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## **‘Mid-life – nuances and negotiations: Narrative maps and the social construction of mid-life in sport and physical activity**

### **Introduction**

“Through passage to a new status or a new social world, persons may find themselves on the threshold of uncharted territory whose customs, contours and inhabitants are unknown. In the extreme, the newcomer may feel he is confronting “a labyrinth in which he has lost all sense of bearings” (Schutz, 1964, p.105 cited in Pollner & Stein, 1996).

In the above quote, Shutz discusses the feelings of confusion often experienced when a person enters a new environment, activity or situation. Giddens (1991) (cited in Sparkes, 1997) suggests that in situations of uncertainty there is an increased need for individuals to engage in a reflexive project of the self. The project requires the individual to develop and sustain a coherent sense of self that incorporates all the lifestyle changes that are encountered. Individuals sustain this coherence through the production of self-narratives, continually revising the story to produce a unified, integrated whole (Sparkes, 1996).

Hareven (1995) highlights the notion of life stages - the boundaries between childhood and adolescence, adolescence and adulthood and middle age and old age. As we move between stages we face changes in status and identity, and may enter a threshold of ‘uncharted territory’ (Levinson, 1978). Entering new life phases could precipitate a time in which bearings are lost and chaos ensues.

Mid-life, both in academic literature and popular culture has been described as a potential ‘crisis’, where people reassess their sense of self and confront issues of the

declining body and personal mortality (Blaikie, 1999). As Sparkes (1998) maintains, narrative is embodied, and when the body fails, the future self that we had envisioned for our life story may no longer be possible. The result is a lack of narrative fit (Murray, 1989). Following this ‘biographical disruption’ (Brock & Kleiber, 1994) the story must be re-written to accommodate the change. This revised narrative may require a renegotiation of identity.

Whilst ageing is undoubtedly related to biological phenomena, it has been argued that its meaning is socially and culturally determined (Hareven, 1995). Exploration of a life stage must be situated within a specific culture. Within a sports culture the potential for ‘mid-life crisis’ is exacerbated by sport’s emphasis upon the young, fit, performing body and the short duration of the athletic career, with its premature retirement age (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sparkes, 1998). It is likely that mid-life poses a particular challenge to those in the sport and physical activity domains.

Despite the potentially heightened relevance of the middle years in sport as a crisis point, there is surprisingly little literature depicting the experiences of middle-aged athletes and the ways in which they make sense of the ageing process. The current paper seeks to address this deficit by exploring how participants from a range of sports/physical activities socially construct the notion of mid-life and maintain a coherent sense of self.

### **Narrative Maps**

Gubrium and Holstein (1998) maintain that narrative provides a way of fashioning meaning and order from experiential chaos. When confronted with times of change, people look for orientation, information and advice from experienced

others, in terms of how to act and how to negotiate a new sense of self (Kleiber & Hutchinson, 1999). The notion of 'narrative maps' has been suggested as one cultural mechanism for the learning of appropriate behaviours and the negotiation of new identities in unfamiliar situations (Pollner & Stein, 1996).

Narrative maps are the representations or pre-representations of a social world (Pollner & Stein, 1996). They provide a guide to practices and problems encountered in the new world and suggest suitable ways to negotiate them, creating what Giddens (1991) refers to as a feeling of ontological security. For example Kleiber and Hutchinson (1999) argue that the media depiction of heroic action following spinal cord injury, most notably in the case of actor Christopher Reeve, who has spoken out about his determination to walk, provides a narrative map specifying the appropriate way for a man to respond to an injury of this type.

Kleiber and Hutchinson (1999) suggest that individuals exposed to Reeve's story and others like it, may draw upon these narrative maps to construct their own personal narratives of spinal cord injury. From these maps, men suffering from similar injuries receive orientation and information in terms of how to negotiate the experience i.e. fight to regain the ability to walk.

Similarly Pollner and Stein (1996) discuss the way in which the personal narratives or 'drunkalogues' of experienced members of alcoholics anonymous serve as maps for newer members. These 'drunkalogues' transmit the values and norms to the new members and actively shape their behaviour. Via narrative maps, newcomers are directed towards certain courses of action, such as identifying with the group and turning their life over to a higher power. These stories present not only the way in which the alcoholic rehabilitation story should be told, but also how the alcoholic life

should be lived, providing a script by which members come to understand and negotiate their own experience of alcoholism.

