

Researching up and across in physical education and sport pedagogy: Methodological lessons learned from an intergenerational narrative inquiry

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Abstract

Of issue in this paper are the ways in which different forms of narrative may be of value in undertaking research in potentially thorny situations. The project that inspired this paper saw 30 Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy (PESP) Early Career Academics (ECAs) from more than 20 universities across Australasia, North America and Europe, provide narrative accounts of their ongoing academic experiences. From these stories, three letters seeking advice and guidance from leaders in the field were constructed. Following further feedback from the ECAs, the three letters were sent to 11 professors in the PESP field with a request to respond, also in letter form. The composite letters and the professorial responses were then the subject of a symposium at an international PESP conference. While the larger project engages with questions of being and becoming an academic in the neoliberal university, this paper is primarily concerned with methodological issues, including our concerns about steps and missteps with narrative, inquiry and the field. More specifically, the focus is on narrative as both the method and phenomena of study. As such, we consider issues associated with using dialogue as data, the provocation of participants, as well as both the presentation and representation of data and the relative power of the participants. In doing so, we critically engage with issues of anonymity (or lack thereof), the practice of 'researching up' and finally reach the conclusion that the careful approach to data generation, treatment and presentation necessitated by this project, should be a more regular feature of all qualitative inquiry.

Keywords: *narrative research; researching up; research methodology; sport pedagogy, universities; academic career; early career researchers*

Introduction

Academia has been characterised as an increasingly competitive, complex and unstable workplace, driven by a range of neoliberal influences and agendas (Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2002; Metzler, 1994; Shore, 2010). In recent decades, and related to these shifts, there has been an increased level of concern expressed by, and for, those new to the academy (e.g., Bazeley, 2003; Bazeley et al., 1996). A variety of reasons have been posited for why Early Career Academics (ECAs hereafter) are a strategically important group worthy of attention and support. Foremost amongst these, however, seems to be that neophyte academics are considered to be the most vulnerable in the system and therefore the first to feel, and the least able to cope with, the additional stresses and pressures (Laudel & Gläser, 2008) associated with the neoliberal university (Ball, 2012; Sparkes, 2007). There have been multiple calls in the wider higher education literature for greater empirical attention to be paid to understanding how ECAs, and indeed all academics, produce, negotiate and resist neoliberal discourses (Dowling, 2008; Giroux, 2002; Hatcher, Meadmore & McWilliam, 1999; Kirk, 2014; Shore, 2010; White, 2004). There is a small but growing body of literature about becoming and being an academic in the physical education and sport pedagogy (PESP) field of inquiry (e.g., Casey & Fletcher, 2012; Dodds, 2005; Sirna, Tinning, & Rossi, 2008; Williamson, 1993). Similar to the wider literature, much of this PESP scholarship arrives at the conclusion that more needs to be known about the process of becoming an academic in the PESP field of inquiry and, therefore, more empirical work is necessary. Moreover, numerous scholars have suggested that narrative inquiry is a particularly generative methodology to support the construction and interpretation of this kind of knowledge (Dowling & Flintoff, 2011; Sparkes, 2007). There is little consideration given, however, to the methodological implications of researching up, down and across within one's own field of inquiry. Accordingly, of issue in this paper are the ways in which different forms of narrative may be of value in understanding the experiences of PESP academics in the neoliberal university, and the challenges of engaging in intergenerational dialogue and research in one's own field of inquiry.

Why generate discussions in the PESP field?

It is argued by those within and beyond our field that notions of collegiality and collaboration are potentially threatened in neoliberal times where individualism and individual accountability pervade contemporary universities (Dowling, 2008; Giroux, 2005; Kirk, 2014; Steck, 2003).

