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Stories of physical activity and disability: exploring sport and exercise students' narrative imagination through story completion

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ABSTRACT

Sport and exercise students will form the next generation of sport, exercise and health practitioners tasked with supporting disabled people to be physically active. Yet, little is known about what these students *imagine* about physical activity and disability. This focus is important as university can be a narratively rich environment that offers pedagogical opportunities to understand and disrupt dangerous narratives around disability and amplify alternative narratives. The aim of this study was to explore sport and exercise students' narrative imagination of physical activity and disability through the novel method of story completion. Ninety Uk-based participants wrote a story in response to one of four story stems. Following a rigorously applied holistic-form structural analysis, three principal narratives were identified across all stories: 1) *incapability* narrative; 2) *supercrip* narrative; and 3) *social justice in sport* narrative. Novel narrative insights highlighted the problematic dominant representations of disabled people in incapability and supercrip stories underpinned by an ableist ideology and emphasised the need to amplify counter-narrative resources to promote acts of social justice. This original empirical knowledge has the capacity to influence university education and expand the narrative resources available to sport and exercise students to talk about disability and improve interactions with disabled people. This article also makes an important methodological contribution by applying an innovative narrative analytical technique to story completion data, as well as advancing practical considerations and challenges guiding story completion design and implementation.

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Ableism; disablism; narrative analysis; social justice; supercrip

Introduction

There is much research on physical activity and disability. This includes research that has identified the barriers and facilitators to sport and exercise participation (e.g. Martin Ginis et al. 2016), key messages for promoting a physically active lifestyle and the key messengers of physical activity information (e.g. Letts et al. 2011; Smith and Wightman 2019). Yet, little attention has been paid to what our undergraduate sport and exercise science students *imagine* about physical activity and disability. What these students imagine about physical activity for disabled people is important for various reasons.

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First, this population will form the next generation of sport, exercise, and health practitioners – such as physiotherapists, gym instructors, coaches, physical education teachers, kinesiologists etc. – tasked with supporting disabled people to be physically active. Sport, exercise, and health practitioners are well placed to promote physical activity and facilitate inclusive opportunities for disabled people to take part in such activities (Letts et al. 2011; Richardson, Smith, and Papathomas 2017). Yet, ineffective physical activity promotion, and negative experiences arising from interactions with such practitioners, contribute to the myriad of barriers faced by disabled people to being physically active (Martin Ginis et al. 2016; Williams, Smith, and Papathomas 2018a). For example, in sport and exercise contexts, coaches and gym instructors lack an understanding and appreciation of disability, which can lead to exclusionary practices that further alienate disabled people from these environments (Hammond et al. 2019; Richardson, Smith, and Papathomas 2017; Townsend, Cushion, and Smith 2018).

Second, university is an environment that can be narratively rich and offers pedagogical opportunities to understand and disrupt potentially dangerous narratives around disability as well as amplify 'better' disability narratives. Narrative environments – including larger abstract socio-cultural environments as well as specific physical locations – work to support specific narratives while disregarding others (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). Understanding the narratives that circulate within specific environments is important because narratives are resources that people draw upon to construct their own stories, make sense of the stories they hear or see, and imagine possible futures. Here, a useful distinction between narratives and stories can be made. Stories are specific tales people tell. Whereas narratives are resources made available through culture and social relations that provide people with a template to build and structure the stories they tell (Frank 2010; Smith and Monforte 2020). Examining the narratives that are reflected in students' imagination of physical activity and disability is crucial for understanding and challenging commonly held assumptions regarding disability within this educational context, and offering more enriching narratives about disability.

Third, narratives do not only shape the stories people tell; they are actors in that they *do* things. As Frank explains, 'People do not simply listen to stories. They become *caught up*, a phrase that can only be explained by another metaphor: stories get under people's skin. Once stories are under people's skin, they affect the terms in which people think, know and perceive' (p.48, emphasis in original). Stories therefore have the powerful capacity to act in a way that guides and informs people's actions and future possibilities. In other words, the dominant narratives concerning physical activity and disability can *work for our students* by teaching them how to be more inclusive and supportive of disabled people in sport and exercise contexts (Richardson and Motl 2020), and *act on disabled people* by influencing their physical activity motivations, engagement, maintenance, and experiences (Papathomas, Williams, and Smith 2015; Williams 2018). Taken together, exploring students' narrative imagination of physical activity and disability has the capacity to influence how a future generation of sport, exercise and health practitioners talk about disability and improve their interactions with disabled people.

The novel method of story completion

One way we can understand students' narrative imagination of physical activity and disability is through story completion. Story completion is an innovative method that offers a uniquely different approach to generate qualitative data. The method involves participants being provided with the opening sentences of a hypothetical scenario – a story stem – and asked to finish the story (Braun and Clarke 2013; Clarke et al. 2017). Thus, the storied data created via story completion is different from more traditional qualitative approaches (Moller et al. 2021). Traditional *self-report* qualitative approaches, such as interviews and focus groups, construct data exploring personal views and experiences. Other textual and digital approaches collect *naturally occurring* data in the form of text and talk drawn from media sources or speech interactions. In contrast to these approaches,

qualitative story completion is a valuable tool for collecting *imaginative* data that captures socio-cultural discourses and dominant meanings available to participants to make sense of a particular scenario (Clarke et al. 2019; Kitzinger and Powell 1995; Moller et al. 2021; Smith 2019).

Accordingly, there are several advantages for qualitative researchers engaging in story completion in comparison to more traditional approaches. For example, as participants are writing about an imaginative scenario, story completion permits socially undesirable responses and is ideally suitable to exploring ethically sensitive or taboo topics (e.g. eating disorders, Walsh and Malson 2010). It also gives participants creative control to play with their storied responses (Braun et al., 2019; Gravett 2019), and is practically less demanding on time and resources for both participants and researchers (Clarke et al. 2017). In addition, story completion facilitates comparative designs as it can be used to compare responses of different participant groups and across variations in key elements of the story (e.g. gender of characters, Kitzinger and Powell 1995). The method is also theoretically flexible as the data generated through story completion can be understood through multiple paradigmatic lens (Moller et al. 2021).

