



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Locke, Abigail

Managing agency for athletic performance: a discursive approach to the zone

Original Citation

Locke, Abigail (2008) Managing agency for athletic performance: a discursive approach to the zone. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5 (2). pp. 103-126. ISSN 1478-0887

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/4400/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

MANAGING AGENCY FOR ATHLETIC
PERFORMANCE: A DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO
THE ZONE

Abigail Locke

Department of Human Sciences

Loughborough University

Loughborough

LEICS, LE11 3TU

UK

Email: A.Locke@lboro.ac.uk

KEYWORDS: discursive, psychology, sport, accountability, zone, flow, agency,
athlete, performance, success, failure.

Managing agency for athletic performance: A discursive approach to *the zone*

Abstract

This paper provides a discursive perspective on a concept used within sport psychology, in both its academic and practical discourse, known as ‘flow’ or the *zone*. This extraordinary state is one of exceptional peak performance whereby the athletes claim to perform effortlessly, automatically and successfully. It is the use of the *zone* as a discursive resource in accounting for successful performance that is the focus of the paper. Through the examination of two televised accounts of performance from elite athletes, I argue that the *zone* can be used as a way of managing agency for a performance – for diluting or softening accounts of success, or as a way of claiming probable success when failing due to injury. Finally the paper proposes a number of rhetorical contrasts that are evident in the discursive deployment of the *zone*.

Introduction

The *zone* in sport science

This paper offers a discursive interpretation on a concept within sports science called *the zone*. The *zone* is a term used in sport psychology in both its theories and its practical discourse. In academic sport psychology, the original uses of the word *zone* are related to its part in the theory *the zone of optimal functioning* (Hanin, 1980; Hanin & Syrja, 1995). In this case the *zone* referred to a specific conceptual area related to arousal levels. Hanin believed that for each athlete, performance would reach an optimal state when anxiety levels remained within a specific *zone*. The *zone* could be at any point low or high on the anxiety continuum, depending on the individual athlete (Kerr, 1997). Related to Hanin's theory of the *zone of optimal functioning* is the usage of the term *zone* in sporting discourse related to exceptional performances and it is this which is the focus of the arguments and analysis presented in this paper.

The specific origins of the *zone* as it is used in practical sports' discourse are not clear (Shainberg, 1989), although it appears that it has filtered down from Hanin's theory to everyday usage. In sporting discourse the *zone* is treated as a distinct mental state and in this sense, it becomes clearer why the term '*zone*' is used, as it denotes a place (Oxford English Dictionaryⁱ). However, in this case it refers to a mental rather than physical place. This mental place is marked by a number of factors such as being relaxed, completely focused and performing effortlessly. Sugarman (1999) offers a simple explanation of what being in the *zone* entails:

“In the flow, in a groove, on a roll, in the *zone* - whatever you call it, it's all defining one thing. It's that special feeling of playing like you can do no wrong and everything goes your way. You are so involved in what you are doing that nothing

else seems to matter because you are so connected to your task”. (Sugarman, 1999: 18).

Although Sugarman’s quote positions the *zone* and flow as the same phenomenon, a distinction can be drawn at times between their discursive usage, and their usage in the sport psychology literature. From a discursive psychological perspective, the variation in terms is itself open to analysis and supports the notion that the *zone* is not simply, if at all, an *actual* state of mind and body but rather a language phenomenon, and therefore a device for accountability. Linking flow and the *zone*, sport psychologists Lindsay, Maynard and Thomas (2005) suggest that the *zone* is a specific state that has characteristics of what has been termed ‘flow’ by others and is associated with peak performance. There is a variety of terminology linked to the *zone*, and other related terms such as flow states, ideal performance states, peak performance and peak experience. Some sport psychologists suggest that the lumping together of all these terms clouds “the conceptual clarity of the area” (Lindsay, Maynard & Thomas, 2005, p. 164) and that the states differ on the basis of specific affective and behavioural criteria. Such sport psychologists are, of course, operating from the perspective that such states are firstly in existence, and secondly, have features that are distinct from one anotherⁱⁱ.

Flow states, the *zone* and hypnosis

Much research has been conducted into flow states, beginning with the work of Csikszentmihalyi, (1975, 1990, 1997). The flow state “involves total absorption in a task, and creating a state of consciousness where optimal levels of functioning often occur” (Jackson, 1995: 138), and has typically been measured through the Flow State Scale (Jackson & Marsh, 1996) and its new version Flow State Scale-2 (Jackson &

Eklund, 2004). Each questionnaire contains 36 items based on nine flow dimensions outlined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) which include:

“ intense involvement, deep concentration, clarity of goals and feedback, loss of sense of time, lack of self-consciousness and transcendence of a sense of self, leading to an autotelic, that is, intrinsically rewarding experience ”(Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 365).

The basis to this questionnaire was Jackson’s (1995) study in which she conducted an inductive content analysis of interviews with elite athletes to ascertain the factors that influenced and disrupted the flow state. She claimed that flow was improved by being motivated, achieving optimal arousal and being focused, and harmed by factors including negative interactions with team mates and poor environmental conditions.

