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Applied utility and the auto-ethnographic short story: persuasions for, and illustrations of, writing critical social science

David Gilbourne, Robyn Jones and Spencer Jordan

Introduction

We have opted to begin this paper with a few words on the background and motivations of the author team. David and Robyn teach in the field of sport and exercise science, and have respective histories in sport psychology and coaching science whilst Spencer practices within the field of literature and creative writing. Our paths have crossed due to a shared interest in the way stories might reflect lived experiences and how, through the power of authenticity and engagement, stories might allow others to share experiences and reflect critically on their own practice and also on their own lives. As an author team, we have worked together in a cyclic and reflective fashion in an attempt to review and revise the manuscript, a form of triangulation some might say. Sometimes we worked on the manuscript in isolation and at other times we met as a group. We adopted this protocol in an effort to up-date and reflect on the introductory and discussion text and also to discuss the tone and structure of the central auto-ethnographic story.

In more general terms we have constructed the present paper to focus specifically on the way stories might have utility within applied pedagogy settings, for example within the curricular of sport psychology and sports coaching; but we do not consider the applications of the present paper are restricted to these domains. Indeed, we believe that the interplay between inter- and -intra-personal issues that feature in the short story (to follow) will be of interest and value to practitioners in many areas of social action. Finally, the story 'Travel Writer' has featured as stimulus material within scholarly settings, initially within a European Research Programme for Students (REPS) symposia at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark (2010), and within a Key-Note presentation at the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science student conference at Aberystwyth University, UK (2010); the first author would wish to thank all those who provided constructive feedback on 'Travel Writer' and to the students and staff who encouraged me to take the idea of stories for pedagogy forward, the present paper emerges as a result of their support.

Building a case for the short story as a stimulus for critical pedagogy

It is widely understood that auto-ethnographic story-tellers write about elements of their own lives; a process that has been proposed to hinge on elongated acts of thinking, writing, drafting, re-shaping, thinking, writing and so forth (Gilbourne, 2011). In terms of style and pitch, authors of sport-based auto-ethnographic texts have made use of literary techniques such as characterisation (Sparkes, 1996; Gilbourne, 2002; Stone, 2009), flashbacks (Douglas, 2009; Jones, 2009; Stone, 2009; Gilbourne, 2010a, 2011; Krane, 2010) and detailed description (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Jones, 2007, 2009; Stone, 2009), devices which, in sum, have helped the authors 'tell' their stories, or

parts of it, in ways that seek to engage and inform. In the emerging and associated domain of narrative inquiry, 'storytellers' such as auto-ethnographers have been described as writers who engage in a form of 'creative analytic practice' (CAP) (Richardson, 2000), in which the analysis of an issue or an event is evident through the telling of the story itself. Similar notions of analytic process, that is, thinking (or reflecting) and writing and reflecting further, have also been the focus of contemporary debate within the domain of reflective-practice writing (Anderson et al., 2007; Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010; Knowles et al., 2011).

In the most recent of these discussions, Knowles and Gilbourne (2010) sought to align auto-ethnographic writing with certain aspirations and assumptions housed within the tenets of critical social science as outlined by Habermas (1974), Carr and Kemmis (1986) and, more recently, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005). Knowles and Gilbourne (2010) described critical social science as an approach to reflection that encourages an understanding of self in a wider world context and, from this, they suggested that critical social science might come to offer a challenge to the status quo; furthermore their proposition, rehearsed briefly again here, is that auto-ethnographic texts can provide illustrations of writing that align CAP with elements of critical social science as well as with the processes of reflection. These contentions are based on a number of observations. First, that auto-ethnographic writing requires the author to engage with varying degrees of reflection to revisit and contemplate elements of their own life story; to our way of thinking, this proposition does not appear particularly contentious. Secondly, that the processes associated with CAP assume that 'analysis' (akin to data analysis) forms part of the reflective-writing axis, which suggests (to us) that an auto-ethnographic narrative emerges from a challenging personal exercise in which events, and understandings of them, are scrutinised in a systematic manner and through a critical lens. Linking the first and second observations to critical social science is not simply an extension of the term 'critical'. Rather, we urge that the tenets of critical social science be a central emphasis within the reflective process; one that extends the act of reflection to embrace notions of appreciating self-in-society. In this critical dimension, authors of auto-ethnographic texts might embrace the possibility that their stories house the capacity to embrace alternative perspectives and, so, potentially act as a catalyst for change.

