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Citation:

Fletcher, T and Wilson, A (2013) The transformative potential of reflective diaries for elite English cricketers. *Leisure/ Loisir*, 37 (3). 267 - 286. ISSN 1492-7713 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2013.865982>

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The transformative potential of reflective diaries for elite English cricketers

Thomas Fletcher, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK and Adam Wilson, Independent Scholar, UK

Abstract

The sport of cricket has a history of its players suffering from mental health issues. The psychological study of cricket and, in particular, the attendant demands of participating at an elite level has not previously received rigorous academic attention. This study explored ten elite male cricketers' experiences of keeping a daily reflective diary for one month during the competitive season. The aim was to assess how valuable qualitative diaries are in this field. Participants were interviewed regarding their appraisal of the methodology as a self-help tool that could assist coping with performance pressures and wider life challenges. Three outcomes were revealed: first, that diary keeping was an effective opportunity to reflect upon the past and enhance one's self (both as an individual and a performer); second, that diary keeping acted as a form of release that allowed participants to progress; and third, that diary keeping allowed participants to discover personal patterns of success that increased the likeliness of optimum performance.

Keywords: coping, cricket, diary, reflection, writing.

Introduction

The elite sporting arena offers a natural laboratory to study social and psychological phenomena. Within this 'laboratory', elite level athletes are required to "excel at optimal levels while performing under conditions that are considered extremely demanding" (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007, p.243). It is suggested that athletes differ in how they react and cope with such demands (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993), with an inability to cope being linked to a multitude of mental health issues including, depression, obsessive compulsive disorders, and psychosis (Peirce, 2012).

On June 18, 2012, Surrey cricketer Tom Maynard (23) was found dead on railway tracks in South London. Maynard, who had been tipped to play for England, is thought to have been electrocuted by the railway track before being run over by a tube train. Maynard is known to have been drinking heavily with team mates the night before, but following a toxicology examination, the coroner also reported finding evidence of long-term use of cocaine by the player (Telegraph Sport, 2013). This revelation came as a shock to both his family and team mates. Subsequently, it has been reported that Maynard was suffering from depression. During the investigation into his death, Maynard's girlfriend at the time told the court that he had phoned her only two hours before he

died. She described him as sounding “very down, very depressed” (Telegraph Sport, 2013). Notwithstanding the obvious effects this event has had on Maynard’s family, friends and colleagues, for the purposes of this paper, the premature death of such a young and promising sports person has yet again shone a light on professional cricket and issues of mental health.

The sport of cricket has a history of its players suffering from mental health issues. High profile English players such as Marcus Trescothick, Andrew Flintoff and, more recently, Michael Yardy, have all publicly reflected on depressive episodes suffered during their careers. The Professional Cricketer’s Association (PCA), the body responsible for player welfare, takes mental health very seriously. The PCA recently launched their ‘Addictive Behaviour Programme’ (ABP), which aims to further understand the effects and consequences that many on- and off-field stresses and strains can have on the minds of professional cricketers. The PCA, in association with health consultants, LPP, has developed the ABP into a series of tutorials, entitled ‘Mind Matters’, in an acknowledgement that players often need assistance in: recognising the circumstances that could lead to a player getting into problem relationships with substances, gambling or alcohol; learning more about the warning signs of anxiety and depression and the subsequent links to self-harm and suicide; recognising signs of psycho-social problems in themselves, teammates, friends and family; and learning more about the process for accessing relevant help (PCA, n.d). Moreover, in 2013 the PCA teamed up with the Tom Maynard Trust to:

Work closely with cricketers, coaches and support staff as part of an integrated team so as to minimise potential concerns, conflicts and distractions, all of which can be detrimental to a player’s performance and, at worst, may end a career prematurely (Tom Maynard Trust, 2013).

The psychological study of cricket and, in particular, the attendant demands of participating at an elite level has not previously received rigorous academic attention. This is despite an over-representation of psychopathology amongst elite cricketers, and a suicide causality list that far exceeds that of any other sport (Frith, 2001). Naturally, cricket is not the only sport to have had players suffer with mental health problems, or commit suicide. In November, 2011 for instance, Wales football manager and former player, Gary Speed, was found dead at his home. He is thought to have hanged himself. Moreover, between May and August, 2011, three National Hockey League players, Wade Belak (hanged), Derek Boogaard (drug overdose) and Rick Rypien (suicide), have died suspiciously. Notwithstanding instances of suicide in other sports, David Frith (2001) demonstrates that the rate of suicide amongst current and former Test match (the top level of the game) players is

higher than any other sport.¹ He is unable to explain with certainty exactly why this is. He asks, “are cricketers at greater risk of suicide than any other groups of sportsmen” (his analysis is solely about men)? He alludes to the game’s “wicked, teasing uncertainties, its long-drawn-out routine [and] its compulsive, all-consuming commitment” as potentially *transforming* “unwary cricket loving boys into brooding, insecure and ultimately self-destructive men” . Of course, these are not characteristics unique to the sport of cricket, and it would be absurd to assume that people who play cricket (particularly at the highest levels) are more likely to commit suicide than other sportsmen purely by virtue of playing the sport. To do so essentialises and homogenises both the sport and its participants.

Frith’s (2001) analyses showed that suicide figures amongst English Test cricketers were higher than the 1998 British national average. Over this period, 1.07% of male deaths were attributable to suicide, compared to 1.77% for English Test cricketers. Worldwide, 2.70% of cricketing deaths were attributed to suicide, with 22 cases documenting players aged between 17 and 29 years. Given that this age group is indicative of people attempting to construct a career in the sport, and that within this age group are students (another ‘at risk’ group cf. Abouserie, 1994; Travers, 2011), combining academic degrees and playing careers, the risk of psychopathology amongst them is likely to be high.