Despite the exciting potential of story completion in offering a genuine alterative to other qualitative approaches, it is a profoundly underutilised method (Clarke et al. 2019; Moller et al. 2021). There is a growing interest in story completion from mainly feminist researchers on topics related to gender, sexuality, and relationships (see Clarke et al. 2019; Moller et al. 2021). Yet, examples of story completion in sport and exercise are rare. One exception is the study by Lupton (2019) whereby story completion was combined with poetic representation to explore information use regarding health and fitness. In another example, Preece and Bullingham (2020) employed story completion to understand gendered stereotypes in physical education. Beyond this, the potential of story completion to explore socio-cultural discourses, dominant meanings and sense-making in relation to sport and exercise has yet to be realised.

In this article, we respond to calls by Clarke and colleagues (2019) to join in the adventure with story completion and contribute to the current literature in numerous ways. Firstly, we provide original empirical knowledge about how an important group of people imagine physical activity and disability. This knowledge has the potential to influence university education by understanding and challenging commonly held assumptions regarding disability in this context. Secondly, we make an important methodological contribution to the field by providing an example in action of collecting and engaging with novel story completion data. Thirdly, we also advance methodological knowledge through the innovative use of a narrative analytical technique to interpret stories of physical activity and disability (see methodology section below). As such, the aim of this study was to explore sport and exercise students' narrative imagination of physical activity and disability. Using story completion and methods of narrative analysis enabled us to examine the socio-cultural narratives and dominant underlying assumptions regarding disability as reflected and reconstructed in these tales.

Methodology and methods

Paradigmatic positions

Story completion has historical origins in developmental psychology as a form of projective test used to indirectly access people's inner (unconscious) psychological worlds (see Kelly and Bailey 2021; Moller et al. 2021). The assumption behind such tests is that asking people to respond to an ambiguous stimulus – such as a story stem – would project the hidden meaning behind stories and reveal 'psychological truths' about the story writer (Braun and Clarke 2013). These projective tests align with an *essentialist* or realist paradigm and a positivist empirical stance whereby the power of storytelling is harnessed to reveal inner, fixed psychological realities that would otherwise be inaccessible or too difficult to communicate (Kelly and Bailey 2021; Kitzinger and Powell 1995). As such, the rich narrative detail is typically lost through complex coding and quantitative analysis to objectively evaluate the projected story (Moller et al. 2021).

In contrast, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) reconceptualised story completion as a qualitative method by drawing upon a *social constructionist* paradigm to interpret data. Through this lens, the notion that story completion provides the researcher access to people's 'real' opinions, experiences and motivations is rejected. Rather, stories are theorised as reflecting prevailing socio-cultural discourses of the phenomena under study. From a narrative social constructionist perspective (Papathomas 2016; Smith and Monforte 2020), qualitative story completion data can be understood to reflect dominant socio-cultural *narratives* available to people when writing their tales. As Smith (2019) explains, 'if people's repertoire of personally and socio-cultural-available narratives do influence how they respond to a stem, this brings into focus story completion as a useful method for "capturing" socially and culturally prevalent sense-making and moral forces' (p. 158). Thus, the stories out there – in the gym, on the sports field, in the classroom and embedded within social and cultural institutions and practices – will act as narrative resources that will enable and constrain participants' narrative imagination when responding to story stems.

Story stem design

One of the most important design considerations in story completion research is the 'start' of the story that participants are asked to complete – the story stem (Clarke et al. 2017). To design our story stems, we drew upon previous story completion studies as well as the physical activity and disability literature highlighted in the introduction. We then contacted scholars in these fields to seek feedback via email on our initial stem designs. These scholars included those in psychology with experience of using story completion, and qualitative researchers in sport and exercise psychology and sociology of sport actively researching physical activity and disability (e.g. disability coaching, physical activity promotion). Next, to ensure our instructions were clear, and the stems would generate the storied data we were after, we piloted our story stems with both undergraduate and postgraduate sport and exercise science students. Piloting story stems is important to avoid issues such as short or shallow stories, story refusal and fantasy stories (Braun et al., 2019; Clarke et al. 2019). Throughout this process we also reflected upon the six main considerations for designing a good story stem as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). This process of designing and refining the story stems is discussed below and illustrated in Table 1.

The first two design considerations regarded the length of the story stem and amount of detail to include. A balance needs to be struck between containing enough detail in the story stem to arouse participants' imagination and encourage them to explore possible events and outcomes in the fictional scenario (Smith 2019). Yet, the stem must also be ambiguous enough to not lead participants to an obvious conclusion (Clarke et al. 2019). Through piloting the story stems, we refined the detail to provide more clarity or reflect real world issues. The third consideration was to produce authentic and plausible scenarios and characters. Here, we drew upon situations that may resonate with our sport and exercise science students in a variety of physical activity contexts (e.g. gym and sport). Following feedback from researchers with experience in story completion methods, we also replaced our original characters with names that were gender neutral or more diverse.

The fourth design consideration concerned deliberate ambiguity to explore taken for granted assumptions across aspects of the story. Our stems were deliberately ambiguous regarding the characters' impairment (and in some cases gender) as we wanted to explore underlying assumptions in dominant narratives regarding disability within physical activity contexts. The fifth consideration in story stem design regarded whether participants were directed to write in the first- or third-person. First-person story stems can encourage the participant to step into the shoes of the character and write from their point of view. Yet, writing in the third-person takes away personal responsibility as 'it's just a story' (Braun et al., 2019, 139), leading to broader – and potentially more socially undesirable – tales (Kitzinger and Powell 1995). Thus, in line with our social constructionist approach

Table 1. Story stem design process.