To achieve the aim of bringing about change through writing (i.e. based on cycles of reflection), and by engaging in thought processes that are informed and excited by the possibilities of critical social science; requires an appreciation of how one's life experiences have occurred within the constraints and power dynamics of the wider social context. Consequently, reflection that is underpinned by an appreciation of critical social science readily encourages authors, through their stories, to contest, challenge and, so, possibly change previously held views. For example, such texts might suggest alternatives to dominant institutions or to pervasive meta-narratives. To offer one sport and exercise-based illustration of critical social science within an auto-ethnographic tale, Stone (2009), in his auto-ethnography of mental illness and exercise, suggested that his uneven and sometimes opaque storyline captured the often uncertain and fractured experience of mental illness. This, he contended, contrasted, in terms of style and appreciation, with other scholarly texts from the same field. In making these observations, he questioned whether 'traditional' texts are formulated in ways that avoid 'unsettling truths'; an assertion that offers a direct challenge to the way mental illness is reported, to the status quo, and to the meta-narratives that sustain it. In taking this view Stone outlines

the capacity of an auto-ethnographic text to contest what had hitherto been regarded as established. His specific challenge is one of both style and content, indeed style acts to suggest different possibilities in content and so in understanding.

In the present paper, we also position the auto-ethnographic short story as one that provides readers with an illustration of a text that seeks to contest, however obliquely, established 'truths', in this case, on issues of career ending trauma and subsequent transition from elite sport. The story offered here explores the complexity and multi-layered nature of (sporting) experience; of how moments endure and shape a life; of how things are never quite as they seem. The reference to ambiguity is, in terms of both style and content, central to the deconstruction of the comfortable renderings that sometimes act to bloat our various literatures with certainty an act that, over time might limit the reach of literature utilised in applied pedagogy. Following the story, we discuss the value of auto-ethnographical short stories in a further challenge to established pedagogical hegemony.

A brief literary exploration of the short story

Short stories have been a popular form of (mainly) fiction since the early nineteenth century (May, 2002). From the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield to the more contemporary work of Raymond Carver, Lorrie Moore, the short story has remained a key part of the literary canon (see Henderson & Hancock, 2010). Despite this long tradition, the theme of the genre has remained relatively stable, focusing on the intimate, hidden landscape of its characters. For example, it is possible to discern that the author of a short story does not so much portray an exterior world, a world of plot coherency, development and resolution, but attempts, instead, to manifest the 'unknowable' world of the characters' hidden psychology. The short story is, therefore, far more about complexity, context and irresolution because it is these things that are understood to typify the experience of 'real' lives. Novelistic 'tricks' of resolution and exegesis are purposefully avoided.

From the view of pedagogy, it is possible to see interconnections between the processes of literature and those of auto-ethnographic methodology. For example, during the 'teaching' of short story writing, the guides and text books not surprisingly embrace the existential element of the genre as crucial (Burroway et al., 2010), a view that is often taken directly into the creative writing pedagogy itself. Consequently, a key objective for short story writers is to address particularly powerful themes, which are often autobiographical and highly emotional in nature. The literary 'trick' then is to try and represent such emotionality on a page, as a 'fictional' story, in such a way that it remains truthful to the enigmatic 'otherness' of intense human experience. In contrast, auto-ethnographic writing, whilst often deploying literary techniques common to fiction (such as thick description, flashbacks and a propensity to 'show' rather than to 'tell'), does not typically seek to present the author as anything less than central to the authenticity of the tale. Further reference to the notion of 'showing' not 'telling' emphasises the interface between qualitative auto-ethnographic writing and creative fiction and allows reference to Hemingway (1995), who famously described the 'iceberg' effect, in which two thirds of a story should remain off the page, felt by the reader, yet invisible.