From the above examples, it is clear that narrative maps can be helpful in terms of orientating the newcomer. However, Kleiber and Hutchinson (1999) warn that maps may be constraining. In relation to spinal cord injury, they suggest that maps such as Reeve's, which prescribe recovery in specific terms, may limit the possibilities men see for transcending injuries and experiencing personal growth. Alternative courses of action, such as accepting the injury, may be construed as less appropriate or indeed inappropriate behaviour.

### **Narrative maps at mid-life**

In the same way that Reeve's story provides a map for spinal cord injury and alcoholics anonymous provides a map for newly diagnosed alcoholics, those going through sporting mid-life may be presented with maps from which to draw. Mid-life stories circulating within sports cultures transmit sub-cultural notions of what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour at mid-life, and provide a framework for the construction of personal mid-life narratives. To understand how sporting mid-life is socially constructed and the potential implications of this for behaviour, it is necessary to investigate the stories of sporting mid-life that are being told, both in terms of content and construction. By identifying the potential maps available, we may gain valuable insight into the experiences, meanings and behaviours surrounding mid-life in sport.

### **The construction of maps: Narrative resources**

The creation of a personal story is a complex interplay between the personal and the social. As Sparkes and Partington (2003) suggest, personal stories are both unique and social, both actively constructed and locally constrained. Whilst cultural scripts do not wholly determine individual narratives, personal stories are reliant upon culturally shared conventions of telling and upon available narrative resources, which may not be equally distributed (Sparkes, 1996; 1998; Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999).

Gubrium and Holstein (1998) remind us also of the mandates and constraints that govern cultural stories. The narrative is constructed by linking together available story lines and individual biographical material. However, there is often a gap between culturally shared meanings and individual biography. This 'narrative slippage', the different ways of interpreting shared cultural meanings, provides the diversity and uniqueness of individual narratives. Cultural resources do not determine how they are used; rather they provide the material for each narrator to construct his/her own story. In analysing any individual story, we must be aware of retaining a sense of both the individual and the culture.

### **Story types**

Talking about illness stories Frank (1995) identified three narrative types, three different plot lines for the illness story from which all illness stories are constructed. The majority of illness stories are characterised by the Restitution Narrative, and for this reason Frank describes it as the master or canonical narrative in Western society, a Meta narrative for illness. Restitution suggests that illness will be over come and that health will be restored.

Two alternative, but far less common narratives have also been identified. The Chaos Narrative is the antithesis of Restitution, for it imagines that life will never get better and health will never be restored. Quest is the counter narrative to Restitution; the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is gained from the illness experience. The person accepts illness and seeks to use it.

Frank (1995) cautions that these narrative types are idealised types. It is unlikely that individual stories will conform to them exactly. Similarly whilst several individuals may tell a story that draws upon a particular narrative type, there will be unique elements that serve to make the story personally relevant (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Rather than adhere to one distinct story type, an individual may differentially select from all three types (Frank, 1995).

In order to gain greater understanding of the way in which people negotiate sporting mid-life, this paper will examine personal narratives of mid-life, using data from a range of sports and physical activities. We will explore and discuss the construction of mid-life narratives and the role of personal narratives as maps for those negotiating mid-life in sport.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were drawn from badminton, distance running, canoeing and health clubs. These groups were purposefully selected (Bryman, 2001) in order to allow for comparison of the mid-life experience across different sports and physical activity settings. All participants were between 35 and 55 years of age, and the total number of participants was 26. This included six badminton players, seven distance

runners, seven canoeists, and six health club members. There were equal numbers of males and females overall.

### **Procedures**

Interviews were arranged with each participant at a location of his or her choice. At the start of each interview, an outline of the study was provided. Participants were invited to ask questions about the project and to sign an informed consent form including permission to tape record the interview, and to use their comments in future publications. They were informed that a research assistant would be used to transcribe the tapes and that they would remain anonymous. On average each interview lasted approximately one hour.

An interview guide (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was created to provide a framework and to encourage participants to focus upon their lived experiences in the hopes of inviting stories (Chase 1995). The themes incorporated in the guide were: key phases in sport participation, perceptions of mid life, changes in ability/participation with age, times of bodily change, sport and daily life and sporting future.