Stem	Piloted story stem	Revisions based upon feedback from scholars and pilot exercise	Final story stem
A	Phoebe* is a fully qualified gym instructor in a community leisure centre. Her newest client shows up for their first session in a wheelchair . . .	-Removed the description of *fully qualified* gym instructor as some people in the pilot exercise assumed qualified gym instructors would be educated about disability – which is not always the case (see Richardson, Smith, and Papathomas 2017).	Pria is a gym instructor in a community leisure centre. Her newest client shows up for their first session in a wheelchair . . .
B	Nathan* sustained a spinal cord injury a year ago. Before his injury, he enjoyed playing basketball. Now he has been discharged from hospital as a fully independent wheelchair user and would like to be become physically active . . .	-Removed the description regarding playing basketball before spinal cord injury as all piloted stories inevitably led to participation in wheelchair basketball. -Removed description as *fully independent* wheelchair user due to misrepresentation of independence from the wheelchair (i.e. did not need wheelchair to be physically active) rather than our intended meaning of being independently active in the wheelchair.	Alex sustained a spinal cord injury a year ago. Now Alex has been discharged from hospital as a wheelchair user and would like to become physically active . . .
C	After a few weeks of training by himself in the gym, James* has decided to book a training session for a personalised exercise plan. As he walks up to reception to meet his instructor, his first thought is 'Oh, my instructor is disabled!' . . .	-Removed the exclamation mark after 'Oh, my instructor is disabled!' . . . to facilitate a greater range of reactions.	After a few weeks of training by himself in the gym, Zahid has decided to book a training session for a personalised exercise plan. As he walks up to reception to meet his instructor, he first thought is 'Oh, my instructor is disabled' . . .
D	David* has arrived for his first session as the new local youth football coach. Before training starts, David realises that one of the children is disabled . . .	-Added detail regarding being unsure of how to adapt a pre-planned session for the inclusion of a disabled child as this is a concern facing coaches (see Townsend, Cushion, and Smith 2018).	Casey has arrived for their first session as the new local youth sports club coach. Before training starts, Casey realises that one of the children is disabled and is unsure of how to adapt the pre-planned session . . .

*All original characters were replaced with either more diverse or gender-neutral names.

and aim of the study, we designed third-person story stems so our participants would draw upon the point of view of an omniscient narrator. The final design concern was the completion instructions provided to participants (see below), and no issues were raised with the pilot exercise.

Participants and procedure

Following university ethical approval in the United Kingdom, a convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit first year undergraduate sport and exercise science students. The first author attended all seminar sessions for the introductory module in sport and exercise psychology. At this point in their degree programme, students had not explicitly covered topics such as narrative inquiry and story completion. They may have discussed disabled people as a population of interest across the different sport and exercise scientific disciplines (e.g. physiology, psychology, nutrition etc.). All participants were provided with an information sheet, consent form and one of four story stems on a page of A4 paper. After the aim of the study was explained, there was an opportunity to ask questions. Students asked what they were, or were not, allowed to write about and were reassured they could write whatever they wanted.

In line with story completion methodology, students were encouraged not to spend too long thinking about the story and write whatever came to mind, in order to capture 'readily available' meaning (Clarke and Braun 2019, 101). The instructions at the top of the page asked participants to 'Please read and complete the following story'. Underneath the story stem, further instructions

prompted students to engage with the task by asking 'What happens next?' and then stating, 'Please spend at least 10 minutes writing your story'. Students were then expected to hand write their stories on the paper provided. To ensure the voluntary nature of participation, and avoid coercion, all information sheets, consent forms and story stems were collected after 15 minutes regardless of whether the students participated or not. Anonymity was upheld as students were not known to the first author and only minimal identifying information was collected to enable participants to withdraw.

The story completion task was positively received as in total, 90 out of 105 students wrote a story in response to one of the four story stems. One student even commented, 'Yes, not another questionnaire!' Demographic data collected revealed that students were mostly men (57 men, 33 women) and aged 18–22 years (mean = 19 years) which reflected the higher number of men on the sport and exercise science degree and age of first year university students on this course. Only five students self-identified as having a disability with four stating learning impairments (e.g. Dyslexia, ADHD) and one stating a metabolic condition. Just over one third of students (n = 33) had a sport and/or exercise qualification including level 1 to 3 coaching qualifications in a range of sports (e.g. football, rugby, triathlon, gymnastics etc.) and some referee and lifeguard qualifications. The stories in our sample ranged from 20 to 187 words with an average of 83 words. This average word count was in line with other studies using paper and pen data collection methods (e.g. Frith 2013), but shorter than online story completion studies (e.g. Clarke and Braun 2019).

The shorter length of our stories in comparison to online data collection methods may have been due to a restricted time period to complete the task (i.e. 10–15 minutes at the start of a seminar) and/or the lack of preparation to participate in the research (e.g. students were not aware of this research opportunity before the start of the seminar). Using online methods to collect story completion data has many advantages including convenience for participants and practical savings in terms of time and cost to researchers (Moller et al. 2021). That said, for the purpose of this study, a paper and pen mode of delivery was deemed most suitable to engage the study population. The stories were also deemed of sufficient quality as they reflected a rich and complex data set that addressed the study aim (Clarke et al. 2017).

Analytical techniques

Much of the contemporary qualitative story completion literature has adopted a social constructionist approach and used an adapted form of thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning within the storied data (see Moller et al. 2021). Rather than identifying patterns across the whole story, thematic analysis is usually employed within story completion studies to identify patterns in specific elements of the story (Clarke et al. 2017). This form of analysis results in *horizontal* patterning whereby themes intersect across the stories. Pattern based discourse analysis has also been drawn upon within social constructionist story completion research to analyse the discursive construction of the study topic (e.g. Walsh and Malson 2010). However, a limitation of horizontal variants of data analysis is that aspects such as the narrative character and temporal sequencing of causally related events are lost within the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013; Clarke and Braun 2019).

To address this limitation, Braun and Clarke (2013) offered an analytical technique called 'story mapping'. Story mapping seeks to identify *vertical* patterning in the data by examining key elements of a story's progression. Rather than identifying themes across stories as permitted in horizontal patterning, story mapping permits the identification of patterns within stories such as how common story events temporally and causally unfold (Clarke and Braun 2019). Story mapping is the only example of 'narrative' analysis within the extant story completion literature. Despite a long history within narrative inquiry (see Kelly and Bailey 2021), little attention has been paid to the potential of narrative techniques to interpret story completion data (Clarke et al. 2017, 2019). Clarke et al. (2019) propose that methods of narrative analysis can extend beyond the possibilities of story mapping to identify narrative types, genres, and metaphors with exciting outcomes.

Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis refers to a family of approaches that have a common focus on stories (see Riessman 2008). To address the aim of our study and examine the types of narratives shaping students' stories of physical activity and disability, we drew upon a *holistic-form structural analysis* (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998). A holistic-form structural analysis moves away from examining the content of the story (i.e. *what* is said) and identifying horizontal patterns across stories as seen in variants of thematic analysis. Rather, the focus of analysis is on the *hows* of storytelling by examining *how* stories are structured (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber 1998; Riessman 2008). This type of structural narrative analysis scrutinises the overarching storyline to tease out the distinct structures that hold the stories together (Smith 2016). In line with story mapping, a structural narrative analysis can also be categorised as seeking vertical patterns within stories as the storytelling is brought to the forefront of the analysis. However, a holistic-form structural analysis moves beyond mapping the events in a story's progression to identify specific narrative types.

To start the analytical process, we first became familiar with the stories through a process of narrative indwelling (Smith 2016). This involved reading the data several times and writing initial impressions about both the content and form of the stories. Here, we sought to identify and possibly exclude any data that did not 'tell a story'. For Frank (2010), a story is a tale people tell which includes characters, a complicating action or point of view, and a plot where 'one thing happens in consequence of another' (p. 25). When utilising story mapping through online data collection, Clarke and Braun (2019) excluded stories under 50 words which were perceived as lacking sufficient detail and richness for analysis. As mentioned above, our average story length was shorter than those studies using an online mode of delivery. However, when reviewing our stories, we did not exclude any based upon number of words alone. This decision was undertaken due to the perceived quality of stories and our assessment of all data to be 'storied' data in line with Frank's (2010) description. Some stories were short and mundane as was the case for Clarke and Braun (2019), but no students refused the task by writing about something completely un-related.

Next, to focus on vertical patterning and identify the *types* of narrative drawn upon in the stories, we employed analytical bracketing as proposed by Gubrium and Holstein (2009). Analytical bracketing involved temporarily putting aside the content of the story – *what* is being said – to bring the storytelling into focus and explore *how* the stories were told and *how* the stories were structured. For Smith (2016), the aim here is to 'begin to identify a clear and persuasive narrative line; that is, a story that has a coherent narrative structure that is repeated in different forms throughout the participants' storytelling, and that is related to the issue of interest' (p. 265). During this stage, we loosely coded the data considering aspects of storytelling such as the direction of the story, how the plot unfolded over time and the objectives and desires of the characters. Through an iterative process of writing about each narrative type and engaging with relevant literature, we were able to build a typology of narratives reflected in the storied data on physical activity and disability.

The final analytical activity involved interpreting each narrative type in light of a set of exploratory and performative questions. Drawing upon the narrative works of Frank (2010), Gubrium and Holstein (2009) and Smith (2016), these questions included: How dominant is each narrative type? In which narrative environments do these stories circulate? What effects might these cultural narratives have on, for and with people? What details may have been expected in the stories but were omitted? We deemed these questions most suitable for interpreting story completion data as written from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. In terms of research quality, trustworthiness and rigour, there is little guidance relating specifically to story completion. According to Braun et al., (2019), as with all qualitative studies, the most vital aspect to doing *good* story completion research 'is that you have a coherent theory and explanation for what your data represent and what you think the data give you access to' (p. 16). Our rigorous approach to this project has been evidenced

through our rationale for drawing upon narrative theory, a justified explanation for taking a structural analyst approach to data analysis to identify dominant narrative types, and a critical exploration of each narrative type in light of literature and theory.

Results and discussion

Participants' stories of physical activity and disability were structured upon three principal narrative types. These were: 1) *incapability* narrative; 2) *supercrip* narrative; and 3) *social justice in sport* narrative. Each narrative type is defined below in turn by focusing upon the underlying plot and interpretations in light of current literature and theory. Data excerpts are presented to illustrate narrative types and each extract is denoted by the story stem letter (A-D; see Table 1) and participant number (1–90). Before attending to these principal narrative types, we first comment upon assumptions regarding gender and impairment across the stories, and note the overlapping, yet less prevalent, storylines evident in the data.

In terms of gender and impairment assumptions, Pria's gym client and Zahid's gym instructor were mainly depicted as gender neutral. However, in line with cultural ideals which value a hyper-masculine hero narrative following injury (Kleiber and Hutchinson 1999), Alex – who typically overcame his disability to succeed in sport (see supercrip narrative below) – was always narrated as male. Whereas Casey – the children's sport coach – was narrated as female, reflecting stereotypical gendered mothering roles in sport (Preece and Bullingham 2020). Notably, in many stories involving Zahid's disabled instructor, or the disabled child in Casey's story, there was no detail of any specific impairment. If an impairment was constructed in any of the stories, it was always physical such as paralysis or amputation. The dominance of visual physical impairments – and subsequent marginalisation of those with hidden (e.g. intellectual, learning, developmental) impairments – is reflected in the underlying ableist logic that generates disability narratives such as the incapability and supercrip narratives discussed below (Grue 2016; Shirazipour, Meehan, and Latimer-Cheung 2017; Tarvainen 2019). This was also the case for Alex and Pria's gym client. Yet, a focus on physical impairment would be expected as these characters were identified as wheelchair users in the story stems.

In some tales, additional storylines were identified as running alongside the principal narratives. As Frank argues (2013), each narrative type need not be drawn upon exclusively; different narratives can coexist within a single story. For example, we were surprised that only two stories hinted at a *restitution* or *exercise is restitution* narrative. The restitution narrative is a dominant medical storyline that projects hope for recovery or cure following illness or injury (Frank 2013). Due to the prevalence of the restitution narrative in Western culture, we anticipated that seeking to return to an able-bodied former self may have been one way of making sense of physical activity participation for disabled people. However, only one story referred to Alex as needing physiotherapy to 'regain movement and develop motor function' (B25) before becoming physically active. The exercise is restitution narrative provides a new adaptation to this narrative type by specifying exercise – rather than medical interventions or technology – as the means by which a person can return to their former able-bodied self (Papathomas, Williams, and Smith 2015). In another story, one of Pria's personal training clients made a miraculous recovery, but this was not explicitly linked to his exercise programme: 'One month later . . . Craig is no longer paralysed from the waist down, no one knows why . . . ' (A75).