Jackson’s aim was to get closer to understanding how to help athletes get into the flow state in order to optimise their performance. Jackson found that many of her athletes talked about the flow state as being controllable. The notion that flow is controllable has influenced a number of popular sports science practical texts that take the form of self-help books that claim to offer practical exercises to enable athletes to reach the desired *zone* state (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Murphy & White, 1995; Nideffer, 1992; Sugarman, 1999). One such suggestion is to assist in this process comes from recent work linking flow states and hypnosis. For example, Lindsay, Maynard and Thomas (2005) used a hypnotic intervention (relaxation, imagery, hypnotic induction and hypnotic regression) with elite level cyclists. They found that the use of hypnosis was associated with an increase in thoughts and feelings typically associated with flow states. Similarly, Edgette and Rowan (2003) found that athletes who were able to enter hypnotic states at will, found it easier to get

into flow and zone states. However, the hypnosis literature suggests that being in a hypnotic trance is something that can be enacted and perhaps be used as a means of accounting for some kinds of behaviours. Indeed, hypnosis researchers have considered how to ascertain genuine changes in experience from those that are inauthentic or exaggerated because of the social demands of the situation (Perlini, Haley & Buczel, 1998). Wagstaff (1996) and others have suggested that there may be an element of compliance with situational demands of what is expected of a hypnotic episode by participants when reporting their private experience. Thus suggesting that there may be similarities between these different streams of research concerning the reporting of subjective experiences and the accountability practices involved when doing such reporting. In the case of this paper, the focus is on how claims of being in the *zone* are reported and constructed by athletes in order to manage accounting for success and failure.

Qualitative research in sport psychology

Until recently sport psychology relied heavily on the use of quantitative methodologies to approach data analysis. Although qualitative studies are beginning to creep in, as Culver, Gilbert and Trudel (2003) note, over a decade (1990-1999) in three prominent sport psychology journals, only 84 of the 485 published articles used qualitative methodologies, with the majority of these using content analysis. One reason put forward for this is that many of the qualitative methodologies give little in terms of prediction or readily applicable practical solutions (Locke, 2003), as sport psychology in particular is a practical disciplineⁱⁱⁱ.

In more recent years both sport and exercise psychology have seen a slow and quiet infiltration of constructionist methodologies, beginning with a paper by

McGannon and Mauws (2000) proposing a Foucauldian discursive psychological perspective to study exercise adherence. This was followed by a flurry of papers proposing methodologies including narrative analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2002, 2004, 2005), interpretative phenomenological analysis (Nicholls, Holt & Polman, 2005), conversation analysis (Faulkner & Finlay, 2002; Jimmerson, 2001) and discursive psychology (Locke, 2003, 2004). The advent of qualitative methodologies have begun to challenge some of the theoretical safe grounds in sports science. The topics investigated have been diverse, ranging from mental states such as attribution (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2004) and emotion (Locke, 2003), to locker room bonding (Jimmerson, 2001) and spinal cord injuries (Smith & Sparkes, 2002, 2004).

With regards to qualitative research related to flow states or the *zone*, there are a limited number of studies, which in the main rely on content analyses, to look at various dimensions of the flow experience (Jackson, 1996; Young, 1999). A notable exception to these is a study by Sparkes and Partington (2003) who looked at flow experiences in a canoeing club. Using a narrative analytic perspective, they noted that there were different positions and narratives genres open to men and women, and that due to the hierarchical, male dominated club culture that certain hero or epic narrative structures tended not to be used by the women in their stories. They suggest that telling a flow or *zone* narrative:

“is a communicative and relational act. It is a performance that requires narrative skills in terms of, for example, the strategic selection of narrative topics, the use of particular metaphors, and the ability to work to a particular plot in a way that maintains dramatic tension” (page 312).

The work presented in this paper differs from the narrative analytic perspective proposed by Sparkes and Partington (2003) in that the focus here is on the discursive

performance of talking about *zone* states, and looking at what such accounts may accomplish interactionally for the speaker when discussing athletic performances. The following section outlines specifically what a discursive approach to sport psychology entails (see Locke, 2004 for further discussion on this).

A discursive approach to sport psychology: The zone as a discursive resource

Sport psychology, as does much of mainstream psychology, sits against a backdrop of cognitivism. Athletes are seen as active organisms who search, filter, selectively act on, reorganise and create information (Straub & Williams, 1984). Thereby sport psychology justifies its very existence on the premise that at the elite level of sport, physically and technically everyone can be considered more or less equal in terms of ability, and it is the mental side that makes the difference. In some senses then, sport psychology by its very invention invokes a kind of lay Cartesian dualism – that mind and body are separate, but closely linked. More specifically it invokes two fundamental principles. Firstly, that the mind can control the body, and secondly, that the mind must be controlled or trained in order not to have an adverse effect on the body. Sports performers aiming for their optimum performance must, according to sports psychologists, reach a psychological state that will facilitate this exceptional level of performance, and it is the attainment of this desired state that has been called the *zone*.