Literary minimalism draws heavily on this technique as shown most famously in the short stories of Carver (2003). On this theme, others have noted that 'As a rule, writers of the minimalist short story manipulate figurative speech to present what appears to be a single event, a mere incident, a nothing-is-happening- here story that is actually an intricate figurative pattern that reflects the human condition ...' (Hallet, 1996 quoted in Henderson & Hancock, 2010, p. 421).

In the story to follow, we align ourselves with many of the literary sentiments described earlier and so have designed the text to show rather than tell, to try to intrigue rather than inform, to contest rather than align. In addition to and in part because of the earlier issues, we also hope that the story presented will encourage critical debate on issues such professional conduct and care and, as a consequence, illustrate the applied utility of an auto-ethnographic short story. In this final aspiration we seek to convince readers of the role for applied stories in sport and social science pedagogy more generally. Our central argument is that 'real' stories can act as a basis for further reflection, discussion and theorisation within learning communities and in applied training contexts and act as a stimulus for the enhancement of our social sensibilities, and our deeper knowledge of the complexity of others.

Foreword to the short story

Through the story that follows, I, (the first author) offer the possibility that crises may not be attached simply to the central cause of any injury, accident, breakdown or event. Rather, I suggest how secondary and associated events might provide the perfect conditions around which a point of crisis, in this case a career ending injury, might morph from the personal tragedy of an unexplored sporting career, into something that is defined and experienced in wider and far-reaching social terms. The emotions and cognitions that stem from it are depicted in lifelong terms through the contesting tradition of critical social science. The consequences of moments in history are shown to be resistant to easy control or eradication and whilst the hum- drum everydayness of life ticks along, thoughts and emotions are depicted as demons remaining in situ acting in a corroding and/or defining manner, resurfacing and reminding in fragile unguarded instants. As uninvited, unwelcome and often lifelong travel companions, they influence moments along one lived journey; a journey that meanders, falters, becomes unsettled, then, eventually, (and herein lies a peculiarity), returns, a now weary traveller to the same emotional space occupied many years before. There is no suggestion here of a universal journey, one that all must follow, rather the story tells of one journey, a circular journey, other people travel through life, but travel on a trajectory that only they might appreciate and describe.

Before the story begins a final point on style and structure, as the typescript to follow is in regular form and italics. These two fonts depict a story being told from two perspectives; first, from the inside out, that is, me telling you my story as if we (myself and you the reader) were back there in time walking and talking together, this style is presented in normal font. Secondly, I tell segments of the story from the outside looking-in. Here, I act as someone standing gazing back at less well-defined moments these elements are presented in italics. Finally a few points on the personal nature of the story are needed to

avoid any suggestion that the text may somehow propose universal truths on matters such as masculinity. For example, a number of observations are made with regards to coal-miners, observations offered as a consequence of my own experiences, my own up-bringing (within a mining community in the UK). These experiences are brought together in the story in a way that reflects my consequent experiences as I have revisited home and the surrounding areas to meet with friends and family. These latter experiences have brought me increasingly into contact with an ageing population of ex-miners, my Dads friends. The views on miners provided here simply reflect my own views which are informed by my own experiences, experiences built through my own journey, indeed, the story throughout is constructed from personal experience. It is a story for others to reflect upon not a story that attempts to tell any universal truth of miners or any other group, it is one mans story, others will have different tales and so different emphasise to make.

Travel Writer

The top man is all suit and satisfaction, turns out he had been a fan of the team-the team he had just left-so the inter view was a formality and life was about to become very dull. During lunch he would walk out from the third floor offices and gulp-in the traffic fumed air. He felt constantly uneasy, almost dirty and, in the midst of this frustration, he developed a strange compulsion to rub his hands through his thinning hair. He began to run (evenings and weekends). He ran and ran as though he would never stop. He was trapped, in a shirt and tie, in an office, an old dirty office, sitting behind a desk getting lazy surrounded by others sitting behind their desks (eating snacks and getting fat). In tea-breaks, he sat breathing their cigarette smoke. None of this made any sense, his world was stud in turf, foot talking to ball, track-suits and bob hats, sweat, nose dripping sweat. His world was football, always had been, and he needed, somehow, to find a life that brought aspects of this past world back to the here and now.