### **Data analysis**

A research assistant transcribed the interviews verbatim. Next the transcripts were read through several times by the authors to identify key emerging areas of interest and become familiar with the data. Two researchers returned to the transcripts and subjected the data to paradigmatic and structural analysis. Paradigmatic analysis is the most frequently utilised mode of narrative inquiry (Sparkes, 1999). It is a form of content analysis in which the researcher identifies



common themes. Structural analysis involves identifying the story type, form, temporal sequence, purpose and conventions for telling (Sparkes, 1999).

A theoretical framework was developed to guide the analysis. The paradigmatic strand of the analysis was based upon the work of Young and White (1995) and Young, White and McTeer (1994). These authors adopted a paradigmatic approach to the analysis of the 'body talk' of female and male athletes respectively.

The structural analysis was informed by the work of several researchers (Brock & Kleiber, 1994; Frank, 1995; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Brock and Kleiber (1994) utilised this method to analyse the injury stories of elite athletes who had sustained career-ending injuries. They suggested that the injury stories told by athletes were organised in a sequence of recognisable chapters. Similarly, Frank (1995) adopted a structural approach to the analysis of illness stories, focusing in particular upon the notion of different story types. Finally Gubrium and Holstein (1998) focused upon the mechanics of story telling, highlighting issues such as narrative tension, slippage and silence, which allowed for a focus upon both the individual and the culture.

## **Discussion of Results**

### **The stories**

Three different types of mid-life stories were identified from the data. These types can be labelled 'Age is a state of mind', 'Life begins at forty' and 'Growing old gracefully.' As Frank (1995) suggested in relation to his illness stories, these types are

general story types to be drawn upon, and it is unlikely that an individual's story could be totally identical to any idealised type.

The story types adhered to a basic structure that followed a chronological time frame. Each story began by setting the scene of sporting participation during youth. This typically involved highlighting the prominence of sport and the sporting potential exhibited by the teller. Sometimes this section included a discussion of the search process in which the individual participated in a series of sports and activities in order to identify an activity in which he/she felt comfortable and able.

Having dealt with the youth experience, the teller then brought the story up to date by commenting upon current problems, difficulties and obstacles to participation. Such obstacles included for example physical decline, increasing work and family commitments or being passed over for team selection. In this section the teller imparted the strategies used to negotiate these problems. Finally the stories concluded with an indication of the envisaged sporting future for the teller.

Although each story type loosely followed this structure, the stories differed markedly in terms of content and prime narrative (Mathieson & Barrie, 1998). Each story had a distinctive theme and plotline that represented different methods of negotiating sporting mid-life. Each represented a different construction of sporting mid-life. In order to explore these different constructions in more detail each story will be considered in turn.

### **'Age is a State of Mind'**

#### **Example of the story**

"Main interests in school were, I wouldn't say I was a runner, but I used to swim three or four times a week, and swam competitively as well. Tennis -

involved in a number of regional tournaments, I played competitively. With the swimming it was with the school, then county and regional competition. With the tennis it was school competition to regional competition. ...I was competitive then I think what happened is I lost my competitive urge probably when I was about 16/17 really to be involved in external competitions, like county trials. I didn't really think it was important for me or for the sport. Then gradually as I was drifting in to the more outdoor activities with the school, sailing and canoeing. I enjoyed those probably even more and realised that well, competition wasn't really an important part of participation. ...With the school as well I used to enjoy going off to field study centres and doing climbing, canoeing or sailing. Then with the Air Training Corps I used to get involved with the activities they used to do. Things like walking, climbing and those sorts of activities. ...It's a little more difficult at the moment because of my responsibilities with school. I am not active through the week, as much as I used to be because sometimes I finish late, just mentally tired and it's hard to motivate. ...It's something I am aware of and it's a vicious circle, but I still make sure that I try and get out as much as I can. ...I'm 50 so I must be half-way there, though I don't feel 50, I still feel 35 and I still would be able to do the things that I was doing at 35. ...My ability to cope with the canoeing and aspects of that haven't changed. I still have a fitness level and speed of reaction to deal with that sort of thing. I can still walk as far as I did, without any discomfort. So I have a good stamina and that stamina even if my fitness is slightly low, tends to keep us going. ...Sporting future? To gradually, well to maintain, to be active for as long as I can. ...As long as I have got my fitness. I see people in their sixties still doing sea kayaking. I