A discursive psychological analysis of sport data stands in direct contrast to the more traditional work in the area of sport science. In much sport research the interview interactions would initially have been treated as participants reporting some reality regarding their descriptions of events, thoughts and feelings about a particular issue and the context of the talk may have been ignored. From a discursive

perspective, accounts of performances can be analysed in order to investigate how participants rhetorically construct events in order to manage their accountability. As has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Locke, 2004), such an approach offers the researcher a method for understanding interactions across a diverse range of settings in sport research, for example, analysing discourse from coaching sessions, recording team sport interactions or asking athletes to talk about their performances.

As the very definition of sport psychology demonstrates, it is readily applicable to a discursive psychological reanalysis. By focusing on the mental side of sporting performance, sport psychology invokes a rich interactional currency of mental terms and uses such concepts within both its academic writings and practical applications for sport performers. Commonly used terms within sport psychology's academic writings refer to assumed mental states and typically include asking performers to recollect their memories and feelings surrounding past performances; considering the ways in which athletes attribute success and failure; and talking about coping strategies in order to control emotions, such as anxiety. Each of these areas assumes the presumed existence of these mental states that we can access in an unproblematic (and uncontroversial) way, and each can thus be reassessed from a discursive psychological perspective.

Discursive Psychology (DP) is a broad approach resting on ethnomethodological principles, and using in the main the methods typically associated with discourse analysis (see Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), rhetorical analysis (Billig, 1985, 1996), and some of the principles developed from conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) and membership categorisation analysis (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1992). In basic terms it has been described as the application of discourse analysis to the study of psychological phenomena. However,

such a crude generalization does not quite grasp all that DP can do as a methodological approach. As a term it was originally coined by Edwards & Potter (1992) and marked the beginning of a thorough reworking of much of psychology's subject matter, hence the often crude generalizations of it. Edwards & Potter (2005) (see also Potter & Edwards, 2003) outline three overlapping strands of discursive psychology. These ranged from a discursive reworking of traditional psychological models, to looking at the interactional and rhetorical uses of psychological terms, and finally studying where psychological states are implied in discourse. Psychological strongholds such as memory and cognition (Bogen & Lynch, 1989; Middleton & Edwards, 1990), emotions (Edwards, 1997, 1999; Locke & Edwards, 2003), attributions (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and identity (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995) have been subject to a thorough reworking from a discursive point of view, with the result that ascriptions of mental states were considered for their role as interactional currency. In more recent years this work has crossed over into the sport psychology arena with a number of papers using a discursive psychological perspective to sport talk, including offering a reworking on attribution theory in order to explain or justify sporting performance (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2004), to challenging sport psychology's over reliance on the concept of anxiety and instead focusing on the interactional currency of emotion terms in accounts of performance (Locke, 2003).

The focus of this paper is on how accounts of being in the *zone* are constructed by the participants to perform specific interactional business. It is proposed that on a basic level the *zone* can provide athletes with a discursive absence of agency for their performance. Agency in this context is seen as a discursive achievement. Stainton Rogers (2003) claims that “[a]gency is the location of the cause of an effect” (page

310). For the purpose of this paper, agency is regarded as the discursive construction of locating the cause (*zone*) of an effect (exceptional sporting performance). Discursive psychology as a methodology enables us to examine the “situated, occasioned, rhetorical uses of the rich common sense psychological lexicon” (Edwards & Potter, 2005: 241). Thus, we can ascertain how issues of agency are dealt with through descriptions of actions, events and dispositions.^{iv}

Method

The material used in this study is taken from a science documentary series “Equinox” called “Losing It” that was aired on British Television (Channel Four) in the Autumn of 1997. This programme focused on sport psychologists and their work with elite sports performers, with specific reference to the *zone*. Of particular interest were narratives of performance from two elite athletes, Sally Gunnell and Derek Redmond. Sally Gunnell was a British athlete, a 400m hurdler, who after the race she discusses in this programme (World Championship 400m final, 1993) was simultaneously the reigning Olympic, World and Commonwealth champion. Derek Redmond was a 400m sprinter. His career was marked by a number of serious injuries, including his most famous failure, the 1992 Olympic semi-final 400m race in Barcelona, the race he narrates in this paper.

The programme was video-recorded and transcribed using conventions established for conversation analysis by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The resulting transcript was read repeatedly in conjunction with the video data, and analyzed using a discursive psychological approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992, 2001, 2005; Potter & Edwards, 2003) focusing on the invocation of mental states and

their role in the resulting narrative.^v The full accounts from Gunnell and Redmond are situated in the appendices.

Analysis

The analysis will focus on a number of discursive themes that were evident in the accounts of performance. These include how the zone is used to account for success and failure; how invocation of the zone in accounting for performance removes or softens agency; links between zone talk and modesty; claims of remembering and forgetting; the uses of supernatural metaphors; and lastly, how rationality and irrationality are constructed. For the purpose of the analysis, two performance accounts will be used to demonstrate any claims made and these are grouped under three main themed headings: memory disavowals in accounts of performance; managing agency for performance: ‘doing modesty’ in the zone; and, using the zone in accounts of failure: mental success, physical failure. Due to the storied nature of the accounts for performance, the extracts are dealt with one narrative at a time, working through Sally Gunnell’s account before moving on to Derek Redmond’s, although the analysis is not always sequential.