Similarly, we would have predicted that more stories would have elements of the *exercise is medicine* narrative. The exercise is medicine narrative provides an alternative story to restitution whereby participating in exercise is aimed at improving health and well-being rather than focusing on a cure and recovery (Papathomas, Williams, and Smith 2015; Williams et al. 2018b). Some tales featured improvements in health and well-being, but this was not the dominant storyline.

Furthermore, we identified a romantic storyline in a few stories where relationships developed between characters, particularly with Alex and his trainer:

> *Alex was determined to get a membership at six pack city. In order to do so he joined his local gym. It was extremely hard for him to accept the change, and he was struggling to find exercise and movements appropriate for him. So, he sought out a personal trainer. Her name was Lola, she had a beautiful figure, long luxurious golden-brown hair. Her beauty struck Alex at first sight. They soon fell in love . . . Lola assisted him with his dream [of becoming the most decorated athlete of the century].* (B74)

The above example aligns with cultural representations of disabled and non-disabled story characters (Shakespeare 1994; Solis 2004). For instance, Alex is represented as both requiring help and challenged by his impairment to conquer the (sporting) world. In contrast, Lola represents the traditional 'good' fairy tale character who is depicted as being an angel-like beauty (Hodkinson and Park 2017). As noted previously, these overlapping storylines ran parallel to the incapability, supercrip or social justice in sport narratives, rather than being the focus of any one story. We now turn our attention to these three principal narrative types.

Incapability narrative

Many of the stories of disability and physical activity drew upon an incapability narrative informed by an ableist logic. *Ableism* is defined by Campbell (2009) as a 'network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human' (p. 5). In other words, ableism refers to a cultural favouritism for certain able-bodied characteristics and traits such as walking, talking, independence and homonormativity and devalues disabled people as 'other' where impairment is considered undesirable, abnormal, inferior and in need of repair (Campbell 2009). As such, ableism – as a network of beliefs, processes and practices – creates narratives that story disabled people as *incapable* of doing certain things due to their physical impairment. This ableist logic aligns with a medical understanding of disability which is defined as a lack of ability to perform a task considered 'normal' due to impairment (Goodley 2016). The medical model therefore depicts disability as a personal tragedy and psychological trauma that should be overcome, and consequently ignores the structural and systemic factors that negatively impact the lives of disabled people (Thomas 2014).

In stories informed by an incapability narrative, the disabled character was depicted as less than able to do something based upon their physical impairment. In Casey's story, she was often overly concerned with what the disabled child in her sports club 'can and cannot do' (D61) based upon their impairment. Even when Casey attempted to avoid making the child feel singled out or isolated, these strategies involved performing ableism. For example, illustrating the tragedy of disability, 'she made the child feel that there was no reason to be sad' (D14), or highlighted their difference by paying the disabled child 'special attention' (D63). Once Casey understood the physical limitations placed upon the disabled child, she was commonly narrated as being able to successfully adapt the sport session with only minor adjustments required. This act reflects so called 'inclusive' coaching practices where only minimal modifications to normal practice are considered necessary to improve the inclusivity of sport (Hammond et al. 2019). These 'inclusive' practices included having the disabled child coach or umpire the game.

For Pria, she was often narrated as having initial feelings of nervousness, doubt and concern when faced with a disabled gym client. Pria's ableist notions of the body and the gym led to sessions that were a waste of time for the client, incredibly awkward, or poorly run:

> *The session didn't run as Pria had hoped . . . feeling like it was a mishmash. Pria apologised and confessed that she didn't know that the individual had a disability and that was the reason for a poor session.* (A67)

Ableism as an 'othering' condition often produces stories reflecting general negative attitudes and prejudices concerning impairment (Tarvainen 2019). In our tales of physical activity and disability, it was in Zahid's stories where more explicit examples of discriminatory assumptions and prejudice towards disabled people were evident. By inflating disability to incapability, Zahid was narrated as underestimating the disabled gym instructor by assuming they were not as capable due to their physical impairment. Initial concerns from Zahid included: 'Will I be getting my money's worth?' (C2), 'Will this be a problem? Should I just walk straight past and pretend I'm not Zahid?' (C6). In some of these stories, Zahid was aware of his prejudices and was concerned 'it would be rude to discriminate' (C36) and 'feels bad that the disabled man would take it personally' (C17). That said, self-awareness of discrimination towards the instructor did not change Zahid's ableist attitude:

> *He feels a sense of nervousness because he does not want to be trained by an instructor who is disabled. Even though he believes in equality and there is no difference between people who are disabled. He still feels uncomfortable having an instructor like this . . . When Zahid gets home, he rings up the sports centre and cancels his membership. He feels bad for doing so but doesn't want to make it out to be because of the disabled instructor. So, he tells the receptionist it's because of family issues.* (C22)

In contrast, some stories took a turn of narrative resistance against ableism towards the end of the tale. Narrative resistance refers to alternative or counter-narratives that deconstruct and oppose harmful master narratives (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance 2017). According to Tarvainen (2019), stories of narrative resistance feature the rejection of ableist notions of disability as limiting. Instead, disability is narrated as neither a hindrance nor obstacle as ableist assumptions are challenged and overcome. Examples of narrative resistance against ableism were evident in stories featuring both non-disabled characters Pria and Zahid. Following initial concerns from Pria regarding the capability of her disabled client, she goes on to treat them 'as she would with an able-bodied person' (A55) by addressing their individual needs to successfully deliver a training plan. These stories resisted ableist norms by overcoming negative first impressions of disability and challenging this ableist behaviour:

> *He laughed when he saw the shock on Pria's face and simply said 'Don't let the wheels make you underestimate me.' Pria felt embarrassed because she had done exactly that.* (A81)