'There's one place left', the lecturer was a runner I'd spotted that straight away. I had claimed to be a runner on my application form. He really looked like a runner, lean with bright eyes. They glistened like sun on snow; he was a fit bugger, no mistake. He pointed at my application letter, he asked where I ran (roads or country) then he paused .. . 'So, how far do you go out for?', 'about 30 minutes' I said. He said, 'I've just got back from a 3 hour run' I said 'wow' .. . Alright, I'd crept a bit, but I knew I had that one place, it was mine; I was in, and, I was in because I ran. As I was leaving the room, he mentioned the need for me to provide them with an up-to-date medical report on my left knee. He had learned to hate hospitals. The smell made him stammer. He was 19 years old now, yet as he walked through the hospital entrance, he recalled wanting his Mum to be there. That day, the out-patients was packed, row after row of chairs all facing the same way with consultants' names stuck with dirty sello-tape onto pale yellow walls. A tall thin nurse with greasy long black hair stood in front of my consultant's name, the name of the man who had wielded the scalpel that had played a key role in my career; the same man who 18 months earlier, and with a carefree wave of the hand ...

had told me, and Dad, that I should 'Think about doing something else'. He had delivered the line like he had nothing to do with it! It was as though he had never opened me-up, cut bits out of me, but he had. His words killed Dad. A part of him died there and then, the part of him that had, until that second, automatically afforded respect to the educated class. I never really talked about the surgeon much, Dad did though, regularly. His life was digging coal, underground, in the dark, with only his mates to rely on. They worked in gangs, they grafted together, looked-out for one another. After a shift, in the showers, they would scrub the coal-dust out off each others' backs. My memory is of tough men who spoke little. Dad is far from stupid, he knows that things happen. One day, when he was working a new seam, a chain machine, used for carrying the coal away to the surface, stopped working, the face fell silent. A second later a creak-like sound made Dad run away from the face, his mate ran towards it, his mate died, crushed beyond recognition as the roof collapsed. As he has got older, Dad has begun to tell and re-tell that story, and when he does he cries for the man who lost his life, on the same day years ago when he very nearly lost his. Miners care for each other that much I understand, and I now believe that Dad wanted the surgeon to show some sense of care for me; to indicate that he had somehow been in their fighting for me, slicing, sweating, blood stained, cutting out tissue desperate not to cut too little not to cut too much; he wanted him to offer some semblance of regret for my career. But he showed nothing. So Dad, for the best part of 30 years has spat out his name like a gobble of snot.

I went across to a nurse with long black greasy hair, the one stood alongside my consultants' name. She looked at me I tried to say my name and stammered. The nurse seemed startled, as if I was someone long-lost, like I was someone she knew. I tried again and made it, first and second names out. I blurted a bit but at least she knew who I was. I felt myself go hot and red-faced. Her eyes returned to the list of names, she placed a tick against mine. Another nurse walked by and gestured for me to take a seat.

I watched at the nurse, the one with the greasy hair, as she picked up a file. I followed her as she walked to the front and turned to face the waiting patients. She was holding the file in her right hand she looked at it briefly, then, tried to speak. Nothing happened she tried again, still nothing. Her mouth opened, but no sound came. She took a deep breath, now a sound 'Mr' then nothing; then again 'Mr' ... then a letter ... As she fought with this letter I swear I saw it twist in her gullet. I understood her plight, understood the gate-keeping power of a single letter. She allowed herself a few seconds, took several deep breaths. We all waited, a trickle of cold sweat dripped under my armpit. She was so strong; I admired her so much, she wanted that letter out; once out, the rest would follow, that's how it works. Now transfixed, I urged the letter upwards ... 'Get it out' ... a sound broke through her taught (almost blue) lips, the patient's name emerged (a joyful physics). Then, and with a smile, she escorted the patient to the consultant's rooms. I slumped in my chair, exhausted, closed my eyes and went back in time:

Odd how sometimes you can drift in memory to the extent that you hear, almost feel places where you once lived, where you walked and talked. On this day, he did just that ... he could hear the sound of doors opening and closing, children's voices and the sense of people moving en masse from one place to another. He remembered that his friend had noticed his name on the school notice board:

'You're down to read ... in Assembly ... look!'