The lifestyle associated with being a professional athlete can partly explain the relationship between sport, mental health illness and suicide. In cricket for example, pressures include: spending long periods of time away from home and loved ones (up to 5-6 months at a time), appearing in the public eye, and naturally, constant pressure to perform (Peirce, 2012). These factors, when considered alongside the fact that being a professional athlete already involves a short playing career, mean that the development of resources that may support cricketers (and other sports people) to cope with these demands is needed. In short, research suggests that despite high levels of psychopathology amongst cricketers, modern performers are not spending enough time conditioning their mental faculties. Therefore, there is a need to explore the ways in which cricketers can be assisted, not only in coping with performance pressures, but also wider life stresses and strains.

This study examined the experiences of elite English cricketers keeping a solicited reflective diary during the English cricket season. The aim was to assess how valuable qualitative diaries, and the act of reflective writing, are as a coping mechanism for sport-related pressures and wider life challenges. This paper examines whether diary keeping encourages the identification, exploration, and expression of thoughts and feelings that may facilitate a player’s ability to cope with sport-related stressors. The professional cricket environment, via the PCA, is required to both support its

performers, and nurture them in a way that allows them to perform at their optimum level, whilst also maintaining positive mental health. However, there is evidence suggesting that professional cricketers are reticent to speak out about sensitive personal topics, which may include their mental health. Fletcher (2013) and Fletcher and Spracklen (2013) and Burdsey (2010) have reflected on racism within the sport. Burdsey, in particular, identified that professional British Muslim players are reluctant to report incidences of racism due to fear of negative reactions from other (white) players, coaches, and managers. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the potential of more personalised coping mechanisms, diary keeping included, as forms of psychotherapy and expressive therapy.

The current research is justified given the already cited high profile cases of mental health issues within the sport. Naturally, elite athletes are required to develop a range of cognitive and behavioural skills that allow them to manage competitive stressors (Scanlan, Stein & Ravizza, 1991). Current research into the effects (positive and negative) of writing as a technique for reflecting on stress-related and mental health issues has focused on groups such as students and medical patients with trauma history (Sloan & Marx, 2004; Travers, 2011). To date, there is no research pertaining to reflective writing and sportsmen or women. This research uses reflective diaries as a research tool to help determine whether the relative simplicity of writing offers potential as an everyday therapeutic tool.

Reflective writing

Reflection can be defined as “the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective” (Boyd & Fales, 1983, cited in Travers, 2011: p.204). Reflective writing is a tool that is gaining cogency in social and psychological studies of sport and health (Travers, 2011). A number of studies have documented the therapeutic effects of writing (Elliot, 1997; Smith, 2010; Travers, 2011). Although it has only been adopted to a limited extent in sports research, reflective writing has been applied to contrasting issues and samples, and to a number of academic disciplines, including, psychology, sociology, and health studies (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Stride and Fitzgerald (2011) stress the diversity of writing forms to include, for example, confessional tales, auto-ethnography, ethno-drama, and poetic and fictional representations.

Travers (2011) describes diary methodologies as a “frequently kept, often daily record of personal experiences and observations in which ongoing thoughts, feelings, and ideas can be expressed” (p.204). Jokinen (2004) refers to diaries as a form of ‘intimate meditation’ that act as ‘confessional’ texts. Consequently, for Jokinen, diaries are ‘serious literature’ that require academic

scrutiny. Diary methodologies have regularly been employed to explore those aspects of life that “occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention” (Wheeler & Reis, 1991, p.340). The narratives resulting from diary keeping are believed to reduce the intrusive and avoidant thoughts that accompany life events; improving working memory as a result (Carpenter, 2001). Carpenter argues further that maintaining a reflective diary can enhance one’s ability to cope effectively, and noticeable results can be achieved from writing for as little as 20 minutes per day. As a result, according to Elliott (1997, p.2):

This proximity to the present, the closeness between the experience and the record of experience means that there is a perception at least that diaries are less subject to the vagaries of memory, to retrospective censorship or framing than other autobiographical accounts.

Allport (1943) identified three models of diary. Firstly, the ‘intimate journal’ is used to record private thoughts, and is uncensored; secondly, the ‘memoir’ is an impersonal diary, written with an expectation to publish; and thirdly, the ‘log’ offers a list of feelings, behaviours and events, with little additional commentary. According to Allport, the intimate journal and log are ‘private’ documents, written primarily for the diarist. They are:

[D]ocuments of life ... [a] self-revealing record that intentionally or unintentionally yields information regarding the structure, dynamics and functioning of the author’s mental life (Allport, 1943, p. xiii).

It is widely argued that reflective writing, as a health intervention, can overcome barriers such as personal inhibition, social constraints, and/or a lack of services. In other words, writing enables thoughts, feelings, and emotions to be expressed at any time, in any space, and crucially, as this activity is private, it is devoid of social repercussions such as ‘labelling’ and ‘stigma’ so often associated with mental health issues (cf. Goffman, 1991[1968]). Indeed, the theory of emotional inhibition suggests that the probability of detrimental health effects is reduced following the release of stressful or traumatic experiences (Pennebaker, 1985). Disclosure via reflective writing can help avoid risks such as social rejection and/or disapproval, thereby helping to alleviate the emotional burden placed on individuals who may otherwise inhibit their emotions (Pennebaker, 1985)

A number of further uses of reflective writing have been identified. Progoff (1975) for example, argues that the process draws “each person’s life towards wholeness at its own tempo”