Memory disavowals in accounts of performance

Prior to extract 1, the presenter Brian Moore, the programme’s narrator and Sally Gunnell (SG) have talked about how Gunnell went into the race suffering from a cold, with Gunnell talking about covering up her illness and acting as if she felt normal. The out of the ordinary nature of her performance does not come into the account until later. In contrast, this opening scene has been set for the notion that what

is going on in Gunnell's head is normal, rational and mundane. Extract 1 is where the race begins and she constructs her experience of the race situation.

Extract 1 - Equinox: Sally Gunnell

29 SG: it's weird really but u:m (0.2) yo:u (1.0) totally forget
30 everything (.) I I can't really (.) recall why I mean its
31 probably only ever happened to me probably twice in my
32 whole (0.6) career

Prior to this extract, Gunnell has talked about feeling unwell. This extract moves on to the mystical or out of the ordinary elements of her account. She begins by aligning herself as normal by finding what she claims happened to her as weird (line 29) before moving onto a generalized and scripted account (Edwards, 1994, 1997) in that “yo:u (1.0) totally forget everything”. As the analysis will demonstrate, such claims of not being able to remember are common place from Gunnell when accounting for performance (cf. Middleton & Edwards, 1990; on memory as a participant's discourse category). This memory disavowal, combined with the script formulations, construct Gunnell's claims as to this weird experience as what generally happens in this kind of situation, rather than her specific personal and subjective experience of it. Her phrasing is marked by the use of the extremes “totally” and “everything”. The “yo:u” once more, along with the script formulation, situates the account as possibly happening to anybody and not specifically herself and the construction of totally forgetting makes her account mysterious and out of the ordinary. However, throughout her narrative, she is careful that whilst talking about this extraordinary experience, she constructs herself as rational and normal within the situation. The extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) – “totally” “everything”

“whole” help to build the extraordinariness and abnormality of her account. The inference presented is that what Gunnell achieved in this race because of her prior illness was beyond her normal performance ability, and as such it constructs this special (*zone*) state.

In Gunnell’s account, her physical sporting ability is not in question as it is common knowledge and previously stated in the programme that in the year of competition, she was one of the best hurdlers in the world. Thus, the use of her having a cold is crucial for a ‘*zone*’ account, because it provides a reason for her performing at an extraordinary level whilst claiming illness. Finally she constructs this state she achieved as very special, in that it happened on only two previous occasions during (again in extreme terms) her “whole career” (line 32).

There appears to be a rhetoric of control related to flow states, whereby some athletes, for example those in Jackson’s (1995) data, suggest that they may be controllable states (cf. Redmond’s remembering of the race). Whereas others, for example, Sally Gunnell in the data presented here, suggest that it is something that happens, that they themselves have no control over and indeed have no recollection of that happens to them rather than they are actively controlling it. This, rather than being contradictory aspects of the *zone* phenomenon, point to the discursive flexibility and rhetorical contrasts of the concept. Extract 2 develops this further^{vi}.

Extract 2 – Equinox: Sally Gunnell

34 SG: but I don’t (0.8) ever remember (0.8) coming off (.)
35 the last (1.0) hurdle and and knowing that she was there
36 (.) and this is what happened she was actually right

37 ahead of me and she was ahead of me all the way in but I
38 don't (0.6) remember this and it was only me sort of like
39 fighting and going over the line and (0.8) y'know I
40 stood over the line and it was like (1.0) my life was
41 almost starting again (.) it had almost been on hold for
42 that last (0.4) y'know fifty two (.) seven seconds

Once more, Gunnell's account of the race is marked by her not remembering (lines 34, 38) what happened and in this extract she contrasts what her subjective experience of the race was (lines 34-35) with what *actually* happened, and is being shown on the television screen while she is talking^{vii}. As discursive analyses demonstrate, everyday categories of "remember" and "recall" are not simply references to inner psychological states, but have some interactional currency and rhetorical use in managing accountability in discourse (see Coulter, 1990; Locke & Edwards, 2003; Lynch & Bogen, 1996). As has been claimed elsewhere "memory limitations feature as a rhetorical resource, in avoiding accountability for forgotten actions, in reflexively displaying concern for strict accuracy and in providing plausible deniability" (Locke & Edwards, 2003, p. 243). Gunnell gives a description of the actual race and then contrasts this with her subjective recollection of the race in line 38 where she reiterates that she does not "remember" what happened. Her memory disavowal builds into the mystical element of her account which is further verified by her extreme statement that her "life was almost starting again". The "almost" serves to soften this statement as otherwise it may appear as too extraordinary and open to challenge (cf. Edwards, 2000 on ECFs, softeners and doing non-literal), and the next "almost" does the same, where in lines 41 and 42, she continues that her life had "almost been on hold" followed by a specific recollection of her race time. The

softener “almost” enables her to maintain a rational, non-extreme perspective whilst saying extraordinary things.

After this account of her subjective experience of the race where she claims to not remember, contrasted with what *actually* happened, Gunnell moves on to what she *can* remember once the race had ended. Her construction of not knowing what happened during the race ties into her account of being in a mystical, *zone* state, marked by not recalling events. Extract 3 picks up this up further.