If there was one thing in life that might instantly strike him down with feelings of fear and panic, then reading in public was it. He sought out the head of year, the man responsible for organising such lists. He found the man, alone in his classroom marking papers. His shaking sweaty hand knocked on the half-open door, he walked in:

'Sir, I'm on the list to read'

'Yes, I know'

'I can't do it Sir'

'They all say that'

'I can't read ... I have this stammer'

'A stammer?'

'Yes'

'I've never noticed! ... look ... take this Bible, go to the back of the room and just read for me'

He did as he was told. He remembers finding a passage of text and began to read ... he quickly jammed on a 'd'. He forced his way past it only to become instantly lost in a familiar maze of P's, G's and D's. It was just hopeless ... he looked up exposed and deflated. He closed the bible and walked towards the teacher who looked-up from his desk, returned his eyes to the book he was marking and said .. .

'You'll be fine'

Indignation is a powerful emotion. It was his first experience of it. He found that, in him, it engendered a need to act. Instinct took him to the staff-room door. He knocked on the door, for the first time in his school-life he knocked on the staff-room door. She answered, she came to the door. An unspoken prayer had been heard, not only heard but registered, processed and approved.

She opened the door a little wider 'Miss' I said, 'I'm on that list'. Her expression raised a question. I needed a champion and without any sense of deliberation, had sought out my English teacher. She had begun to read-out my homework and, in that one act of sensitivity and care, had taken away my fear of ever having to read in class again. We had no pact, no agreement, she just never asked me to read to the class and I understood, with a liberating certainty, that she never would. She stepped outside, closing the staff-room door behind her. She told me to, 'Go home and forget about the list' .. . she told me 'not to worry'. 'Thank-you Miss' I said and, as I turned to walk away, she called after me; 'David you won't read tomorrow' and I knew that would be that.

His turn arrived. The nurse with the long greasy hair walked with him towards the consultant's room, a small space with a couch surrounded by plastic curtains. The next few minutes are hazy in parts. He knows the consultant had peered at him over his glasses and gestured for him to sit. He remembers that he noticed a young woman in the corner, his secretary, his very pretty secretary. The consultant asked about the knee, the knee that he, in

his white coat, had spliced open, the knee he had peered into. 'How had the knee been?' he asked. The consultant asked him to take-off his trousers and lie on the couch and this he did. The consultant's cool hands moved around the knee stopping occasionally then

moving again; he pulled the knee upwards and applied pressure on the lower leg, said something to his secretary then stood-up.

'All seems fine .. .' Not knowing quite what to do I decided to get dressed .. . then he asked me a question, 'What are you going to do now?' 'I'm going to be Physical Education teacher' I said. The consultant turned to his secretary and smiled, a smarmy smile, a patronising smile. She looked back at him, returning his smarmy patronising smile with an extra ingredient, amusement, yes, that was it, she returned an amused smile, a smile that said what a clever man he was and what a stupid-foot- balling-boy I must be, he liked her smile that much I could see. No words ran through my head, no wild emotions tempted me to pin the bastard against the wall (I would want to hit him and hit him hard, but those thoughts came later). Instead, I just slid away in quiet trauma. The bus journey home is hazy in parts he can recall little emotion but, as he stared out through