(p.9). For Progoff (and others), writing enhances growth and learning via the recording of personal thoughts, experiences, and insights, thereby promoting critical self-reflection. Foucault (1985, pp. 25-32) argues that reflections on the self are also about searching for ways to act as an agent in one's life and the moral subject of one's actions. Thus, Klein and Boals (2001) argue that writing can assist emotional health in that, transferring one's thoughts to paper encourages more objective analyses (also see Hancock, 1998). Likewise, the construction of words into sentences within one's head prior to the writing process is believed to provide recollections with structure and accuracy, resulting in a form of professional practice that has the potential to elicit further insights/development if revisited (Travers, 2011). Therefore, according to Travers (2011), using a diary this way allows "sensations, thoughts, and emotions occurring in daily life to be monitored and reported with the minimum of retrospection and hence distortion" (p.214). Moreover, the fact that they are 'diarist-driven' makes them relatively unobtrusive in the individual's natural setting (Bolger, Davies and Rafaeli, 2003). The potential impact of reflective writing is promising given that many alternative interventions, counselling for example, are much more time and labour intensive, economically more demanding, and ultimately, require more researcher involvement (cf. Spiegel, 1999).

A number of reflective writing 'techniques' currently exist (cf. Progoff, 1975) and they all share a number of characteristics, namely: the imperative to write on a daily basis; be critical and reflective; and the intention to promote 'learning' and enhanced self-awareness. Crucially, for Travers (2001: p.205), "The contemporary focus on learning and reflection in diaries or journals shifts the emphasis to process rather than product and makes them a helpful tool within educational environments." Moreover, she argues that the extent of positive outcome(s) of writing will likely depend on the participant's level of intimacy with the method. She argues that because diaries promote the writer to address each entry with *Dear*, this method is more intimate and personal than other reflective writing techniques (principally logs and journals) and thus, the impact on learning is often greater.

Scheibe (1986) refers specifically to sports and advocates that "the keeping of formal and exact records in modern sports has a very important function, for in this fashion comparative possibilities are afforded which greatly enrich the meaning or significance of present accomplishments" (p. 145). Moreover, Travers (2011) found that 'narrative enrichment' affected skill development in that awareness of work choices and the ability to perceive the importance of such choices increased as a result of writing. Despite this, few studies have explored the use of writing in sport settings. Of the studies that have been conducted (Mankad & Gordon, 2010; Thatcher & Day, 2012), writing is portrayed as offering an array of benefits, including decreased stress, fewer mood

disturbances, and increased self-esteem. Whilst the benefits of writing as a self-help tool have been documented in other settings, a more rigorous evidence base is required in sport if the benefits are to be better understood and applied.

Given the recent 'narrative turn' within sport psychology (cf. Smith, 2010; Sparkes & Partington, 2003), it is an appropriate time for this study. This is further supported by the evidence linking the methodology to numerous ontological and epistemological benefits, including (amongst others) the ability to expose athletes' complex subjective worlds (Smith, 2010); and added richness (provided by diaries) to current research surrounding lived experiences (Travers, 2011). In other words, reflection acts as the link between experience and *learning* from that experience. The purpose of this research was to assess how valuable qualitative diaries, and the act of reflective writing, are as coping mechanisms for sport-related stressors. A brief overview of our methodology now follows.

Methods

This paper focuses on first-person narratives of the writing experience and its broad impact(s) on personal stress and coping with these stressors. As a result, important insights and knowledge surrounding the potential transformative potential of writing are developed and, therefore, could be more effectively applied to sports settings. This is crucial given that health diaries have been used effectively for over 30 years in medical research (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001). Consequently, whilst writing per se is not new, its application to cricket and amongst cricketers is.

Participants

Eight County Cricket Clubs (CCC) were represented in this research. Participants were recruited by one of us during late Spring 2012. The criterion for participation was that each participant possessed a professional cricket contract at one of England and Wales' eighteen first class Counties. At the time of this research, one of us was competing at first class level and therefore had easy access to elite level players. Indeed, as current research into (mainly ethnographic) qualitative research suggests, being competent in and knowledgeable about the sport does (to a certain extent) contribute to an 'insider' research position (cf. Newman, 2011; Fletcher, 2013). In total, 48 cricketers were approached to take part in the research. Whilst ten welcomed the study, 38 either declined or did not reply.

Some players competed at 'first class' level and the others represented County 2nd XIs (the tier below first class). Six participants categorised themselves as all-rounder's, two as fast bowlers and two as spin bowlers. Seven players were studying for an academic degree alongside their playing careers. All participants were male and ranged in age from 20 to 29 years. Competitive experience ranged from 8 to 21 years. They all self-identified as being white British. Participants created their own pseudonyms to ensure they felt ownership over their voices and this step further represents the participatory epistemology favoured in this study (see below).

Each participant was provided with an information sheet and written informed consent was obtained prior to primary research. All participated voluntarily, though it should be noted that the majority participated without the knowledge of their team mates and coaching/managerial staff. Whilst we did not explore why this was the case with the participants, it can be surmised that a reluctance to share this experience with others means that diary keeping and personal reflection continues to be widely stigmatised within the arena of masculine competitive sports.

Approach

The diary methodology demanded that participants' voices be central to the overall research narrative. In so doing we treated participants as collaborators in the construction of this narrative. Our approach is consistent with an epistemological shift towards accepting one's participants as competent and skilled agents, capable of reflecting upon, understanding, and articulating their own lived experiences (Fletcher, 2013). This paper provides detailed explorations of the individuals' 'participation' in the diary writing process. This kind of participatory research facilitates "participants in finding their own language to articulate what they know, and help them put words to their ideas and feelings and share understandings of their worlds" (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012, p.129). Moreover, participatory methods encourage active participation in the research process and, to some extent, give participants confidence to guide and inform the methodology. This is in contrast to many existing studies that have often restricted participants from setting their own writing agendas; preventing them from choosing what they write about. We support Bakhtin's notion of 'polyphony', which positions participants (Bakhtin actually refers to participants as 'characters') and their ideas on a level footing to the researchers (cf. Morson & Emerson, 1993). Thus, the 'stories' portrayed through participant narrative are not confined to dry theoretical abstraction, but instead provide intimate, 'real life' portraits of how they think, feel, and act.