Numerous scholars also contend, however, that the hegemony of corporatisation can be challenged through first, recognising that many opportunities for care, collaboration and trust to flourish remain (Dowling, 2008), and second, creating collegial spaces and relationships where collective rather than individual identities are supported (Dowling, 2008; Kirk, 2014). The study at the heart of this paper, and indeed the special issue in which this paper is published are both efforts to create such a collegial space. Of interest in this paper, are methodological implications of trying to understand the experiences of being and becoming a PESP academic in contemporary neoliberal universities through narrative inquiry. In pursuing this interest, we are responding to suggestions from researchers such as Dowling and Flintoff (2011) and Sparkes (2007) regarding the potential of narrative inquiry as a generative methodology for exploring and (re)presenting such struggles.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative has an emerging history in research broadly and the social sciences and educational research in particular (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Indeed, for more than two decades narrative inquiry has gained considerable momentum as a versatile research methodology with generative capacity across a range of disciplines (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster & Mertova, 2007). It must be acknowledged, however, that almost all theory and practice associated with narrative inquiry is still highly contested and any research incorporating associated methods should be clear about how the work is conducted (Coulter & Smith, 2009). Irrespective of contestations, narratives are considered to be fundamental to human understanding and therefore

critical to how people make sense of themselves and their lives. (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Ylijoki, 2005). It is on this basis that the increasing legitimacy and primacy of this form of work is premised. What is generally accepted is that narrative analysis studies (Polkinghorne, 1995) rely on stories as a way of knowing and that these are artistically and rigorously framed and rendered (Clandinin, 2006; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995).

There are a number of specific features that made a narrative approach highly appealing to us as investigators who were seeking to support intergenerational dialogue in the academy. With specific reference to research in higher education, it has been proposed that the significance of narrative is its ability to foreground personal stories (Jones, 2011). Of fundamental value in the context of the study that has stimulated this paper is that narrative offers the potential to explore both academic context and practice as well as capture personal and contextual dimensions of lived experience. These aspects are crucial in attempting to understand the development of academic careers (Hatcher, Meadmore, & McWilliam, 1999; Jones, 2011) and the experiences of ECAs more specifically (Bazeley, 2003; Kirk, 2014). Further, narrative enables researchers to incorporate the stories of a number of individuals while ‘keeping the individual’s experience intact’ (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015, p. 3). Another key aspect is the potential for narrative forms to allow researchers to capture, recognise and seek response to emotion. While a variety of other approaches adopt dispassionate orientations, narratives are capable of capturing the centrality of emotions in the lived experience (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Murnighan, 1996; Patton, 2002). Finally, and of potentially greatest importance, narrative has the potential to create interpretive space (Barone, 2001). In conveying lived experiences and challenging tacit assumptions, narrative approaches promote the possibility of multiple interpretations by multiple readers (Coulter & Smith, 2009). This interpretive space was felt to be important in generating and sustaining discussions in the PESP field.

How we generated discussions in the PESP field

In addition to leveraging the narrative aspects considered above, we also sought to incorporate a more traditional narrative form into this research – letter writing. More specifically, we took our lead from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* (1984). Rilke, a well-known Austrian poet, corresponded via letters with an aspiring poet by the name of Franz Xaver Kappus during the early 1900s. Kappus initially wrote to Rilke seeking career advice and feedback on the quality of his poetry. The ensuing correspondence amounted to 10 letters from Rilke that Kappus subsequently published in 1929 (and these were translated into English in the 1984 text). Inspired by Rilke’s efforts, and making use of contemporary notions of narrative and the connections possible through modern technology, we conceived a study that would create a dialogue between PESP ECAs and the PESP professoriate.

In our project, PESP ECAs from across the world provided narrative accounts of their ongoing academic experiences. From these stories, three letters seeking advice and guidance from leaders in the field were constructed and assigned fictional authors. Following further feedback from the ECAs, the three letters were sent to 11 professors in the PESP field with a request to respond in letter form. The composite letters and the professorial responses were then the subject of a symposium discussion at an international PESP conference. These aspects are considered in more detail in the sections that follow.