the window his mind was heavy with thought. The memory is of voices, of recollections, flashbacks, to people and the way they had treated him. Expressionless as if in a trance his head jostled with the twists and turns of the road. Something was telling him that life was not nice anymore. He thought back to his English teacher, then to the surgeon, then to the series of events that led to the end of a career that had never really started; to the coaches and the managers, to the other players he once ran with. Aside from his Mum and Dad, no one had seemed to care and Dad was too caught up in his own grief to help much. He concluded that he was alone and on that day, on the way home he came to understand the world as a dark place. It would be nearly 20 years before he took off the social armour that he had reached for that day, maybe out of fear of the world as he then saw it. One day he dismantled all scaffolding and ceremoniously put it away, a conscious, deliberate, volitional act; the weight of it all had become too much. Tired of fighting whoever and whatever, tired of trying to be tough, of being difficult to be with, of being cold; all ways to make others wary, to stop people from seeing a push-over, a weak person, a stupid person. He had sensed a need to breath deeply once more, to smile, to experience life emotionally, more fully, again. In the years to come, and very much like experiences in my younger days, many would take advantage of this new vulnerability, this openness, moments he always found devastating and (on a few occasions) he struggled to cope with the sadness of it all, a basic disappointment with people his constant melody; but, wiser now, he has come to understand that to 'open-up' means facing pain as well as joy.

And so, some 30 years after that hospital visit, since that 'final-straw' in my early evaluation of the world, I have been re-united with a former self, with innocence, which, like the sporting crises, had never really gone away.

Discussion and concluding thoughts

From the onset it is (maybe) worthwhile reminding readers that the case for the auto-ethnographical genre as a means to encourage and produce critical debate in sport has been well made (see Spry, 2001; Sparkes, 2002). We also note it to be just one genre of writing that might achieve such ends. Moreover, as the impact of auto-ethnographic writing is dependent on reader appreciation and engagement, we accept that the literary qualities of auto-ethnography may not always manage to convince. As author's

and consumers of auto-ethnography we accept our place to be limited in terms of the scope and scale of writing approaches and in terms of how some readers may remain unmoved by a structure and content of any particular story. That said, we are, in our lowest moments, troubled by the constant accusations of self-indulgence and (lack of wider) relevance that continue to appear in many social-scientific circles. So, how, in this discussion might we revisit these themes and so re-ignite our case for the storied self within the framework of applied pedagogy?

We begin by emphasising that reflective tales (such as the auto-ethnographic short story presented here), are, in fact, social stories. They tell of a culture through characters, characters that move, that engage, that feel pain and joy as they travel through any given plot, one that is often littered with evocative flashbacks and challenging sentiments. Their target is (or should be) social critique; to give us an enhanced sense of the different stories we, and those connected to us, tell, so as to increase the sense of possibilities within our constructed life contexts (Frank, 2001). Auto-ethnographies, we have argued earlier, also hold the capacity to problematise what might otherwise be accepted, and so can serve to contest grand narratives through the exploration of mundane everyday knowledge; the 'non-logical logics' which often guide social action (Gardiner, 2000). In this way, we hope the story challenges, through its direct appeal to the hidden multi-layered everydayness of life, the contextual jig-saw of experience.

When laid open to discussion and critique, say, in a pedagogy situation (a postgraduate seminar for example) we believe that auto-ethnographical tales have the capacity to generate insightful and un-asked questions about practice and so, to ask 'why we behave as we do?' (Jones, 2009). Indeed, we could have begun and concluded this section with one word, 'discuss', but understand that might be viewed as brash, however, this should not detract from our central case which argues for the potential of stories to energise and engender critical discussion.

For some, the capacity of stories to inform has been related to the way personal stories often exist at the junctures of critical methodology, interpretive theory and social structure (Denison & Markula, 2003). The writing of such accounts then, often becomes a socio-political act (Denzin, 2003) and, at times, a volitional and deliberate process of challenge, a challenge that might emancipate others (authors and readers) from the boundaries of what they already have been 'told' to know. To our mind, texts that offer such possibilities are central to the process of scholarly endeavour and to the processes of critical social science (discussed earlier).

In 'Travel Writer' lives collide in unpredictable ways, with actions having unintended, yet far reaching, consequences. So, understanding the present through references to the nuances and subtlety to be found in everyday life, (both past and contemporary), acts to highlight the futility of attempts at divorcing ourselves from our inevitable social interconnectedness and dependence; in ways, we feel, that is often suggested by many of the grand social theories that litter our sports curricular.