Participants were encouraged to write freely about *anything* they wanted. This is crucial given that the narratives which accompany one's experiences are often extremely private and only

individually meaningful. As a result, we argue that the writing process should not be manipulated in ways that take power away from individual diarists. The only solicitation that was imposed was that diarists were aware that descriptions of their writing experiences (obtained through interviews) would be analysed and written about. However, it is crucial to note that no diary content was made available to or directly analysed by the researchers. All diary content was confidential, unless revealed by participants in their interview. The rationale for this approach was to encourage participants to treat their diaries as a 'safe' place, where they could reveal their most sensitive and intimate thoughts. The rationale for this was part of our wider supposition that diary keeping can positively influence performance and mental health/well-being in a meaningful and long-term way if participants have control over the writing process.

The research had two distinct phases. The first phase involved participants completing a daily diary for one month during the competitive season (June, 2012). In the second phase, participants participated in an in-depth semi-structured interview where they reflected on the value of the diary method, and their writing experiences. The technique of combining these approaches is referred to as the 'diary-interview' method (Elliott, 1997). The one month diary duration is consistent with previous research (Milligan, Bingley & Gatrell, 2005; Nicholls, 2009). Participants were encouraged to be honest and open, and reminded that their entries would not be read by a researcher at any stage. No time or word limits were imposed and, as such, diarists controlled the content and style of their records in their entirety. The freedom attributed to participants was in response to previous studies which have warned that participants in diary/journal-related research soon become bored with the process, often citing the demands of time as too prescriptive (cf. Platzer, Shelling & Blake, 1997).

The level of engagement of each diarist varied tremendously. Some wrote for as long as half an hour a day, whilst others wrote sporadically and for less than five minutes at a time. The content of entries also differed. As Elliott (1997) has previously identified, entries are likely to differ in their 'intimacy', 'level of reflection', and tendency to 'report' basic events. This open approach to diary keeping can be justified by narrative theorists' suggestion that 'story-ing' allows an individual to understand his or her actions, thereby organising them in a way that enhances meaning to a greater extent than more 'prescriptive' methods (Chase, 2005). However, perhaps more important is the acknowledgement that, given one of us was familiar with all participants (and had a personal relationship with some), examining the diary data could have been problematic, and may have discouraged participants from 'opening up'.

The diaries were mainly unstructured. All participants were encouraged to take ownership over the style and content of their entries. We acknowledged that this would be easier for some

than for others. Therefore, each participant was provided with a diary template, which consisted of a number of prompts: 'Date'; 'Goals (if applicable)'; 'Day's content'; 'Performances (i.e., wickets, runs, catches, run outs etc.)'; 'Thoughts, feelings regarding the day'; and 'Any other notes'. The template was created following discussions with sports practitioners - most notably, the England and Wales Cricket Board's (ECB) psychology team. The template aimed to avoid the tendency of participants to list experiences, as indicative of methods using daily logs for instance, and encouraged participants to revisit and evaluate their experiences more qualitatively (cf. Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Elliott, 1997). Although content of the template reflected our agenda, it was merely provided as a prompt for capturing participants' views should they wish to use it.

Participants were not 'coached' on how they should reflect. Whilst some scholars have suggested that diarists may benefit from additional guidance from the researcher(s) (cf. Johns, 1994), we wanted participants to have full ownership over their diaries and consequently, each was encouraged to write about what *they* felt was important. At no point did we want participants to feel compelled to write about what they thought *we* might find important. We wanted the writing experience to be as 'natural' as it could be under the circumstances of formal research. To that end, we entitled it the 'Total Control Diary'. Contact was maintained with participants throughout the research period in order to preserve the personal link that had already been developed. This was done via weekly text messages and emails. It was hoped that this would encourage diarists to ask questions about the research process. This act of 'keeping in touch' ensured participants felt valued, and not exploited.

In the second phase, participants' experiences of keeping the diary were explored in individual semi-structured interviews. Thus, the diaries formed part of a wider research process in which participants actively participated in both recording and reflecting on their own behaviour and feelings. A pre-determined framework of essential questions was developed to facilitate the interview process. The framework addressed issues broadly related to their experiences of the writing process, their thoughts on the potential benefits of writing as therapy, as well as asking them to reflect on current form, performance levels, and everyday life circumstances. It was meant solely as a guide and was never treated as indicative, in that each interview was unique based on the participants' responses to questioning. Interviews invited participants to share any effects they believed accompanied diary keeping, speak about their experiences of the writing process, and provide practical recommendations for future diary use. As a result, "The diary forms a particular space both for its keeper and for its researcher, and their encounter constructs particular research knowledge" (Jokinen, 2004, p.340). In total, ten interviews took place. Five were undertaken at

participants' home cricket ground, whilst five were conducted via Skype. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis and findings

All interview data were subjected to inductive analysis and 'coding', which led to the emergence of three core themes: diary keeping as (1) an opportunity to reflect on the past in order to enhance one's self; (2) a form of release facilitating progression; and (3) a quest to find one's personal patterns of success. Results from this analysis are presented in the forthcoming sections.