Letters from the ECAs

We first took the decision that as ECAs, we would include ourselves in the cohort. Various forms of participatory qualitative research are now well-accepted in the empirical literature (Blodgett et al., 2014; Casey & Fletcher, 2012; Hannan, 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Many of the regular features of participatory research such as research leading to action, empowerment of the research group, fostering mutual learning, development of a shared process and the provision of locally accessible and usable findings (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; James, 2007; Seymour, 2001) fit well with the aims of our project. However, as we will note later in this paper, this

approach was not without ethical, logistical and intellectual issues (Priyadharshini, 2003; Wisniewski, 2000).

We engaged the ECA participants through a combination of purposive, emergent and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). To qualify for entry into the study, ECAs had to firstly have been awarded their PhD in the field of PESP, and secondly have had it conferred no more than 8 years ago. We began by contacting all of the ECAs that we knew through our various networks (e.g., university contacts, PESP discussion groups, online forums) and asked our contacts to pass on the invitation to be involved to any other ECAs that they knew. Once the ECAs had signalled their interest in contributing to the study they were contacted via email and asked to offer their informed consent (under the condition of anonymity) and, if willing, to provide some demographical information (e.g., the year they were awarded their PhD, the nature of their current academic role) and a narrative.

Regarding their narrative contribution, the ECAs were given the option to write freely about the joys and challenges of their work, their ambitions, their perspective on the PESP field and their place in it and pose any questions that they may have for PESP professors. While we encouraged them to offer stories and anecdotes, they were also afforded the option of providing shorter and more 'bulleted' accounts. The contributions we received were typically 1-2 pages in length and were either sent as email text or as a word document attachment. We received these contributions from 29 ECA participants (from an original group of more than 40).

We then embarked upon the complicated task of considering the individual ECA contributions with the aim of crafting a composite letter to be sent to the professors. This occurred in two stages: a first examination where we debated themes and storylines until consensus was reached amongst the research team (i.e., adopted a gestalt position), and a second layer of narrative analysis that was more content-oriented (i.e., hierarchical content analysis). In undertaking the first stage of narrative analysis, each member of the research team familiarised themselves with the ECA narratives by reading through them several times and sought to identify what they viewed as dominant themes (e.g., storylines or elements that were common across the group), contradictory cases (e.g., individual and institution-specific examples) and interesting stories (e.g., inspirational perspectives, cries for

help, whinges). We then met and discussed our various points in relation to the multiple dimensions of narrative including characters, audience, setting, causal relationships, events and themes (Davis, 2008). At regular intervals, the group would seek to clarify, challenge and re-assess the suggestions of each researcher. The final result was an agreed collection of themes and elements. The second round of narrative analysis took place at a later stage (after the conference symposium described later) and resembled a typical content analysis (Patton, 2002). The purpose of this further analysis was to add additional rigor to the study (in readiness for publication) and provide a slightly different way of working with the data generated. The specific findings of this analysis are dealt with elsewhere (see Alfrey, Enright, & Rynne, this edition).

During the initial process, it became clear that it would be impossible to capture the range of experiences of the ECA group in one composite letter if we were to maintain the storied nature of narrative through a depiction of actions, emotions and outcomes in temporal sequence (Jones, 2011). Also as previously noted, and as explained further elsewhere (see Alfrey et al., this edition), we sought to give due consideration to the multiple dimensions of narrative (Davis, 2008). Moreover, the choice to develop more than one composite letter connects with the literary elements of ‘point of view’ (related to sensibilities and emotions of the characters) and ‘person’ (related to who tells the story; e.g., narrator, fictitious character, factitious character, author) (Coulter & Smith, 2009) whereby we sought more than one lens through which the narrative was offered. For these reasons we chose to construct three separate, but overlapping narratives: told by Molly, Emily and Jason.

As a result, by composing three letters we were better able to present consistent themes as well as highlight the differences amongst the group. We were keen to avoid the production of ECA caricatures that had little resemblance to the ECAs’ actual experiences. For this reason, we sought to make use of slightly paraphrased and even direct quotes from the ECA contributions in the letters developed for Molly, Emily and Jason. Given their origins and content, these composite letters could be considered to be ‘factitious’ in that they are ‘shaped by both subjectivity and phenomenal ‘facts’ (Hartsock, 1999, p.442).