can foresee myself doing that. The amount of coaching, the emphasis will shift from river kayaking more to sea and open canoeing. ... (a mid-life crisis?) Not at the moment, but it could become a problem. I think it's, when that happens it will be when I get out of bed one morning and find that my ankles have gone, then I will get upset probably, but I am still thinking of other things that I can do. As far as I'm concerned that ... I am not going to think about that. I think that sort of crisis is a mental thing and as far as I am concerned I am not prepared to have that." (Dan, canoeist).

### **Analysis of the story**

The prime narrative (Mathieson & Barrie, 1998) of this story is resistance. The story is comprised of talk about fighting the aging process, determination to continue with sport and the importance of self-discipline. At the heart of this story is battle, the belief that the ageing process can be beaten or at least postponed via physical effort and determination. The teller of the story has control of the ageing process. Physical activity is a primary means to counteract the effects of ageing, as shown by the words of Matt, a badminton player

"I don't see any reason to stop. I am already fitter than a lot of people my age. I guess I see people who are contemporaries of mine when I was younger and they wouldn't stand a prayer on court against me now. Yet at the time they were my equal".

This story talks of continuing with sport to the point where the body is physically incapable, a point envisaged to be in the distant future.

“It’s nice to find races that you haven’t done before or looking for different challenges, but I would expect to still be running for at least another 10 years.”

(Greg, runner)

The middle section details the conflict between declining physical ability and the drive to succeed. At times the teller is let down by the physical body despite best intentions and this produces moments of narrative tension (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). The story no longer makes sense, the narrative is contradictory and coherence is threatened.

Different people adopted different strategies to deal with this tension. Some acknowledged that their levels of fitness were not what they once were, but rationalised this by attributing the decline to lack of available time to train, due for example to increased work commitments. Given the same amount of training that was undertaken in earlier years, equivalent levels of fitness would be achieved.

“There is no way I could be as fit as I was at University, cos I just can’t do the same amount of sport and I am also more senior at work so I have to spend longer hours and sometimes I have to go in at the weekends.” (Matt, badminton player)

“I feel that I can get as fit now as I ever did. ...I’m not as fit because I don’t do as much, but I think I would be if I did.” (Debbie, runner)

Others absorbed the tension by suggesting that they were no longer interested in the competitive aspects of the sport. However, if they had been interested in

competing they felt that they would certainly have been capable if they put the effort in to training.

“Yeah I was a lot more competitive when I was younger. But to be competitive you have got to put the time in. I haven’t got enough time to train hard, hence the reason why I’m not in a club anymore, because the club really did drive you on to be competitive. Even in just the normal evening training, it was very competitive and I just haven’t got the time. I don’t miss the competitiveness by the way I don’t miss that side of it. I just enjoy more the friendliness about running and everyone’s good friends.” (Ken, runner)

This story is labelled the master narrative for sporting mid-life because the majority of participants tell stories of this type. Participants from all four of the groups (badminton, running, outdoor activities and health clubs) linked their stories to this map. Stories of this type were told by both males and females, indicating that access to this story type was not limited by gender.

This is a ‘success story’ that offers comfort in the face of advancing years. Key is the idea of retaining control over one’s destiny. The message given is that the ageing process can be held at bay by participation in sport and physical activity. In terms of behaviour, those who link their personal narrative to this story type are encouraged to maintain their current involvement, with the belief that obstacles can and will be over come.

## **'Life Begins at 40'**

### **Example of the story**

"I started playing when I was about eight and started playing tournaments when I was about twelve. My father was always really enthusiastic and there was a massive group of us. There were lots and lots of kids there. We all had a good time and we were all very competitive and wanted to win. From twelve onwards you start playing in tournaments and come across other people and I suppose I was lucky in that I was better than most of them, so therefore I won an awful lot, so that was also an incentive.