Extract 3 – Equinox: Sally Gunnell

44 SG: and it was like “well what’s happened” (.) y’know I
45 didn’t know that I’d actually won (.) and that I’d
46 actually broken the world record everyone thought “oh
47 she’s very calm” y’know (.) “she’s just walking around”
48 (0.2) but I was looking to see you know what actually
49 happened in that race (.) I had no idea it was as though
50 I’d just run my own (.) >y’know< (.) tunnel vision all
51 the way round I don’t remember any of it

Gunnell begins with actively voicing her thoughts (“well what’s happened”) once the race was over in line 44 and claims that “I didn’t know that I’d actually won” (line 45) and she uses her experiences of the race here in direct contrast to what spectators may have thought. As Wooffitt (1992) notes in his work on accounts of paranormal experience, active voicing can be used to warrant storied accounts as perceptually veridical, being now recalled with an experiential quality as if re-experienced. In the case of this extract, Gunnell uses her out of the ordinary mental state of not knowing what happened in the race (“well what’s happened” line 44) to

directly contrast with a generalised “everyone” (line 46) who thought that she was very “calm” (line 47) and “just walking around” (line 47). Gunnell explains that in fact she was attempting to find out the race result, because she did not know that she had won. She claims that she had “tunnel vision” (line 50) and she did not “remember any of it” (line 51), linking in with her reported thoughts in line 44. Her display here of not being able to recall the result further bolsters her claims of not being fully conscious of her actions throughout race. Her construction of events is extreme, noted in part by the uses of extreme case formulations such as “any of it” and it is this extremity that marks the race as out of the ordinary and lays the foundations for claims of being in a special ‘*zone*’ state.

Managing agency for performance: ‘Doing modesty’ in the *zone*

Elsewhere it has been noted that when accounting for performance athletes may ‘do modesty’ in order to play down their successful achievements (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2001, 2004). Gunnell’s account is set up to do just this. As the analysis demonstrates, throughout the narrative she does not openly claim full responsibility for her exceptional performance in this race. As we know from the programme prior to the extract, it was in this race that although Gunnell was suffering from a bad cold, she won the gold medal and broke the world record.

Throughout Gunnell’s account, she constructs the events of the race as to enable a removal of agency for her actions, and that she was in a passive state, and unable to consciously recall her performance. This enables her to manage the problematic nature of accounting for outstanding success and “do modesty”. One way to accomplish this is to appeal to the notion that it is unconscious or subconscious, to be unable to recall these extraordinary events, whilst still retaining some personal

agency, as we have seen in extracts 1-3. Another, and linked rhetorically to the former is to invoke an external agent, such as a supernatural or mystical element as part of the zone account in order to bolster this account for this extraordinary event. Gunnell's account holds all of these elements. She uses both the agentive and passive, with the agentive being done by her use of softeners on many of the passive components. By using softeners on the passive components it enables to ascertain that Gunnell although playing it down, was agentive and responsible for her performance. The language and metaphors used throughout the account help to build up the extraordinariness of what happened and extract 4 demonstrates some of these metaphorical constructions in action.

Extract 4 - Equinox: Sally Gunnell

70 BM: and it's almost like a religious experience
71 SG: yeah you feel as though someone's almost (.) helping you
72 I must admit just because it (.) it does feel so alien
73 (.) at times (.) y'know as I said before it
74 doesn't actually (.) particularly feel like (.) me out
75 there and you almost get into its like a tr[↑]a[↓]nce (.) and
76 uh you feel as though someone y'know I always said (.)
77 someone's watching you and just sort of like you know (.)
78 pulling you round (.) the track and and and (0.2) and
79 letting you flow around that track yeah it's a yeah (.)
80 it is (.) an amazing feeling

Brian Moore as interviewer and narrator (BM), constructs what Gunnell has portrayed as “almost like a religious experience” (line 70) to build up the mysticism of the *zone*. He uses “almost” to soften what is hearably an extreme statement. Gunnell

uptakes on what Moore is suggesting and although not using his religious terms, answers in generalised terms that describe elements of religious experience - “you feel as though someone’s almost (.) helping you” (line 71), before moving on to her personal experience and feelings about the situation, that it feels “so alien” (line 72) at times. “Almost” (as used in lines 71 and 75) is a useful word for Gunnell because it plays down the notion that she is being literal that someone helped her and perhaps fends off the notion that she is making a serious claim that she was not responsible for winning the race, whilst still softening her agency and making it easier to talk about her success. In addition, she uses other softeners such as “at times” (line 73), “particularly” (line 74), “like a” (line 75) and “sort of like” (line 77). The use of softeners also enable Gunnell to construct herself as rational in an irrational and mystical situation. These softeners orient to her being a normal rational person who although making extraordinary claims in this account, is not usually predisposed to (Edwards, in press).

The use of metaphors in this extract are important to its construction as mystical and out of the ordinary. Moore invokes “religious experience” (line 70), whilst Gunnell invokes “alien” (line 72), “tr[↑]a[↓]nce” (line 75), “flow”(line 79) and “pulling you round (.) the track” (line 78). This constructs the notion of being in the *zone* as something that you yourself are not fully agentic and responsible for, and places the agency elsewhere, or at least consciously removed from you.