An opportunity to reflect on the past as a means of enhancing one's self

All participants highlighted how diary keeping facilitated their level of personal reflection. This reflection involved thinking functionally about themselves as cricketers and students and, more philosophically, about themselves as human agents. Pennebaker and Segal (1999) suggest that disclosure through writing may best be understood as promoting the creation of narrative sources of meaning, and that writing is a way of making sense out of one's life experience and pulling together otherwise fragmented stories, memoirs, and experiences. Similarly, Boyd and Fales (1983) argue that in depth personal reflection should be triggered by one's experiences. They suggest that this "creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self" and "results in a change in conceptual perspective" (p.100). Similarly, Travers (2011) advocates that experiences are transformed into knowledge via reflection, and the transfer of learning is enhanced following knowledge formation. Given that participants reflected daily, diary keeping could assist cricketers to learn/develop. In the context of sport, therefore, diary keeping encourages participants to transfer their learning from one context to another. For example, Alfie (20 years of age with 9 years competitive experience) reflected on the benefits of documenting performance mistakes at lower levels of competition to ensure that the same mistakes do not feature as part of his game at higher levels:

I'd write about "well actually I can use this experience [writing] as something to learn from when it happens again". With university cricket, then going back to second XI and first class cricket, sometimes I'd say "well this is the lesson that I need to learn", because the higher up I go, if I kept doing what I was doing, it would happen again.

Alfie acknowledged that learning quality is dependent on the quality of reflection (Smith & Betts, 2000). Therefore, encouraging cricketers to write about their experiences suggests that the diary method can encourage them to benefit from critical incidents that offer valuable learning opportunities. Learning was fundamental to Alfie:

I think it [keeping a diary] aids the learning process. It encouraged me to evaluate myself. Self-evaluating and reflecting can help speed up a learning process that might not, or might not have happened otherwise. It probably helped me the next day generally. Just to have all my emotions in check and ... all my thoughts in check, rather than going into the next day ... with my thoughts clouded from the day before.

As part of their reflections, participants also said that transferring experiences onto paper allowed them to be analysed in a manner that was more considered and rational, thereby avoiding 'in the heat of the moment' conceptualisations. Jay illustrates this point:

Obviously you get the heat of the moment kind of thing, the emotion, and then later on, when you've sort of taken the emotion out of it, and you've got a little bit more perspective on things, you can look again at your performances. So I think the diary's probably allowed me to have a little bit more perspective rather than just ... focusing truly on the emotion. It made me think more about what had happened rather than being hasty.

This capacity to reflect in a way that is far removed from the subjective nature of diary keeping demonstrates how the process may allow individuals to view situations from alternative perspectives (Hancock, 1998). The ability to do this is important for players who, for example, have had their contracts terminated, or are struggling for form, as coping could be enhanced if performers can better understand the context of their situation. Likewise, encouraging performers to reflect on particularly difficult periods in their careers ensures they 'face up' to key issues rather than avoiding them (Klein & Boals, 2001). As Jay articulated:

Sometimes I'd brush things aside. I'd brush it under the carpet and just not think about it, and bury my head in the sand. Whereas this process kind of meant that you had to face up and think about things, and write it down.

Indeed, most participants agreed that, throughout the writing period, they tended to confront their feelings more regularly, instead of, as they might have done in the past, avoiding them. Consequently, some participants even suggested that diary keeping may equip performers with the capacity to cope better with some difficult situations. This was reflected by Xavier (20, 13 years competitive experience):

I felt like I didn't want to neglect negative performances, because in a sense, as a cricketer, I definitely get disappointed when I do badly. So there's no point in trying to forget about that and avoid that. But at the same time, it's almost, by getting it down on paper you feel that, say with the negative side of it, you can, it's more easy to understand. Whereas perhaps if you don't do that, then it can become this sort of, massive issue, when it's actually maybe, a small thing.

Similarly, Alfie reflected on the pressures of captaincy and noted how writing had positively affected his development in that he became more aware of others and how they perceived him. These changes often led him to challenge his own behaviour:

I would sometimes, yeah, change my opinion on, even like what I'd said at the time, and then, maybe in the morning I'd go up to them [another player] and say "well look, I was a bit harsh". But there were a couple of occasions where I re-evaluated and probably changed my mind the other way. Keeping the diary forced me to face up to my decisions and the effect of them. It [writing] stopped me from stewing over situations and made me be more proactive toward them.

The fact that Alfie used diary keeping as "a good opportunity to be honest" with himself (and others), and to evaluate his captaincy, suggests that diary keeping could be particularly useful for people in positions of responsibility. This lends support to Thompson and Thompson's (2008) suggestion that critical reflection develops knowledge and skill development, and given the importance of these factors for cricketers (in addition to the need to learn quickly), it appears that diary keeping is beneficial for reflective learning.

'In sight, out of mind': A form of release that allows progression

A benefit of diary keeping experienced by many of the participants was the release that came with putting pen to paper. This was expected as current research consistently argues that writing can be cathartic; assisting the release of emotions (Travers, 2011; Burton & King, 2004). Given the challenging nature of professional sport and its links with psychopathology, it is important to note that diary keeping has such cathartic potential. Terry, for instance, explained how performers require a 'release' if their careers and lives are to progress without conflict:

Cricket can be very taxing on the brain sometimes, especially when you play day-in-day-out. You know that you can execute a skill, and some days you just haven't executed that skill, and some people kind of, release it in different ways. Some people will get angry and sulk. But I quite enjoyed writing about it. And then the days that I did have a bad day I didn't over analyse it, I just shut the book and said "oh right, tomorrow's another day". And that would be the perfect release.