It has been awful this year because I have not been feeling very well that was awful. I felt I was in and out of hospital. Because I was getting older, every time I had an injury or an illness, it takes longer to get back and I was so far down that I thought I would never get back to where I was and it's taken almost nine months and I'm just about back to where I was. I now accept the fact that I can't keep playing county first team. My game has improved throughout the years. My only problem now is that it will start declining, because I will not be able to be as fit as I was, just due to age.

Having just played my first vets match it was so nice to play a match where you weren't having juniors as the opposition and they are people of my age. It was quite easy as well mind, but that's not the point. It just was good fun. It was people I had played with at the county 15 years ago, who then dropped off from the county cos people took their place. Now we are back together again,

its people we have known for 20 years. It's good fun, it's a social day out, everybody wants to win, but it's such a relief not to be facing an 18 year old. I don't mind the hard work; it's the running out of steam. So hopefully I am going to go on and play lots of veteran games. So I am not so bothered about playing county firsts, if I'm not playing in the first team I am quite happy to play in the seconds. I'll play anyway, but I have the advantage that I know I can play on the vets team and having a bit of an easy ride and enjoy it as well. I am quite looking forward to that, I have friends who are coming up behind me, 38 or 39 now only another two years and they will be vets as well. Then it's quite exciting as they are talking about playing tournaments all over the place, like nice days out. It's like starting again, it's like going back 20 years where all my friends are together again and we are tootling around the country again playing tournaments. (Andrea, badminton player)

### **Analysis of the story**

The prime narrative (Mathieson & Barrie, 1998) of this story is rejuvenation. The story is comprised of talk about returning to a youth like state. The teller of the story has choices and opportunities available and can make changes to his/her current position. This story talks of going back to the beginning and feeling young again as reflected in the comments of Kate, a runner.

“I think between 32 and 35 you kind of like are in the middle ground, because you are running against all these youngsters. ...before 35 it's just like an open race, just senior, which the actual senior, starting from 18/19, but obviously there are under 23 competitions for them, but as you get more national, some of the girls run against 23 and above. It's quite difficult, especially on the



track, because they have got so much more pace. ...It's just that they leave you standing at the start and stuff because they have got so much more pace."

The story talks of recapturing youth, a return to a previous life style, and re-acquaintance or continued acquaintance with people from that life period.

"It would be nice to increase it next year and try the vets. ...It would be nice to have a go again. Socially we meet people my age, who are like me and haven't played county for a while. You know people in Cumbria and Nottinghamshire." (Graham, badminton player).

The middle section details the trials and tribulations of the ageing process. Mid-life is a time of struggle, when continued participation is difficult. The ageing process is acknowledged and the teller admits that things have to change. Rather than attempting to fight the ageing process (as in age is a state of mind), a new arena for participation is sought. This may include participating in veterans or masters events or changing sports/activities.

"I think really because of my age, whether I could get back to what I did in the past. It's going to be more the Veterans team." (Kate, runner).

This story is a counter narrative (Frank, 1995) to 'age is a state of mind'. Unlike that narrative, stories of this type acknowledge that the ageing process cannot be halted and as result of ageing, a change is made. Several participants saw this as positive, an improvement upon their previous situation. Certain ages such as 35 (female runners) and 40 (badminton players and male runners) were milestones for veteran participation status. Gaining veteran status was seen as acceptable and

positive and in some cases a relief. However, not all participants who had access to veteran status chose to accept it, others continued to participate at their current level, linking their story to ‘age is a state of mind’.

It was predominantly participants from badminton and running who told this story. Perhaps this was because the veteran system is well established and recognised in these sports. Stories of this type were told by both males and females, indicating that access to this story type was not restricted by gender.

‘Life begins at forty’ could be viewed as a positive story that offers opportunities for participation beyond mid-life. However, just like the ‘age is a state of mind’ story, this narrative rejects age in favour of youth. What is seen as most desirable about veteran status is that on first entering that world you become once again one of the youngest participants with all the advantages of youth.

As a map, the message given is that the ageing process cannot be stopped, but it can be side stepped. By changing the context of participation you can ‘negate/redefine’ the ageing process. In terms of behaviour, those who link their personal narrative to this story type are encouraged to seek out a new arena of participation.