Gunnell’s handling of agency in her performance narrative is interesting. On the one hand it seems that she was not responsible for winning. Through her construction of events, her lack of conscious memory of the race, and her use of metaphors and softeners, Gunnell is able to manage talking about her success. As noted, she utilises softeners throughout the extract, most notably “almost”. The

remaining part of the narrative contains more of these softeners, for example, “almost”(line 75), and there placing here is crucial. It appears that Gunnell uses her construction of events attributing it to mystical experience to manage the problematic nature of accounting for her success and to “do modesty”. Further evidence is given for this in line 74 where she argues that it does not “particularly feel like me out there” and there are links with her previous construction of “almost (.) helping you” (line 71).

Her construction of events leads to two positions. Firstly, that this exceptional state and its associated results could have happened to anybody. In direct contrast is the second position whereby her use of softeners such as “particularly” (line 74) work against this construction, and suggest that Gunnell was agentive in her performance. These constructions enable Gunnell to perform modesty for her performance, the result is known and by seemingly removing some agency for her performance, she manages the problematic nature of accounting for her success. Her uses of softeners such as “almost” are producing her as a normal rational individual who is not disposed to making bizarre mystical claims but finds herself having to go along with them on this occasion. This is further backed up by her conclusions in lines 79-80 whereby she has to agree with Moore that “yeah (.) it is (.) an amazing feeling”. This final statement is constructed by Gunnell as if concluding from the evidence of what happened to her.

She claims further that it is like a “tr[↑]a[↓]n[↓]ce” (line 75). Her delivery here marked by the rising and falling intonation is performative. Gunnell reflexively indexes her own rationality by enacting the extraordinariness of what she is claiming. Linked to this are the use of extreme case formulation softeners such as “almost get into it’s like a trance” (line 75) which index the speaker as not disposed to making

extraordinary claims. Note the similarities in language to hypnotic accounts, in particular with Gunnell's use of "tr↑a↓nce" and her prior claims of not being able to remember.

Gunnell continues in a generalised scripted account that "you feel" before reformulating this as a personalised and long-held notion - "I always said" (line 76). This scripted formulation as something that is long-held by her, adds further credibility to her claims. She reverts to Moore's prior formulation as the *zone* state as a "religious experience" (line 70) when she suggests that she feels like "someone's watching you" (line 77) and "pulling you round (.) the track" (line 78) and "letting you flow" (line 79). Her generalised and scripted version (cf. Edwards, 1994 on script formulations) here once more suggests that this something that could happen to anyone, and not necessarily her. One result of this scripting is that it again bolsters her rationality whilst making what may be seen as irrational claims. In addition, her agency is further removed by her description of what happens "pulling" and "letting you flow", suggest that it is a higher or mystical force rather than her, that enabled the final result. The use of "letting you flow" is a passive construction. "Flow", along with its usage as a mental state, is a word conventionally used for natural athleticism and flowing round the track is a desirable state. It describes a natural process, something that is happening rather than something that Gunnell is consciously doing. Finally, she says that it is an "amazing feeling" (line 80) and again this formulation is extreme and marks it as out of the ordinary. This statement is produced as an unsoftened conclusion, and as a kind of recognition or agreement, most notably through her use of "yeah" (line 79), whereby displaying her carefulness is using those descriptions but is finally driven to agree with what has been constructed "yeah..it is (.) an amazing feeling".

Through Gunnell's invocation of this extraordinary state, she is able to claim success without arrogance, as she was operating semi-consciously, on automatic pilot if you like. This is a way for the athlete to reduce their agency and responsibility for the performance. There are many other ways of doing being modest and many other notions of agency and discourse around this area that the athletes can draw upon. For example, perhaps another method used by athletes to claim such success could be the idea of luck (Locke, 2004).

Using the *zone* in accounts of failure: Mental success, physical failure

The *zone* is part of a narrative of success that downplays agency, whilst strongly upgrading the claimed performance, enabling the speaker to make immodest claims modestly. Gunnell's narrative is a clear account for success and the result is given that she broke the world record and became World Champion. But what of the contrast case of Derek Redmond who invokes the *zone* immediately in his narrative of performance, yet the result was that he lost the race? Redmond's is also an account for success, but it was potential success, with his failure attributed to physical injury.

Extract 5 – Equinox: Derek Redmond

9 BM: despite a career plagued by injury (.) Derek Redmond
10 began the semi-final of the four hundred metres in
11 Barcelona in nineteen ninety two (0.4)
12 as a strong favourite (0.4) not only for a
13 final place (0.6) but for a medal
14 DR: I was in the zone heh heh heh heh I was (.) everything
15 had gone right (.) yeah at the start I said on your marks
16 ((clips))
17 DR: and I knew I'd won it
18 ((clips))

Brian Moore as the programme's commentator, narrates the voiceover that sets up Redmond's account that although Redmond had been "plagued by injury" (line 9) throughout his career, he began the race as a "strong favourite" (line 12) for a medal. Moore has previously discussed reaching this optimal level of control and then puts this in stark contrast if we imagine that the rewards of this might be "snatched from you" (line 7). Thus, Derek Redmond in this account holds the category entitlement (Potter, 1996; Sacks, 1992) to speak as a person who has experienced that potential scenario.