A number of participants made reference to the diary acting as a catharsis. Travis (22 years of age, 11 years competitive experience), for instance, described the process as 'therapeutic', highlighting that he would always feel better after writing. In a similar fashion, Terry explained:

Sometimes I'd get back [home] and the television would be on, and I would start writing, and I didn't have a clue what I was writing about. I'd just release it, and it was quite peaceful.

Participants' references to the links between diary keeping and 'peacefulness' and catharsis support Pennebaker's (1985) suggestion that writing has the potential to alleviate emotional burden, thus decreasing the risk of developing future psychosomatic problems. Owen's (20 years of age, 11 years competitive experience) testimony supported this, suggesting that writing allowed him to observe alternative perspectives on a given situation. These views were echoed by the majority of participants. Writing as a means of overcoming barriers was regularly referred to, with participants enjoying the fact that they could express their experiences, but not be stigmatised as a result. In other words, writing was, in Owen's words, "like talking to someone but they never answer you or give you jip". Owen described diary keeping as an "outlet", and explained how writing allowed him to confront thoughts and feelings that ordinarily he would have ignored. Similarly, whilst explaining how it was "quite nice" to get certain things off his chest, Jay referred to the importance of privacy:

I now understand why they're [thoughts/feelings] probably clearer if they're written on paper. When you write everything down, it's almost as if you've spoken to somebody else because you can get it off your chest, but it's still private isn't it? I think it needs to remain private.

Participants proposed a number of other functions for the diary. In following Pennebaker's (1985) 'theory of emotional inhibition', participants commonly discussed writing about stressful and traumatic experiences. Jay, for example, reflected on a number of instances when writing had placed him outside of his 'comfort zone':

On a couple of occasions, I started ... I wrote ... you know, with emotion. I think I probably did come out of it feeling like a line had been drawn under it [the situation] and it was nice, and it did probably give me a sense of satisfaction that I'd got it down on paper. So I probably did come out of it with a more positive mind set.

Ryan (22 years of age, 15 years competitive experience) experienced something similar. He referred specifically to the influence of the diary for coping with difficult situations:

I think it [writing] certainly ... probably calmed me down in a very stressful kind of period that can just flash by. I was giving myself the time each day to sit down and actually think about what had happened, as opposed to letting it all fly by and not even worry or think about what was happening. This probably allowed me to deal with the times a lot better.

In contrast to this, Xavier made reference to an inability (inhibition?) to reflect on a particularly difficult period in his career: the death of a team mate. Having taken part in a group counselling session organised by his CCC, he said he "didn't feel 100% comfortable" sharing his feelings with others. For Xavier, the diary provided an opportunity to release thoughts and experiences that he had been prevented from sharing previously. Crucial for Xavier was an ability to share his feelings in a place and at a time that suited him, without the fear of judgement:

There were times [after the player's death] when I felt pretty sad and quite numb. And there were other times when I just didn't feel anything. And I mean, my life, I suppose,

life goes on, but you can feel a bit guilty about that kind of thing. But by writing it down I actually could identify with the fact that, sometimes, I was not coping that well with it, and other times I was coping fine, and I think ... the diary has been quite useful for that.

Consequently, as Wheeler and Reis (1991) have previously argued, the diaries allowed participants to capture those aspects of life that monopolised their conscious attention: their performances. For instance, Owen often found himself re-playing performances in his head and then writing them down:

You know how you can get those little things that niggle away at you for a couple of days that just annoy you? Like I've played a shit shot or I haven't bowled in the right areas. These things can just annoy you for two days and then two days later you find yourself thinking "why did I play that shot?" I just found that if I put it on paper, like "Fucking shit shot! Idiot!" or whatever, and then it's just out there, and I could kind of move on, because I'd released it.

A key aspect of this function was that participants could put their performances into a wider context. Alfie described the process of putting pen to paper as "the start of the process of moving on". Some participants quite rationally reflected how a few poor performances do not make a poor player. Many revealed that prior to using the diary they did not cope well with poor performances. Instead they would 'sulk' and dwell on them; often stressing over them for long periods of time. But after using the diary, they were able to more effectively put their performances into context; allowing them to move on to their next performance, unencumbered from the last.

Finding personal patterns of success

The majority of participants made reference to noticing 'patterns' in how they were feeling at a given time and the quality of their on-pitch performances. They highlighted factors that consistently appeared when things were going well in order to collate experiences into a positive 'toolkit' that could be revisited when things were going badly. As Jay said:

I think it would be very blasé to say "I'm doing well because I'm doing well at this time" and "I'm doing badly because I'm doing badly at this time". I think that's the wrong way to look at it. Before the diary I might have tended towards that argument a little bit

more ... I would have just thought “well I’m in good form”, “I’m in bad form” or whatever. But now ... I think there’s got to be certain things that are happening in my life for it to be that way, because it can’t just be in the lap of the gods whether you’re in good or bad form.

Following Jay’s testimony, we advocate that diary keeping may enhance athletes’ awareness of their state, thus allowing them to better manage their expectations. Moreover, if diaries are used positively (i.e., to reflect on good performances and provide constructive feedback on poor ones), they can enhance an athlete’s confidence and facilitate future positive performances. Jay explains the mechanisms underpinning his thinking:

If you’ve got a diary that you can fall back on when things have gone well or when you’re in a real rut or a bad spell, if you can read through that and remember the good times, then surely that’s got to affect you positively? Because I think it reinforces that *you know* you can do it, you’ve got this purple patch here, and this bank of positive thoughts, and when you’re in a happy state of mind and everything was going well on the field and off the field, then if you can go back to that, then surely that’s got to be positive (*emphasis in original*).