### **‘Growing old gracefully’**

#### **Example of the story**

“I took up the game initially through my father, and at school. Just playing any sport, it wasn’t necessarily just badminton it was football, anything just to kill time. As it happens one of the games I had to play was badminton. It wasn’t until I got to university that it became more serious and I began to play competitively... I wanted to continue playing the sport, so I joined a club to

see how I would get on... My youngsters are coming through now and coaching them and seeing them grow is such a rewarding experience. Also seeing young kids coming along and seeing how they improve and taking them through is a very rewarding experience... It started off with just a junior club and the numbers multiplied and the club grew and you know it just sort of took over. ... It's not the competitive side that interests me now. It's more just keeping my eye in and keeping the interest in the sport and getting some exercise and doing something different.. I suppose once you no longer are as fit as you used to be. When you are playing competitively and you are playing against the same people, more or less every season, then after a while it's no more fun. So I guess the edge just goes out of it and not trying to prove anything any more. ...It started off interest in the game and once the ability developed, the competition comes in to it. You want to do better and better as you improve. Then you develop further then obviously the competition is greater. You play more and more and the competition becomes stiffer so that sort of snowballs. It continues up to a certain level where you achieve what you think. You have more or less achieved, you play as much as you possibly can and you are not getting any further. ...I would probably play less in the future, 5-10 years from now and coach more. .. Whether I am able to play in a club which is a high standard for any length of time will also depend upon how well I can keep up, but that won't stop me joining another club that is less taxing. ...It's like any part of life really, it's up to you really, it's not a be all and end all after all. So I don't have an issue with that. Rather than being embarrassed, I would retire gracefully at that point." (Fred, Badminton player).

### **Analysis of the story**

The prime narrative (Mathieson & Barrie, 1998) is acceptance of the ageing process. The story is comprised of talk about dignity, age appropriate behaviour and bowing out when the time is right. At the heart of this story is the belief that ageing is a natural process, fighting it or attempting to postpone it is futile. The teller of the story has no control over the ageing process and accepts that this is the way things are.

“That’s life, that’s the way it goes. It is a natural progression. It is a natural thing that has happened and you can either accept it or be bitter about it and I would rather accept it and move on”. (Pam, a health club participant).

Participants who told this story talked of bowing out of current participation to avoid the embarrassment of being unable to compete. They chose to jump rather than be pushed. Although accepting that they could do nothing to halt the ageing process, they were determined to retain control over their own participation. They wanted to leave on a high rather than linger on confined to the sidelines as a substitute or ridiculed as a weak link.

“I would rather go out now while I decide to than be a saddo standing on the sidelines hoping for a game. I knew I wasn’t wanted at the highest level, which is acceptable as there are young people coming through and that is the way and I do believe in that. I got selected, but just to run up and down the sidelines for the day.” (Pam, health club participant)

The middle section details the difficulties engendered by the ageing process. Ultimately the teller admits defeat and seeks respite from these problems. Unlike the 'life begins at forty' story in which tellers are able to participate at what they deem to be an acceptable level, those who told this story down graded their participation. In some instances this involved taking on the role of coach rather than player

“I would probably play less in the future, five to 10 years from now, and coach more I would say.” (Fred, Badminton player)

In other cases it meant shifting to a less demanding level of participation by moving to a lower level club, participating recreationally rather than competitively, or changing to a less demanding activity.

“When I was younger I used to do sprint water racing that were what over a mile long. So now I don't do any sprint racing at all, whether it's biking or whatever. ...I do more endurance events now certainly on bikes, I wouldn't entertain going back on the track.” (Colin, canoeist)

This story is the antithesis to the 'age is a state of mind' story because it acknowledges that ageing is a natural process that cannot be halted. Only three participants told this story, and even they did not tell pure 'growing old gracefully stories'. One teller was a badminton player who had reached the higher end of the mid-life age range. He had begun to relinquish his player status to more fully embrace his role as coach. Although still participating recreationally on club nights, he no longer participated on any of the club teams. He talked of his conviction to 'bow out gracefully' from club participation 'when the time came'. However, he felt that he had not yet reached that time.

Another teller was a female health club member who had formerly participated in women's football at the elite level. She had given up football after being continually relegated to the role of substitute. Her story was not purely 'growing old gracefully.' She drew upon elements of the 'age is a state of mind narrative.' Whilst she was willing to accept that she was not able to play football at the top level, she still felt that she could achieve high levels of fitness.