Redmond's begins his race narrative in line 14 and he explicitly claims that he was "in the *zone*". This is a hearably extreme and problematic statement and his laughter immediately afterwards displays an orientation to various kinds of interactional delicacy. There are two kinds of delicacy being managed by Redmond here, those of otherwise being seen as immodest and irrational, and he has to manage these through his narrative construction of events.

He continues with the extreme formulation that "everything had gone right" (lines 14-15) referring perhaps to his race preparation. The mysticism of the *zone* comes in lines 16 and 17 where on the starting blocks he claims "I knew I'd won it" (line 16) before the race had even begun and then the reformulation of this to "mentally...I'd won the race" (line 17). There is interactional delicacy here for Redmond to not appear as arrogant and irrational, and these are the kinds of interactional matters that athletes handle when accounting for success, as Gunnell has demonstrated. There is a play-off between claiming their ultimate performance whilst doing modesty at the same time. Redmond's reformulation of "knew" (line 17) to

“mentally” (line 19) may be due to this being a retrospective account that he did not win the race due to a physical problem and thus the “mentally” is in direct contrast to the *actual* physical. This mind-body distinction is crucial as Redmond is constructing an account for what would otherwise have been success, without the physical injury. How can he claim to know that he would have won the race? The *zone* makes his account possible, due to this mystical state whereby ultimate and exceptional performance is attained. The extreme case formulations throughout this extract, for example, in lines 14-15 “everything had gone right” enable Redmond to maximise this claim and evidence it. He goes on to construct this evidence in extract 6.

Extract 6 – Equinox: Derek Redmond

21 DR: and I was just (.) floating down the back straight I felt
22 like I was running on air (.) I look at the film now (.)
23 just the way I was running was absolutely brilliant

Redmond provides a description of how he was running and uses the metaphors of “floating down the back straight” (line 21) as if he was “running on air” (line 22). These metaphors propose a lack of effort required by Redmond to win the race due to him being in the *zone*. There is a reflexive element to his account that further bolsters his credibility of making extreme claims of winning the race, and this is evidenced in line 22, “I look at the film now”. Redmond is watching his performance on the screen while producing his narrative and this adds a public-private dimension to his account. He is not claiming extremities that can not be verified. As he constructs his account, not only are these things that he believed in his head, by watching the race again, and viewers of the programme also doing so, corroboration is

available for how well he was running. Both Gunnell and Redmond attend to the rhetorical difficulty of making a big claim of this kind based on nothing but subjective thoughts. Redmond has his own memories of the event and the footage of the race to back up these claims, and he explicitly makes the film evidence relevant in his narrative.

One aspect of claiming to be in the *zone* is the depiction of irrational or extraordinary thoughts at the time. As we saw in extract 3, Gunnell actively voiced her thoughts and those of others around her, to explain her behaviour or reactions immediately following her performance, claiming that she had no recollection of the race. Note that in direct contrast to this, Redmond provides us with a detailed account of his (constructed) thoughts and feelings for each part of his race and displays his irrational thinking at the time of his injury. Extract 7 picks this up further.

Extract 7 - Equinox: Derek Redmond

25 DR: and all of a sudden I heard a (0.2) what I thought was a
26 g↑un shot from the crowd (.) u::m (.) carried on running
27 next thing you know (.) (that-) I thought somebody had
28 shot me and I thought I'd been shot in the back of the
29 l↑eg and (0.4) that was it y'know your hamstring
30 goes there's nothing you can do you go up and you come
31 straight back down again (.) game over

Redmond predicates his account with “all of a sudden” (line 25) which prefaces that something is about to happen before moving on to saying that he heard what he “thought was a g↑un shot from the crowd” (line 26). This notion of hearing a gun shot is dramatic and rhetorically potent. His use of “thought” here bolsters his

claim that he was in the *zone*, because it evidences that he was not thinking in a mundane or rational way. Redmond's account of his injury is constructed as extreme and takes on many of the forms of a device first proposed by Sacks 'at first I thought....and then I realized' (Jefferson, 2004^{viii}; Sacks, 1984). More specifically, Redmond's constructions are an inversion of the "I was just doing x...when extraordinary" formula that Wooffitt (1991, 1992) has examined in accounts of paranormal experiences. The inversion is a marked difference in the accounting structures. Wooffitt's participants set up the previous situation as mundane in order for them to account for these strange supernatural experiences, whereas Redmond's account has previously been set up as extreme in order for him to visibly demonstrate that he was in the *zone*, thus the "extraordinary y" precedes the "mundane x". The extraordinary y is that he claims to have heard a "gun shot" in the crowd and then after feeling pain, claims that he thought he had been and "shot in the back of the leg" (line 28). He then moves his account from the extreme to the mundane in lines 29-30 whereby he had not been shot, instead he had pulled a hamstring. This inversion demonstrates the strength of the "x...y" device. In terms of paranormal data, it is used to situate the narrator as normal before the experience occurred, whereas in Redmond's account his irrational "y" thinking is used to evidence his claims of being in the *zone*, and that because he was in the *zone*, without the injury, he would have won the race.