Similarly, for Zahid, stories took a turn towards narrative resistance when he came to the realisation that 'If he is a qualified instructor, it doesn't matter if he's disabled' (C53) and 'You should never judge a book by its cover' (C57). In some instances, Zahid demonstrated remorse for being judgemental:

> *However, despite his prejudgement, he goes up to the coach who despite being disabled is just as able as any sports scientist . . . Zahid leaves feeling really bad for perceiving that someone who is disabled is less able.* (C65)

Supercrip narrative

The most dominant narrative in stories of sporting pursuits was that of the supercrip narrative. The supercrip narrative speaks to stories of disabled athletes who with courage, dedication and hard work prove that their impairment can be beaten, and one can heroically triumph over the 'tragedy' of disability through sport (Berger 2008; Silva and Howe 2012). The supercrip narrative was the central storyline in the tales of Alex following spinal cord injury. For Alex, becoming physically active was constructed as wanting to play sport. Perpetuating the ideology that men are valuable for their strong athletic bodies (Kleiber and Hutchinson 1999) and wheelchair sport provides an arena to create and sustain masculine competence (Berger 2008), Alex was described as seeking out disability sport opportunities such as wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis, disability skiing, swimming, powerlifting and rugby. Such stories ignore the desires of many people with spinal cord injury to take part in physical activities beyond sport (Williams, Smith, and Papathomas 2018a).

Alex's rise to supercrip stardom was achieved effortlessly as illustrated in one story where he entered a tournament and 'won his first one at the first try!' (B16). Indeed, popular media portrayals of the supercrip typically include inspirational heroic stories of para-athletes defying their impairments to achieve exceptional feats of athletic prowess (McGillivray et al. 2019; Silva and Howe 2012). This heroism of the supercrip was further evident for Alex as he became captain, a decolorated athlete and was often the hero of the game:

> Alex wins the world cup with his country, scoring three tries in the final. *(B76)*
> *In the final few seconds of the match Alex receives the ball on the edge of the D and manages to get a shot away. It sails into the basket just as the buzzer signals the end of the match. The Seattle Spinners won the competition and Alex went on to play in the Paralympics for his country.* (B18)

The supercrip narrative was not as common a storyline drawn upon within the other story stem scenarios. However, there were a few examples of other protagonists depicted as heroically overcoming their disability. For instance, in one story, Pria's gym client became a Paralympian. In another, the disabled child in Casey's sports session was not only included in the netball game, but became the celebrated hero of the hour:

> *The disabled child was playing goal shoot and hovering around the D-section. The ball was passed to the disabled child and they scored the first point of the game. All of the children went up and gave a high-five. The game continued and the disabled child managed to score 8 goals in the first quarter. By the end of the last quarter, the disabled child had scored over 18 goals and was given MVP (most valuable player) from the team.* (D29)

The supercrip narrative is the most common representation of disabled athletes in media and culture (McGillivray et al. 2019; Silva and Howe 2012). Yet, a primary concern with supercrip athletes as noted by Berger (2008), 'is that these stories of success will foster unrealistic expectations about what people with disabilities can achieve, what they *should* be able to achieve, if only they tried hard enough' (p. 648). Thus, the act of overcoming disability through athletic prowess also aligns with ableist logic and further perpetuates the medical model. Supercrip tales are ableist in that the expectation of inferior ability and performance leads to sporting achievements to be considered as defying the odds, and as such, *super*human (McGillivray et al. 2019; Silva and Howe 2012). Furthermore, conflating impairment with disability through the lens of the medical model places the responsibility of overcoming disability in the hands of the individual (Goodley 2016; Silva and Howe 2012). There were only a few instances where Alex was unable to overcome his disability and reach heroic superhuman athletic status. In these stories, Alex perceived he was not ready to be active, worried he was not good enough and lacked self-confidence to play sport. Such stories constructed Alex as a 'failed' supercrip:

> *Within weeks Alex became one of the most famous disabled athletes to ever play the game . . . Then Alex woke up and it was all a dream, and he was still in a wheelchair, doing nothing.* (B19)

Failing to become a supercrip had undesirable and somewhat dire consequences for Alex including taking up drinking, playing darts and gaining weight. Then, when any suitable opportunities to play sport arose, Alex lacked the masculine competence to take part (Preece and Bullingham 2020). In one more extreme example, such failure was synonymous with cultural representations of disability as misery, anger and hopelessness where suicide was (and maybe should be?) the only viable option (Ingham 2018):

> *Alex has been skiing for a month and not improving whatsoever, so he kills the instructor and takes over the instructor's business and identity. So, Alex clearly has gained major anger issues due to frustration and anger of failing and not being able to walk. With this frustration he kills himself.* (B27)

In contrast, stories where Alex was able to overcome his disability, achieve unlikely success, and demonstrate that the impossible was indeed possible (Berger 2008; Silva and Howe 2012), he was narrated as an inspiration to others:

> *Just before he went up to the stage (for a powerlifting competition) the nerves stopped him. He thought of all that he has overcome and what he has achieved. Alex realised that he had the ability to inspire others by smashing the competition. He gritted his teeth and went up to the podium. Placed his hands on the bar and began to lift . . .* (B56)

> *The following summer he goes to Wimbledon and meets his hero Alfie Hewett and thinks how a year ago I was in hospital, I can still achieve a lot in a wheelchair and hope to inspire others!* (B16)

The notion that disabled people can be inspiring to other people (both disabled and non-disabled) has been termed 'inspiration porn' (Young 2012). Inspiration porn has been defined by Grue (2016, 838) as 'the representation of disability as a desirable but undesired characteristic, usually by showing impairment as a visually or symbolically distinct biophysical deficit in one person, a deficit that can and must be overcome through the display of physical prowess'. In common media portrayals of disability – especially in relation to Para athletes – inspiration porn is characterised by an image of a person with an impairment, displaying signs of physical prowess while being physically active, and accompanied with a caption to inspire the viewer (Grue 2016). Depicting people with impairments achieving great success, displaying physical capabilities or as potential role models is not necessarily bad. The supercrip narrative can indeed be a positive inspiration to others (Berger 2008; Shirazipour, Meehan, and Latimer-Cheung 2017). However, as Grue (2016) argues, inspiration porn objectifies people with impairment and devalues their experiences as having a smaller scope for achievement than non-disabled people.

