so generously. We also wish to thank Lewis Campbell, producer, KWMC, for filming and producing the videos.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status:  

Version 1

Reviewer Report 20 November 2023

<https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.14530.r30680>

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Hairul Anuar Hashim

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Using a narrative approach, this article presented written and verbal stories about participants' understanding, barriers, and physical activity experience. Five contributors of different ages and backgrounds with a diverse range of physical activity participation were interviewed. The interview questions capture the contributors' understanding and attitude toward physical activity, the barriers they faced to be physically active, the factors that drive changes in their physical activity, and how that change benefits them. The stories were written in iterative, and the contributor's active roles in finalising the reports add strength to the authenticity and relatability of the stories. Furthermore, the stories are presented coherently and beautifully. Moreover, the contributors' consent to share their details adds strength to this research's output. The strengths and the limits of the study are adequately highlighted. For example, issues that may influence the authenticity of the stories and ways to address them are adequately discussed. The authors also offer recommendations for future research undertaking the same approach.

Major issues

There are no major issues with this manuscript, and this reviewer felt that adequate information and data were provided.

Minor issues

Some minor issues this reviewer recommends the authors to look into:

1. The term 'under-served communities' may need to be briefly elaborated without having to refer to Nobles *et al.* (2020).
2. In Vince's story, non-native English speakers may not immediately understand the word 'telly', I recommend inserting (TV) after the word.

All in all, this is a nicely written manuscript, and the outputs are promising materials for physical activity campaign.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My area of expertise is in Sports and Exercise Psychology. My research interests include correlates and barriers of physical activity and exercise habituation. My research projects are typically conducted using a quantitative approach. Though limited, I have been involved in a few projects using a qualitative approach to offer my insight for this paper.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 20 Nov 2023

Zoe Trinder-Widdess

Thank you for taking the time to review our manuscript and for your kind review of it. I'm glad you found it useful and there were no major issues. Your thoughtful comments are appreciated.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 20 November 2023

<https://doi.org/10.3310/nihropenres.14530.r30682>

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I really enjoyed reading this paper and as someone who regularly uses narrative approaches I understand the challenges associated with this kind of work. I don't have too many concerns but a couple of points do stand out for me.

As this is a narrative analysis of participants experiences of PA I found the link to professional athletes in the opening paragraph somewhat confusing. There are some really good examples of narrative research in the PA space. Brett Smith, Katrina Douglas, Catherine Reissman...I could go on. I would defer to these rather than professional sport, especially when you appear to argue PA is more than sport or exercise.

The other section which didn't work for me was the writing the stories. What kind of narrative analysis was undertaken? Was this a 'thematic narrative analysis' or a 'structural analysis'. As the portrait stories include flash forwards and flashbacks in which time shift occurs I suspect it is a structural analysis. Either way it needs to be clarified.

The stories themselves could be underscored by a 'narrative type'. For example, does Abiir's story about 'cycling freedom' defer to a desire to be active for social reasons. Previous narrative research in PA has suggested participants follow either a 'performance', 'relational' or 'discovery' narrative. Just a consideration here - not a deal breaker for me but it might be worth considering some of Douglas & Carless (2015)¹ work. I really enjoyed the movie component and this for me at least was a powerful addition to this body of work.

References

1. Douglas K, Carless D: Life Story Research in Sport. 2014. [Publisher Full Text](#)

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My research tends to cross traditional sub-discipline boundaries in the field of sport and exercise science. An emerging area of research interest is understanding the learning nexus of applied practitioners in sport and exercise science enrolled on doctoral education programmes.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