The final component in the development of the composite letters from Molly, Emily and Jason was seeking feedback from the ECA group. We sent all three letters to every ECA in our original group with a request for honest feedback and further suggestions. Approximately half of the group responded in some form and the composites were adjusted accordingly.

Letters from the Professors

The second stage of recruitment in this project involved contacting PESP professors. We acknowledge that there are a number of assumptions involved in recruiting professors as 'leaders in the field'. However, we take the view that in a relatively new field like PESP, those who have risen to the rank of professor have, at the very least, demonstrated some capacity to successfully negotiate the PESP field and in most cases, a variety of tertiary institutions. In any case, it is common in a variety of fields for neophyte workers to seek out guidance from those in higher positions (Billett, 1994, 2003). Most importantly, having ECAs approach professors for advice and guidance in our study was very much in keeping with Kappus' approaches to Rilke (1984) and as such we felt it to be a fitting design.

Like the ECAs, the professoriate were engaged through a combination of purposive (i.e., prominent professors in the PESP field), emergent (i.e., through our professional networks) and snowball (i.e., professors were asked for further suggestions) sampling (Patton, 2002). As per the ethical clearance conditions and as noted on the information and signed consent forms, unlike the ECA contributions, the professorial responses were not anonymous. We have, however, chosen not to name the professors in the papers that have emerged from the study in order to maintain the focus on the data generated in the context of this study and our methodological steps and missteps. Instead, we have allocated pseudonyms and have indicated the country of current employment.

Consenting professors were sent the three composite letters from Molly, Emily and Jason and were asked to respond also in letter form. Of the 12 professors that were contacted, 11 (5 female, 6 male), from six different countries responded to our composite letters within the agreed timeframe.

The professors were instructed that they could respond to the composite letters in any way they saw fit. The responses were generally between three and six pages in length, varied in form from all prose to some that made use of headings and sub-headings, and tended to be in relation to broad themes and the overall sense they gained from the letters. All letters (i.e., the composites and professorial responses) were then made available to all participants (i.e., all ECAs and all of the professoriate).

The international symposium

As a way of furthering the intergenerational dialogue commenced in this project, and as a final data collection event, we sought to engage with the PESP community through the presentation of a symposium at an international PESP conference (AIESEP, 2014). In addition to all participants having access to the materials as part of their involvement, we sought to disseminate a portfolio containing the three composite letters and 11 professorial responses to individuals we knew would be in attendance at the conference. Portfolios were also made available at the conference in the lead up to the symposium and the letters were published on the walls of the symposium venue. The symposium commenced with an introduction to the project that included a brief role play from Molly, Emily and Jason, a reminder to the audience that these were ‘factitious’ accounts, a brief summary of the method and the presentation of some data. The remainder of the session (a little over an hour) was then dedicated to collegial discussion and debate between the six professors in attendance, the presenters and the rest of the audience.

As per the ethical clearance protocols, attendees were reminded that the discussion was to be recorded and would form part of the data in this study. Again, the key outcomes of this session are dealt with elsewhere (see Enright, Rynne & Alfrey, this edition) but at issue in this paper is the ‘space’ created for emotion, debate and intergenerational conversations through the development of composite letters and the invitation of professorial responses.

Meanings and complexity in generating dialogue

Having outlined all of the ways in which data were generated in this study, in the remainder of the paper we provide an account of what we consider to be some important issues regarding the conduct of this project and the methodological approach employed. In doing so, we seek to discuss the use of dialogue as data, using letters as provocation to generate dialogue (with ECAs and professors) and the issues of presentation and representation in generating and sharing the dialogue. We conclude with the contention that these issues go beyond the conduct of our project and have relevance to all qualitative approaches.

Dialogue as data

In keeping with the nascent conventions of narrative inquiry, this work embraced narrative as both the method and phenomena of study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). As such, when we composed the three ‘factitious’ accounts from the experiences of the many ECA participants and when we collected professorial responses to these accounts, we viewed these as simultaneous data collection and data analysis events. Similarly, the gathering of initial ECA narratives and the multiple opportunities for feedback provided to all participants (inclusive of the symposium event) were also deemed to be important data collection and analysis events. In this way, these events are vital opportunities for others to tell of their experiences and for us to both reflect on our own experiences and how we had represented the ‘storied lives’ (Riessman, 1993) of others.