Participants approached diary keeping in different ways and adopted individualised techniques of reflection. Sheridan (1993) argues that some people will naturally warm to the task of diary keeping more than others because some people are more inclined to record their daily existence. According to Sheridan, some “have already forged for themselves an identity as *that kind of writer*, someone who keeps records” (p.35). Xavier and Dale (20 years of age, 12 years competitive experience) for instance, preferred to record ‘key words’, rather than lengthy entries. They both said that key words prevented over analysis, encouraging more balanced reflection, as opposed to indiscriminately writing down everything they were thinking. This could be interpreted as the participants taking the ‘easy option’. However, the fact that developing key words was their creation emphasises that writing is an individualised experience and currently, there is no evidence to suggest that there is a positive relationship between the amount written and an individual’s level of learning. Moreover, the fact that participants adopted a multitude of writing techniques reinforces the rationale for not modifying/manipulating the diary process. Had the method involved either of us analysing diary data, participants may have been more inclined to write ‘for us’; that is,

in more clearly delineated and understandable passages, which would have been less beneficial for them.

Thus, this research demonstrates the value of individualising methods to give participants freedom to express themselves – a technique frequently adopted by narrative theorists (cf. Smith, 2010) and widely used in physical education research involving young people (cf. Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; O’Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010; Stride & Fitzgerald, 2011). That said the construction of words into sentences did produce recollections with greater structure and accuracy. The narrative construction that diary keeping facilitates could therefore, act as a form of professional practice that has the potential to improve performance if revisited afterwards by the player. As Jay suggested:

If you were trying to work on technical issues for the day, if you could write it down and have progression on paper, then I think that gives you progression in your head as well. By having it on paper, it gives you the confidence that you’re moving forward.

Ryan provided an alternative example, describing how writing about positive performances elicited ‘drive’ and a desire for further success:

It kind of almost spurred me on to want more. Almost like ... I got a bit of a bug. I wanted to have more success. Whereas had I not been keeping a diary and not had that reflection each day, I might not have got that drive straight away.

The benefits of diary keeping on positive performance were commonly referred to by the participants. The disclosure offered from creating their own narratives encouraged these cricketers to ‘make sense’ of their experiences. Boud, Keogh and Watson (1985) refer to this as ‘attending to feelings’ and argue that negative feelings must be resolved as they create a barrier to learning and development. Jay, for instance, believed that diary keeping provided him with much needed clarity and order:

I think, if you can have stuff on paper and in writing, it does probably give you a clearer outlook on things. It really clarifies your thoughts and puts them in a sense of order. Because when you’re thinking about things, you can get muddled. You can kind of hop from one idea to another. Writing it down gave me a sense of order ... you know, what I should be prioritising and focusing on.

Recommendations for future diary use

We have argued that the use(s) of applying diary methods in sports-related research has been under-theorised. As a result, participants were asked to reflect on their strengths and limitations, and recommend future applications. The majority of participants made specific reference to the necessity for diarists to 'control' the writing process. These participants stressed the positive influence of being able to dictate what they wrote about, when they wrote and, for how long they engaged in the activity. The purpose and function of keeping a diary is widely understood. Diaries have an everyday meaning that extend beyond this research setting. Thus, participants had their own ideas about what diary keeping entailed. Participants insisted that the personal nature of diaries means that 'control' is a prerequisite for successful engagement. Owen explained:

It was good that there were no guidelines to it [writing]. I know you [researcher] put that template there, but that was again a choice if you wanted to use it. The whole reason of a diary is personal use, so it's not for other people, it's for you. It's the fact that there were no rules and regulations to it. That's so much more useful because then you can literally use it as your own personal thing.

In saying this, there is no agreed upon approach as to whether diary entries should be analysed. Whilst we did not analyse the diary content, some researchers prefer to. The most common explanation for examination is so that the interview component of the method is suitably informed by diary content. Elliott (1997) has criticised this approach. For Elliott, 'open' diaries are written with a strong awareness of the researcher. If participants know their diaries are being examined by a researcher, they will write it with the researcher in mind. Participants in this research preferred it that neither of us viewed their entries. Many actually stated that the openness and clarity of their entries was largely attributed to their privacy. As Alfie stated:

If I thought someone was going to read it I probably wouldn't have written some things. The fact that it was a personal, like a private diary, meant that I could. I felt like I could write anything, and if you [researcher] said that you were gonna collect them in and read them and analyse them, then it might have felt like it was a bit controlled and I wouldn't be able to write what I wanted.

The suggestion that writing should remain private to the diarist was common. Travis, for instance, revealed that he wrote in his “own language” so that he could “Release” what he wanted, but without worrying about whether others understood his entries. This desire for privacy goes some way towards justifying the decision not to examine the content of diaries. It also contributes to our understanding of the appropriate application of diaries. Findings from this research suggest that practitioners should avoid reading the diaries unless specifically asked to do so by the diarist. However, we are in no way arguing that diaries should never be accessed by researchers. Evidence suggests that some diarists prefer their entries to be open. Indeed, Miller, Tomlinson and Jones (1994) have argued that little learning takes place if diaries are not monitored in some way because diarists can become discouraged from taking the exercise seriously. Therefore, there is a need for much more rigorous research into why participants may or may not want others to access their diaries.

Owen (above) and others cited the influence of the diary template that had been made available. Whilst participants clearly appreciated the freedom and flexibility of determining diary content, they also explained how the template was a valuable resource, acting as a catalyst for accessing their thoughts. This was particularly relevant during early stages of the research when participants were inexperienced writers. Travis, for example, who was a relatively experienced writer compared to some of the others (notably, he continued to use the diary methodology after the research period) said:

When you first start writing the diary, it's quite hard because you're thinking about what to write and how to start it. So I'd definitely recommend giving a template out to people. Or even when they're half way through the diary, and maybe struggling one day to think of something, they could always go back to that.