Finally, the story of a male canoeist had strong elements of 'growing old gracefully', but these were countered by themes from 'age is a state of mind.' He talked about down-grading his activities to suit his 'advancing years' whilst at other times he maintained that he can still hold his own against younger athletes.

This is a 'compromise story' that speaks of the inevitability of ageing and the need to come terms with it. As a map, the message given is that ageing is a natural process and attempts to halt it are futile and embarrassing. In terms of behaviour, those who link their personal narratives to this story type are encouraged to bow out gracefully and with their dignity intact, removing themselves from the arena rather than waiting to be ejected.

## **Conclusion**

The findings revealed that ageing and more specifically the physical decline of the body produced a lack of narrative fit (Murray, 1989) for these participants. As Frank (1995) suggested, individuals sought to repair this narrative wreckage by re-writing their stories by linking to the available narrative maps.

A dominant narrative for mid-life in sport, 'Age is a state of mind' was identified. A counter narrative, 'Life begins at forty' and an antithesis narrative, 'Growing old gracefully' were also identified, but were much less common. A pure

form of 'Growing old gracefully' was not found. Sportsmen and women linked their stories to these idealised narrative maps, but via a process of narrative slippage (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998), created their own personal narratives of sporting mid-life.

The majority of participants told the 'Age is a state of mind' story, suggesting that youth is a highly valued commodity within sport and physical activity and something that participants want to retain for as long as possible. A minority of participants told 'Life begins at forty' stories. These participants were from the sports of badminton and running. This may be due to the established veterans systems available in these sports, which allowed access to this story. This narrative also prizes youth over experience, exalting the notion of 'turning back the clock.

The 'growing old gracefully' narrative was extremely rare. It may be that because sport places such value on youth and vitality it is hard for participants to admit that they no longer possess these qualities. Where these stories were told participants were in a situation where it was impossible to deny the loss of youth and they were unable to continue participation at their previous level. This was because of their more advanced years or because their participation level had been high.

Analysis of these personal narratives identified three different maps (Pollner & Stein, 1996) for an individual negotiating sporting mid-life. These maps offer conflicting routes through the mid-life experience. Firstly resisting the ageing process, secondly redefining the ageing process and thirdly accepting it. Of these, the resistance narrative is the most prevalent and is likely to be perceived by those within the culture as the most appropriate way to negotiate mid-life in sport.

The narrative map 'Age is a state of mind' guides those who are entering mid-life, providing an acceptable way to behave and to construct the notion of ageing.

However, we must remember that dominant narratives may become constraining, limiting choices, behaviour and understanding (Kleiber & Hutchinson, 1999). This can perhaps be seen in the fact that no pure antithesis narrative was available – those who linked their narratives to ‘Growing old gracefully’ still retained elements of the dominant map. The fact that this narrative was not readily available suggests a lack of resources and a narrative silence surrounding ageing in sport.

It is tempting to champion the cause of the counter and antithesis narratives, to shatter the narrative silence and to open up alternatives and possibilities. However we must be careful how we go about this. Frank (1995), describes his counter narrative ‘Quest’ in positive terms, but also points out how it is easy for the researcher to be seduced in to viewing ‘Quest’ as the ultimate narrative type. He warns that by promoting ‘Quest’ in this way we risk romanticising illness when any sane person would prefer to be healthy. In fact Quest may be merely a romantic ideal impossible to achieve.

Similarly the ‘Growing old gracefully’ story should not be promoted as a superior guide to negotiating mid-life and transcending the ageing process. Romanticising this narrative may encourage people to drop out of sport much earlier than they would like to or is necessary. In addition the notion that everyone can transcend the ageing process may be an unrealistic idea. As such, we are not suggesting that the counter and antithesis narratives are superior to the dominant narrative merely that failure to value them within the culture may constrain choices and behaviour.

Future research across different sport and physical activity settings may provide alternative maps for sporting mid-life, in particular the opportunity to accept the ageing process rather than resist or refine it. There is a need to more closely



examine the cultural resources available and the potential constraints, which may result in the dominance of certain narratives over others. Finally, a more in-depth exploration of the construction of narrative maps to include motives for telling particular stories is required.

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