As alluded to earlier, what must be acknowledged, however, is the underlying assumption that this entire project is founded on – be it in written or verbal form – dialogue can reasonably be viewed and treated as useful data. Like others (e.g., Clandinin, 2006; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008), we take the view that social interactions are central to learning and as such, we can foster and examine learning through dialogue. There are a variety of alternative views that seek to problematise this assumption that are worth acknowledging. For example, Draper and Anderson (1991) note a major philosophical caution that leads to methodological issues for researchers seeking to analyse dialogue, that is, ‘how can we be sure that what we understand by what a person says

corresponds in any direct or simple way with what was actually meant?’ (p. 95). Their subsequent suggestion is that the relationship between the adjudged content of dialogue and what is learned or believed by the participants is an indirect one (Draper & Anderson, 1991). That is not to say, however, that the relationship is worthless. An example from our project is instructive here.

Because of the letter format, the professors had ample opportunity to consider their written responses. This realisation serves to prompt a consideration of the view of the ‘self’ in modernity as a reflexive project maintained through the construction of narratives (Giddens, 1991) and in this case, developed through activities that enhance the narrative (James, 2007). In our study, the participants had the opportunity to write and re-write their narratives before submitting them. James (2007) notes that this process of revision and reflection can mean that what is finally read may not entirely reflect the thoughts of the participants. The potential implication for us is that the narratives may have been less authentic as a consequence and that this time spent reflecting may have resulted in a more ‘sanitised’ version from the professors. Indeed, the admission of one of the professors in the symposium that ‘yes I did temper the response’ (Sarah, Australia) is indicative of this.

This does not mean that the professorial responses then lose their value. Draper and Anderson (1991) suggest that reasonable certainty regarding the meaning of dialogue can be achieved through careful selection of approach (e.g., our careful selection of letter format, composite construction and probes and symposium facilitation) and the involvement of multiple perspectives to foster constructive interaction (e.g., our construction of three composites, seeking feedback from all ECAs on more than one occasion, and our regular reflections as a research team). While we would never claim certainty regarding our interpretations of the professorial responses, as a result of various decisions we made, we do have some degree of confidence in the data generated and the interpretations arrived at.

Provocation of the ECA letters

The composite ECA letters were seemingly effective in provoking professoriate responses in both letter form and during the symposium. For some, there was a sense that the format (i.e., letters as narrative) facilitated conversations that did not typically occur in the PESP field and academia more broadly. For example one of the audience members in the symposium said:

I was thinking when I was reading them, people - my colleagues right now don't usually complain, people ask you how you're going, you say, "yep fantastic", "busy but fantastic", "loving it". Private call for help you could read in those letters by saying, "hey you know what, we're loving it [but] it's almost not sustainable. How do I keep this up for the next 10, 20, 30 years?" Maybe it's a bit alarming. (Audience member, Australia)

Beyond the creation of this 'conversational space', the ECA narratives clearly stimulated emotional responses. For example, when we opened the symposium discussion by asking about their initial response upon reading the letters, two of the professors started:

When I read the letters, [I was] a little sad ... that was my first emotional response to the letter. (Lars, Sweden)

Yes, I think when I read the letters first, I felt very sad. I wondered about what we were doing to our early career academics that they would feel like that. (Sinead, Ireland)

The capacity of the ECA letters to generate nostalgic and provocative discussions was also evidenced on a number of occasions throughout the symposium. For example, early on in the discussions one of the professors offered this:

My first feeling was that the letters seem to me to be based on a totally unrealistic view of what a university actually is. I thought there was a slightly romantic view of what a university could or should [be] or you wished it was. But I thought it was slightly unrealistic, because I don't think universities are those places, and probably haven't been for some time. I don't know if they ever were. (Rebecca, UK)

At this point it is worth reinforcing that the nature of the content and themes contained in the letters is dealt with elsewhere (see Alfrey et al., this edition). However, suffice to highlight here that

the comments and advice provoked by the ECA letters included reflections on institutional fit (e.g., ‘you may well be happier in a different workplace doing something else with your research’ Sarah, Australia), the growing PESP community (e.g., ‘there’s a huge community. Thirty years ago that just didn’t exist’ Kate, Australia) and the neoliberal university and higher education context more broadly (e.g., ‘I think things will intensify further actually ... we’re going to have to do more with less’ Rebecca; UK). The professorial letters were also provocative.