Social justice in sport narrative

The final narrative – social justice in sport – was less commonly drawn upon to structure stories of physical activity and disability. Here, the focus of the story was on making a positive change for the disabled community to participate in physical activity opportunities. In contrast to the incapability and supercrip narratives that were underpinned by ableism and medical understandings of disability, the social justice in sport narrative shone light on the societal barriers that prevent disabled people from leading a physically active lifestyle (Martin Ginis et al. 2016). These barriers can be understood through a social relational model whereby disability refers to the restrictions on activities, aspirations and the psycho-emotional well-being of people with impairments (Thomas 2014). Despite equality laws protecting the rights of disabled people, they still face social injustices and experience a form of social oppression known as *disablism*. Disablism arises from the disabling and discriminatory cultural, social, environmental and political conditions that restrict the function, activities and social participation of people with impairments (Goodley 2016; Thomas 2014). As such, there is a growing interest in research and practice focused on sport for social justice to challenge disablism both within and outside of sport (e.g. Haslett, Choi, and Smith 2020; Schinke et al. 2016; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016). These social justice missions in sport contribute to human welfare by tackling the oppression and discrimination disabled people face through acts such as promoting diversity, condoning discriminatory practices, and engaging in activism.

Activism can be broadly understood as collective problem-solving action to bring about social or political change (Corning and Myers 2002), and was the complicating action in tales of social justice in sport in this study. Here, the protagonists Alex and Pria adopted a sporting activist identity. According to Smith and colleagues (2016), a sporting activist identity is 'a type of identity that advocates for change *inside* sport and for the purpose of transforming policy, practices, and organisations that are believed to restrict one's own *individual* or *team* sporting success' (p. 141,

emphasis in original). In elite sport contexts, a sporting activist identity is enacted through various means including athletes being positive role models and advocating for increased participation in Para sport, and to reduce the perceived financial, resource, and support service inequalities between able-bodied and disabled sport (Haslett, Choi, and Smith 2020; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016). In the case of Alex and Pria, acts of sporting activism focused on improving disabled people's access to sport and exercise opportunities. For example, a sporting activist identity was employed by Alex when faced with his own barriers to being physically active. Here, Alex advocated for disabled people's rights to participate in sport by setting up his own inclusive sports club:

> *He goes to uni and starts a disabled basketball social team and it becomes part of the uni games, playing all over the country every week*. (B84)

> *He calls his local gym and asks about whether or not it would be possible to get help from a personal trainer. However, they respond by saying they don't have the facilities or qualified personnel. Before Alex sustained his injury, he used to love playing basketball so he decided to set up his own basketball club, where you can attend regardless of whether you're disabled*. (B3)

Similarly, Pria adopted a sporting activist identity when she became aware of the barriers to physical activity participation faced by her clients. In these examples, Pria's activism acts included wanting to help disabled people overcome these barriers to lead a fit and healthy lifestyle. That said, Pria's social justice motives were also narrated as being accompanied by personal gain. Although Pria was promoting access to exercise opportunities for disabled people, the act of doing so resulted in her own pleasure or financial success:

> *Enjoying the session, the client asks for another session claiming Pria was the most open-minded instructor she had as others don't try to accommodate. Feeling pleased about herself, Pria looks for more clients with disabilities as she enjoyed teaching those who may be worried about exercise*. (A41)

> *Inspired, Pria starts her own company specialising in health and fitness for disabled people. She develops specially adapted equipment and makes a lot of money*. (A85)

The social justice in sport narrative acted as a counter-narrative to stories of incapability and supercrips in that they went some way to resist the disablism experienced by disabled people. However, there were no stories involving social justice missions beyond sport and physical activity contexts as reflected in the wider sport *for* social justice literature (e.g. Haslett, Choi, and Smith 2020; Schinke et al. 2016; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016). Notably, no characters in this study were narrated as embodying a political activist identity. As Smith, Bundon, and Best (2016) explain, a political activist identity is 'a type of identity that advocates for change *outside* sport contexts for the purpose of resisting and transforming discourses, attitudes, non-verbal acts, policies, and environmental structures that socially oppress people in their everyday lives' (p. 143, emphasis in original). There were a couple of instances where Alex's acts of activism extended beyond personal or sporting success to become a coach for young children for example. Yet, there were no stories where activism was drawn upon to challenge disablism outside of sport to improve the day to day lives of disabled people.

Final thoughts

This article offers an original and significant contribution to the field by producing new empirical knowledge about how an important group of people imagine physical activity and disability. Through story completion methods and structural narrative analysis techniques, we identified three principal narrative types drawn upon by undergraduate sport and exercise science students. These narratives reflected prevailing dominant assumptions regarding disability within wider society

and sport and exercise contexts. Both the dominant incapability and supercrip narratives were informed by an ableist logic and medical understanding of disability that stories disabled people as abnormal, inferior, and undesirable, and situates their impairment as something that should be overcome. These ableist understandings are problematic as they perpetuate an artificial stereotype of disability that alienates the wider population of disabled people for whom overcoming impairment may not be possible, or even desirable (Campbell 2009; Silva and Howe 2012). Furthermore, incapability and supercrip narrative types divert attention away from the social oppression faced by people with impairment and prevents the development of a collective identity and common cause to improve the lives of disabled people (Berger 2008; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016).

Our results also revealed how story completion methods can bring about varied and novel types of data as evidenced in the limited stories of narrative resistance and counter-narrative data. Here, negative stereotypes of disability were challenged through a few examples of narrative resistance against ableism and the less commonly drawn upon social justice in sport counter-narrative. This third counter-narrative went some way to resist disablism by seeking to address the structural and systemic restrictions on the lives of people with impairment through a social relational understanding of disability (Haslett, Choi, and Smith 2020; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016). As such, in this article we advanced methodological knowledge by demonstrating the innovative use of structural narrative analysis techniques in understanding the socio-cultural narratives guiding participants narrative imagination when responding to story stems. We have also illustrated some of the methodological considerations and challenges guiding story completion design and implementation throughout this empirical example. We now turn our attention to the practical insights arising from this study and methodological reflections for consideration in future story completion research.