The story presented here is, in part, also testimony to the unfolding genre of complex relatedness. According to Ely et al. (1997, p. 59), 'form shapes meaning' and although many literary forms exist, a decision as to which to use might be driven by the question of meaning; 'to make ongoing meaning for ourselves and to communicate that meaning with people in order to involve them in thinking about and living our research experience' (Ely et al., 1997, p. 59). The chosen method of representation here could be

initially defined in a variety of ways; as vignettes, short stories or layered text, among others. Focussing on the paper's intended purpose and meaning, labelling the form became less important than what the form in itself might achieve. I, as the first author, determined to write a series of interlinked-stories which, and although not in chronological order, represented an unfolding tale of a particular sporting life. As an author team, we propose that this particular example of writing is, however, best seen as a short, multi-layered story and as rhetorical device that might reasonably convey the aspirations and issues that we have described in our introduction. The question then becomes why did we come to such a conclusion?

According to Ely et al. (1997), this issue of representation surprisingly vexed the pioneering psychologist Sigmund Freud; so much so, that he apparently 'followed where his intuition led him'; that the 'nature of the subject became more telling than any of his [existing representative] preferences' (p. 62). Quite how this uncertainty was reflected in his subsequent work is an issue for debate. The point here, however, is that we experienced a similar process in grappling with how to best illustrate the grittiness of the everyday story we wanted to tell. Taking a lead from Ely et al. (1997) and thus foregoing any claim to righteous originality, we believe the story housed within this paper borrows from a variety of literary forms. For example, from anecdotes; where a 'nugget of meaning' may be initially more in the body than the mind: a 'faint hint that something in the incident is important' (Ely et al., 1997, p.

65). We have sought to explore how the unlikely and seemingly unconnected might contribute to the essence of a life story. Through anecdotes then, we make comprehensible some previously elusive issue (Van Maanen, 1990). Anecdotes also give rise to doubts; such as, what pressures make people act and think in that way? Why do we subject others to less caring interactions? Why do some things stay and gestate in the memory, while others are lost? Such questions, which, we hope the story presented encourages us to consider, also lie at the core of social critique.

We additionally borrow from vignettes (and the tenets of wider fictional literature) to present the above tale in a way that invites others to 'step into the space of vicarious experience' (Ely et al., 1997, p. 72). The purpose here is to assist broader understanding; to put life experience into richer context; to create portraits through condensing and compiling (Ely et al., 1997); to show the social through the personal. In this respect, vignettes may have multiple sections characterised by a flow of events over time exposing an unfolding character. Finally, we also draw on layered stories. Such stories rely on 'fragments of information, splintered remembrances and ruptures of logic as various explanations are juxtaposed' to suggest why an event occurred (Ely et al., 1997, p. 79). They also have the capacity to demonstrate the social construction of life, of the relation of one personal self to another; focusing on an individual's creative interpretation of experience. Above all, however, the multi-layered auto-ethnographic story presented here represents a critique of social life; of who we become from our richly constructed experiences. The story, laid bare, might defy an unproblematic reading, one reader seeing one issue another reader seeing something different. In that regard, things are never what they appear; events and people are inherently connected in the social milieu, and to each individual's own experiences. Such perspectives, however unsettling to the broader scientific community, do render a challenge to the comfort of meta-narratives that presently exist in the more specific field domain of applied sport texts (such as the social cognitive theories that seem so

readily to explain why we do what we do). And so, as authors, we might wonder about transition, wonder if (whilst in transition) we are led to believe that we travel on a clear trajectory, or at least in a single line away from something and towards something else; travelling along a line, that stretches inexorably further and further away from some point of crisis. In this way of thinking a crisis, even one that might require profound adjustment, might be viewed as one that dissipates as one moves further away from it (in time maybe); and, that's quite a neat perspective, where some comfort and a good deal of logic can be found. However, when, as in 'Travel Writer', readers are invited to view the notion of crisis, and transition in more messy, lifelong, multi-layered, multi-contextualised and, maybe, in more circular and haunting terms, a challenge of sorts is laid down, critical social science is enacted and critical debate can begin. What that might mean for practice seems a sensible question to ponder and may be a point for discussion with those who, presently, or, in the future, hope to practice and support people in their social context.

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