Provocation of the Professors’ Letters

To facilitate dialogue in addition to their original contributions, the professorial responses were sent out to all ECA contributors. The response was somewhat mixed. For the majority of ECAs, there were feelings of joy and gratitude in relation to how the professors had responded and for the process more broadly:

I really love this project of yours, and I probably don’t need to tell you what letter resonated with me most?? I love her work. It’s now pinned to the board next to my computer as inspiration. (Female ECA, USA)

Others, however, were left feeling disappointed with the nature and content of the professorial letters:

How is it that these critical scholars don’t turn their critical eyes on themselves and the universities they work in? I expected more resistance and critique of the system, rather than telling us to fall in line. (Female ECA, Australia)

While we had certainly hoped it would be the case based on previous research (e.g., Coulter & Smith, 2009; Hatcher et al., 1999; Jones, 2011; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2015; Neumann, 2006) and our resulting methodological choices, of great interest to us was the degree of interaction and the emotional reactions generated through the ECA contributions, the ECA reflections on the composite letters and the ECA responses to the professorial letters. It is worthwhile spending a little more time now on our steps and potential missteps with narrative and the field.

Presentation and representation in generating dialogue

Developing the composite letters. As alluded to in a variety of instances already, a key concern for us regarding the entire study was representation. We have taken responsibility for representing the stories of the ECAs and this meant representing a diversity of experiences and opinions of our peers. This was no easy task considering the group was not some small, well-bounded, homogenous and integrated entity (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). As a result, the relationship between writers (us as researchers), characters (Molly, Emily and Jason) and readers (the other ECAs, the professors and you) is complex and contentious (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

While presenting any research in written form requires authors to make careful decisions about how findings (and data more specifically) are represented, many argue that narrative requires a higher level of vigilance and attentiveness. For example, it has been suggested (Barone, 2001) that researchers making use of narrative must frequently make important literary decisions that achieve a kind of representativeness. In negotiating our multiple interests and obligations, we sought to create composite ECA letters (and therefore composite characters/ECA identities) by experimenting with different tones, voices, data excerpts and so on to ensure our representations were aligned ‘with the evidence and represented the experience of the participants with fidelity and respect’ (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 578). Similarly, we tried to reflect the dominant themes constructed from the ECA narratives, the biographies of the ECAs who shared particular challenges and joys, and various ways in which the ECA participants expressed themselves in the composite letters. While we appreciated that our three short letters would never be truly representative of our eclectic and complex group of participants, that did not stop us working towards such representativeness.

Therefore, the feedback from the ECAs regarding the representativeness of the composite letters really mattered to us. As noted earlier, the majority of feedback from the ECAs was extremely positive. Below are some direct quotes from emails we received:

Wow... You have done an amazing job with these! The majority of the content of all three of these letters could come from the thoughts inside my head on any given day, but I only wish I could present my ideas as clearly as these letters. Awesome job! (Female ECA, UK)

They are fabulous. It is so nice to read something that suggests I am not alone in my thoughts and frustrations – and I actually feel that you've been able to articulate many of my feelings much better than I have been able to myself. I hope this project is as well received by the eminent as I'm sure it will be by the ECR cohort (Male ECA, Australia)

However, there were also a couple of ECAs who were a little surprised or troubled by the letters. For example:

The two women sound more insecure than I would expect. Seriously though, after reading these I am a little apprehensive about positioning myself as an ECA. Were they (we?) really this 'bad'? It is one thing to ask some questions of experienced scholars [but] couldn't we do it without making ourselves sound like complete novices or game players? (Male ECA, Sweden)