Practical implications

These narrative insights give rise to some practical implications within university education and sport and exercise contexts. For instance, despite academics problematising the ableist ideology underpinning disability narratives such as the supercrip (Berger 2008; Silva and Howe 2012; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016), students still predominantly draw upon these storylines when imagining physical activity and disability. University educators can challenge the prejudice and exclusionary nature of such stories by providing students with alternative narrative resources for when they leave the curriculum. Marginalised narratives – such as the social justice in sport narrative – need to be amplified to provide students with important counter-narratives that encourage inclusivity and challenge disablism both within and beyond sport and exercise contexts (Richardson and Motl 2020; Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016).

One way to amplify counter-narratives is to create a narrative environment and ethos that is centred upon inclusivity and advocacy for disabled people (Richardson and Motl 2020). Inclusive narrative environments can be achieved in university institutions through education and opportunities to positively engage with disabled people. Such examples include peer-based physical activity programmes with disabled students (see Moola 2020), contact-based disability sport education and awareness programmes (see McKay et al., 2021), and integrating community-based exercise programmes for disabled people into the undergraduate degree curriculum (see Jackson et al. 2019; Man et al. 2020). Here, students can be introduced to narratives of social justice through hearing stories about oppression and activism from disabled people themselves (Smith, Bundon, and Best 2016).

Another way to amplify counter-narratives is by using story completion tasks as a pedagogical tool. As our results highlighted, story completion can bring about varied and novel data that can provide students with a practical opportunity to talk about physical activity and disability. Given the imaginative nature of data, story completion is particularly suited to exploring ethically sensitive

topics (Clarke et al. 2019). Those teaching topics related to sport, exercise and health can use story completion to directly access contemporary topics such as ableism, disablism and issues of social justice (Moller et al. 2021; Schinke et al. 2016). Sport and exercise researchers might also want to explore story completion as a method to foster personal and social change. As Smith (2019) explains, story completion may enable people to expand the menu of stories they have available to make meaning and challenge dominant ways of knowing to imagine a different world.

Methodological reflections

There are some noteworthy methodological reflections which should be taken into consideration when interpreting our results and conducting future story completion research within sport and exercise. First, in relation to our study, although we used four story stems and explored narrative responses across stems, we did not compare responses across participants. In line with our social constructionist approach, we compared the socio-cultural narrative resources available to students as a social group in the first year of their sport and exercise science degree. We were not making interpretations of the participants by comparing demographic details or other experiences (e.g. those who had a relevant qualification). Future research avenues could make use of such comparative research designs. For example, comparisons could be made between different social categories including those students who identified as disabled, or had 'experience' with disability either within or outside of sport and exercise contexts, and those without. From a social constructionist viewpoint, the aim would be to understand whether the experience of having an impairment, or being involved in disability sport, gave participants access to different socio-cultural narrative resources when responding to story stems (Braun et al., 2019; Smith 2019).

Second, careful consideration was taken regarding the type of analysis drawn upon when using a narrative approach to story completion research. Some methods of narrative analysis that seek to understand participants' lived experience (Riessman 2008) and/or address questions concerning identity (e.g. How do participants tell stories to explore whom they might become?) or function (e.g. As 'actors', how do participants' stories shape their actions?) (Frank 2010) are less suitable for interpreting data written from the point of view of an omniscient narrator (Clarke et al. 2017). That said, identifying dominant narrative types within relatively short stories using a structural narrative analysis was not easy. This is because people can draw upon multiple narratives in telling their tales, and rarely articulate 'fully formed' narratives (Frank 2010). As such, it is vital to take time to consider what type of story is being told through the iterative process of returning to data and engaging with literature to revise, reflect and edit narrative types (Smith 2016).

Third, we encourage sport and exercise researchers to engage with qualitative story completion methods, not for the sake of innovation (Smith 2019; Williams 2018), but to expand their methodological repertoire and access new understandings in exciting ways. As the method is theoretically and methodologically flexible, it can be drawn upon to address a range of research questions from various paradigmatic positions. These research questions include what participants think or feel about a subject (essentialist paradigm) or how a phenomenon is socially constructed (social constructionist paradigm) (Moller et al. 2021). In addition, from a *contextualist* paradigm, research questions can include how participants make sense of a topic in their particular social context (Clarke et al. 2017). Through a contextualist lens, stories access participants' perceptions and understandings (similar to essentialist truths) but are shaped by and embedded within participants' social context (similar to social constructions) (Moller et al. 2021). As such, the rich narrative data from story completion research can be analysed from several perspectives of interest to sport and exercise researchers (e.g. discourse and narrative analyses, McGannon and Smith 2015) to create multiple and diverse interpretations of complex phenomena. Lastly, sport and exercise researchers can play with

more unique story completion methods to further advance the field. For example, story completion methods can be combined with interviews to invite participants to reflect upon interpretations of their tales (see Gravett 2019), or extended through visual methods (see Hayfield and Wood 2019) and gamification (see Troiano et al. 2021) to produce more engaging research and creative responses.

In conclusion, in this article we have produced new empirical knowledge regarding the narrative types shaping sport and exercise students' imagination of physical activity and disability. The problematic representations of disability in storylines founded on the dominant incapability and supercrip narratives work to exclude and marginalise disabled people from sport and exercise spaces. Thus, future research and practice should identify strategies to successfully amplify a broader menu of socio-cultural narratives that promote social justice missions. Such stories can act on students to challenge disablism and discriminatory practices by promoting diversity and engaging in activism. We have also advanced story completion methodology through the innovative use of narrative analytical techniques to interpret imaginative storied data. Overall, we hope that this article encourages others to include story completion within their methodological toolkit to create more engaging research and collect qualitative data in new and exciting ways.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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