Participants also reflected on the duration of the process. The vast majority found it easier, and the quality of their writing (i.e., their reflections) improved as the month went on. They also agreed that one month was a suitable time period. This is consistent with other studies (Milligan *et al.*, 2005; Nicholls, 2009). Given this, researchers must ensure that diarists are both allowed sufficient time to benefit from the process, whilst crucially, not becoming fatigued by it. This is particularly important given that intellectual growth can be enhanced as experience of the writing procedure develops (Hiemstra, 2001). Dale also said that prolonged engagement with the writing process enhanced his ability to write; leading to better, more in-depth reflections:

I think I got better at writing throughout the month if that makes sense? At the start I wasn't really sure what I wanted to write down. But at the end of the month I'd found a pattern. By that time you know exactly what you want to get out of your diary. So it was a lot easier in that sense. If I did it for longer I think it's something that I could become very good at, and I think it's something that can only help someone.

However, some participants identified the limitations of relying solely on the diary as a psychological intervention. These participants acknowledged the therapeutic benefits of the diary, but argued that its impact could be enhanced if participants were encouraged to vocalise their entries. In this sense, whilst the privacy of the diary process was essential for getting their views into the open, they also advocated the need for these views to be shared with others on a discursive, everyday level. Travis, for instance, stressed that reflectively writing and speaking are not mutually exclusive. He was one of few to actually speak to others outside the research about the content of his diary, and suggested that the effect of combining writing and speaking was greater than relying on one or the other:

Well I think if you're in that bad of a state, I don't think writing alone would be able to dig you out of the hole, I think you'd have to speak about it as well. But not only are you feeling good about yourself after you write, but if somebody else is making you feel good about yourself, then it just doubles the effect.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that a number of benefits of keeping a reflective diary exist, and that that this method is a worthwhile psychological intervention. These benefits include: a heightened sensibility for personal reflection; offering valuable opportunities for cathartic release; and facilitating participants to overcome negative experiences, all of which can be experienced from as little as five minutes of engagement per day. We have also identified a number of limitations to this method, which can form the basis for optimising its application in real life settings.

Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) suggest the simplicity of writing means that diary keeping can be applied to a range of research settings – professional cricket being one context that may benefit from its therapeutic capabilities. The focus of this paper has been on male cricketers, and whilst they engaged with the process and were motivated to take part, it is unknown whether the same can be said for female cricketers. Whether the same affects are recognisable amongst female cricketers

offers an interesting avenue for future enquiry. Jokinen (2004) for instance suggests that, as women have traditionally more openly used diaries compared to men, the process of writing diaries is “more feminine and even more women friendly” (p.342). She does however acknowledge that one’s gender will ultimately not determine one’s level of engagement with the diary process. She suggests that, regardless of one’s gender, “a diary creates a space in which its writer can reveal – evaluate - himself or herself without it being unsuitable or frightening. However, different things are frightening and unsuitable – or suitable, for that matter – for men and for women” (p.342). Thus, the question for future research then is not necessarily whether differences exist between uptake of diary use and gender, but the manner in which diaries are used – i.e., what sportsmen and sportswomen decide to write about, and what they choose omit. Similarly, future research may be appropriate on whether certain personality ‘types’ benefit more from writing than others – i.e., determining why certain personalities flourish; and, assessing the longitudinal effects of writing. It may also be beneficial to analyse other, less ‘formal’, modes of reflective writing. For example, many professional athletes now have Twitter accounts, and frequently use this forum, and other forms of social media to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions about their on-field performances, opposition teams/players, and referee/umpire decisions. It would be interesting to establish whether or not writing on social networks provides a similar (cathartic) outlet as others forms of reflective writing, such as diaries. Given that such data would strengthen the empirical basis for applied intervention, we suggest that research ought to be conducted in these areas.

We have demonstrated that writing has the potential to produce individual benefits even when participants are reflecting on their most mundane experiences. This is significant because previous research has tended to utilise diary methodologies to reflect on particularly painful and traumatic events (Travers, 2011) rather than arguably more ‘everyday’ situations. Therefore, we advocate that diaries may have a positive influence on any environment where learning takes place. Given this, writing should be encouraged amongst mental health professionals, particularly given that the strategy could assist mental control – i.e., an individuals’ ability to influence his or her psychological states via the use of tools that change or maintain thoughts, feelings, and/or actions (Wegner & Pennebaker, 1993). Moreover, as mental control strategies are significant contributors to successful sporting performances (Totterdell & Leach, 2001), we can tentatively suggest that diary keeping could positively affect athletes’ performance levels as well.

Whilst the continuous entry of experiences into a diary may not be sufficient to bring about profound alterations in an individual’s life, diary keeping does offer an array of significant benefits within real life scenarios, which have their own significance, and therefore, should not be underestimated. We conclude this paper by drawing once again on participant testimony. Xavier

(who experienced the trauma of the death of a team mate), successfully summed up the potential of diary keeping in the context of this research:

Between then [beginning of research] and now, I've definitely relaxed. I think the diary process has helped me with that. I don't think it's changed my life, but I think it was beneficial. And by beneficial I mean mentally. I've continued to feel happy and been ... I'm enjoying my life put it that way. The diary helped me put life and sport into perspective. It has helped me understand that the sport is only part of my life, and not the definer of it, if you get me?

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¹ It is not only professional athletes who suffer from mental health issues and commit suicide, of course. In May, 2013 for instance, Dominic Sayles (21), an amateur cricketer from Sheffield in the UK committed suicide by stepping in front of a train after his girlfriend broke up with him (Blackledge, 2013). Sayles was known personally by both authors.