There was one ECA who felt a little too exposed by one of the letters and one ECA who did not feel represented in any of the letters at all (despite a number of sections being paraphrased or taken directly from their original contribution). All three of these concerns raised relate to the notions of representation (Sparkes, 1992) and professional identity (Hatcher et al., 1999) in some way. In two cases it was about not feeling sufficiently represented (or at least represented in the right way) and in the other it was about being too identifiable in the ECA representations. This is where researcher selectivity and the issue of anonymity intersect (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 1998).

Feedback from the ECAs gave us cause for focused reflection regarding selectivity of quotes and our representations of the ECA experiences in the composite letters. For example, after being challenged by an ECA colleague who felt she had not been represented at all in the letters, we re-examined her submission and our composites to check for alignment. It was at this stage we were able

to identify how a number of themes present in her original narrative submission were indeed present in the composite letters, but we also realised that because of various decisions we had made about the construction of the three characters, she did not identify strongly with any of composite characters. Again, this realisation prompted us to seriously consider our representational decisions, the casual relationships we embedded in the various composite letters, and how our intervention (specifically our distillation of the data into three composite letters) fundamentally altered the messages some of the ECAs had tried to communicate through their initial narratives. The construction of the composites was, however, only one of the many instancing examples of the ongoing tensions for us around the presentation and representation of data in our study. The conditions of anonymity in this study raised a host of additional concerns for us.

The impact of anonymity or lack thereof. The ECAs knew they were writing anonymously for PESP professors but were also aware that the research team (i.e., their ECA colleagues) would read their original contributions. As is typical in most research projects, the aim of anonymising the ECAs was to foster open and honest responses that could be offered without fear of reprisal and without promise of favourable treatment (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Neuman, 2000; Patton, 2002). But given the relatively small size of the PESP field and the specific career stage(s) that the ECAs find themselves in, perhaps there was a greater opportunity than in other research situations to vent or have an axe to grind. Alternatively, perhaps like the professors, who sought to temper their responses knowing the audience and knowing that their comments would be attributable to them, the ECAs moderated their own responses knowing that they were going to be viewed and discussed by other ECA colleagues (i.e., the researchers)? This line of questioning engages with notions of self-presentation bias or social desirability bias whereby participants may provide modified contributions so that they may maintain or improve their reputation or self-esteem (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Locke, 1989; Neuman, 2000; Patton, 2002).

It was not just the ECAs for whom the issue of anonymity was a serious consideration. In contrast to the ECA group, the professors were invited to take part in this study as identifiable participants, raising a number of issues related to self-representation / presentation. When participants

are clearly identifiable, self-presentation bias tends to become more prevalent. These forms of bias often occur where individuals feel threatened by their responses to questions and especially in situations where their responses may reflect negatively on them or if their responses are likely to be counter to the expectations or values of others in their communities (Schaeffer, 2000). This brings us to an interesting question – are the professors in this study powerful or vulnerable? Next in this paper we consider our role in ‘researching up’ whereby we position the professors as elites in the field of physical education and sport pedagogy. However, as Priyadsharshini (2003) cautions, there is danger in ‘underplaying the contradictions and fractures’ in the positioning of subjects and participants (p. 429). It is possible then that the professoriate was both powerful and vulnerable in this particular project.

Researching up. One of the most appealing elements of narratives is their ability to capture and reveal powerful social hierarchies (Ylijoki, 2005). Universities are replete with explicit and implicit hierarchies and the field of PESP is similarly structured with a variety of prevailing arrangements. The most obvious of these is the academic hierarchy. While these vary somewhat between countries and institutions, the almost universal apex position is that of professor. Professors, therefore, can be considered as occupying positions of power.

There have numerous calls by a growing number of qualitative researchers for methodological approaches that might be generative with regard to researching people in positions of power and authority (Smith, 2006). Researching up (also known as ‘studying up’ and ‘studying elites’) is the practice of researching privileged populations (Hertz & Imber, 1995; Kezar, 2003). In the attempt to foster intergenerational dialogue, this project incorporated design features (i.e., seeking professorial responses and involvement in the symposium discussion) allowing us to ‘research up’. Interestingly, however, given that the professors were identified and their contributions to the study would be commented upon and critiqued not only by the research team but also by a variety of other scholars in the field, it could be reasonably argued that the professors were vulnerable at different points in the research process, despite their relative positions of power.

Indeed, it has been argued that while some of the concerns are the same whether researching up or down, involving elites in the research is said to present different sorts of issues for researchers at every stage of the process (Smith, 2006). Interestingly, these tend to relate more to the researchers than to the 'elites'. For example, there are previously identified barriers in even formulating projects that seek to research up. The suggestion is that educationalists tend to study outside rather than within and that this may have to do with the unspoken sensitivities of researchers, that is, there are (generally unspoken and even unacknowledged) fears about embarrassing the self and the academy (Priyadharshini, 2003; Wisniewski, 2000). There are certainly potential dangers to an ECA's career in critiquing the practices or perspectives of the powerful in their field.

It became clear during the course of this research that we three researchers had been placed / had placed ourselves in some complicated, difficult and somewhat compromised positions. To re-emphasise, each of us contributed our own narrative to the project, we were all involved in the recruitment of other ECAs and the professors (making us identifiable to all), as a group we dealt with these data, we then each crafted a composite letter, facilitated an international symposium on the topic and are now involved in editing a special issue on the central topic. As a result, our research team discussed a variety of potential issues. The conclusion we reached was that the potential and far-reaching benefits of engaging in a study of this nature made taking the associated risks worthwhile.

For example, others have considered gaining access to elites as the most significant issue in researching up (Priyadharshini, 2003; Smith, 2006). However, in our work we experienced very little difficulty and, on the contrary, found the professoriate to be extremely generous with their involvement. While there are conceivably a variety of reasons for this, we believe that the letter writing format was a simple, familiar and relatively non-threatening way in which they could be involved. However, there are a variety of other, potentially thorny issues that remain relatively obscured or somewhat unresolved. For example, the research team discussed serious concerns related to matters such as compromised blind peer review, offending unintentionally omitted professors, challenge of local power relations and impact on future career prospects and current relationships if our interpretations were not appreciated by the professors and so on. However, we were, and are,

highly cognisant of previous research arguing that elites are 'better equipped to protect themselves and are better positioned to manipulate research results and dissemination' (Smith, 2006, p. 644).. Having said that, we, like others (e.g., Priyadharshini, 2003), accept that we have adopted a strategic role in negotiating the terms of the research, not only with the researched but also with the wider research community and even ourselves.

Conclusion

The narrative approach adopted, and the inherent construction and re-construction of the letters, was found to be highly generative in coming to understand the experiences of ECAs and the process of learning to be an academic. However, as noted at several points in this paper this approach was not without tensions. For example, concerns were raised regarding a range of ethical dimensions associated with the collection, interpretation, presentation and representation of the data. Researching up and across in one's own field is always going to be a tricky process as it holds one accountable in ways that researching 'others' does not; it forces you to seriously consider the personal risks and benefits associated with your inquiry. Despite these (and other) issues, we contend that the project we constructed, lived and represent here was a worthwhile endeavour. It has provided us with serious methodological 'food for thought', and allowed us to arrive at some suggestive rather than conclusive ideas about researching up and across in one's own field, and the potential challenges and benefits associated with narrative inquiry.

We are more aware than ever of our own 'methodological immaturity', and have as a result of this project become astutely aware of our positionality and the variety of tensions we should be recognising, articulating and negotiating no matter which 'direction' we are researching. Indeed, we contend that our apprehension as researchers and careful treatment of these data in this case (where we potentially know all participants and will continue to share professional space) is healthy and should characterise our approach to all our research endeavours. This is especially the case in projects that attempt to represent the richness of the experiences of others and interpret what these experiences mean; a form of research that occupies a significant space in the field of PESP.

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