As Edwards (in press) notes, one thing that these normalizing devices do is to "manage subjectivity in the course of relating a potentially dubious factual account" (page 4). That is, by setting the speaker up as normal, the devices detract against any

suggestions that the person claiming such extraordinary things is not usually disposed to do so.

When describing his injury in lines 29-31, Redmond changes from a personalised account of what he was thinking to a scripted, generalised account of what a hamstring injury means to anyone, “there’s nothing you can do” (line 30), before giving a description of how it affects the running action “you go up and you come straight back down again”. Finally, he gives the stark, idiomatic result of such an injury on an athlete in a race, “game over” (line 31).

Redmond’s narrative has moved from the extremity of a *zone* account (and its associated irrational thinking) to the mundane reality of the injury that ended his race. Extract 8 continues on this theme with Redmond’s account of his thoughts immediately after the injury occurred.

Extract 8 – Equinox: Derek Redmond

33 DR: I remember (0.2) getting up (0.2) and thinking “if you
34 get up now (.) you can still qualify” (.) and they’ve got
35 fifty metres to go and they’re all flying (.) I’ve got
36 two hundred and fifty metres to go and three hamstrings
37 (.) and I’m still thinking that I can qualify [I]
38 BM: [you]
39 really believed that you could still get through
40 DR: >if you had come up to me then and said I’d bet you
41 anything you won’t< (.) you- you can’t qualify I would
42 have said (.) you’re on (.) I honestly felt (.) I
43 could still qualify (.)
44 BM: ((glossing)) Redmond was so deeply in the zone (.) that
45 his mind simply refused to accept what his body was

Once more, in direct contrast to Gunnell's performance narrative, Redmond continues to construct his thoughts during the race and he does so as irrational. Redmond claims that he thought that he could "get up...and still qualify" (line 34). He evidences the impossibility of this situation and the irrationality of this thought in the next line where it transpires that at this point due to his injury, he was two hundred yards behind the others with "three hamstrings" (line 36), before situating his thoughts at that moment of the race "I'm still thinking that I can qualify" (line 37). This construction is set up to demonstrate that Redmond was indeed in the *zone*. His description of his irrational thoughts are testament to this, and he invokes a mind-body dualism - his mind wished to carry on the race and believed it could, but his body was unable to run. Redmond's construction of his responses are somewhat irrational, that he was not thinking normally, and the implicit reason for this being that he was in the *zone*. Moore asks in lines 38-39 if Redmond "really believed" that he could qualify and Redmond's answer is situated as his thinking at that moment of the race ">if you had come up to me then" (line 40), before moving on to his thoughts "I honestly felt (.) I could still qualify" (lines 42-43).

The perceived irrationality of his thoughts serve to support his claim that he was in the *zone*, and this is explicitly stated by Moore in the following lines where he provides a gloss on what Redmond has discussed. He builds up the mind-body conflict and claims that Redmond was in the *zone* to such an extent that "his mind simply refused to accept what his body was telling him" (lines 45-46).

Discussion

The *zone* as an accounting device for athletic performance

The analysis has demonstrated how the *zone* is used by athletes to account for athletic performance. Although the race results were very different, both of the accounts were constructed as accounts of success. Gunnell's account is one of clear success and as the analysis has demonstrated she carefully manages and softens her agency for the result throughout her narrative. In direct contrast, Redmond's account is one of mental success but physical failure. Redmond's account has some stark contrasts to Gunnell's, demonstrated, for example, by his invocation of the *zone* by name straight away, whereas Gunnell describes what are taken (by the programme makers) to be characteristics of the *zone* state. In terms of the *zone* as a discursive resource, the injury and the *zone* are not separate parts of Redmond's account. The injury and his constructed reactions to it are designed to portray him as being in the *zone*. Part of his grounds for talking credibly about the *zone* is the fact that he was injured. As previously mentioned, he needs to claim he was in the *zone* to claim that he knew he would have won the race if he had not been injured. Invoking the *zone* avoids his claim that he would have won the race being attributed to mere arrogance.

As an accounting device, *zone* talk has a kind of dual status. On the one hand it is subjective and personalised and a state 'where you just know these things' and thus claims are not wholly open to critique. On the other, accounts of being in the *zone* can be scripted and generalized to potentially anyone (note the uses of a generalized "you" throughout the data extracts and the use of the recognized term '*zone*' itself). So *zone* talk, like psychological talk generally, provides a way of making personal experiences publicly accountable.

Zone talk trades on a rhetorically useful discourse of a split within the self, whether between mind and body (Cartesian dualism), or parts of the mind. The *zone*

makes possible this notion that there are different parts of your mind and body, which can be split up or compartmentalized, as demonstrated in Redmond's account between the mental and physical or the mind and body, and his active voicing of his conscious thoughts throughout the race. However, in sports talk there is another view of the *zone* that is presented and that is that there are normally separate and often conflicting domains of mind and body. In the *zone* or flow state however, they are in unity, and such unity contributes to an outstanding athletic performance. This rests on the concept of the *zone* as being constructed as automatic actions but based on there being no separation between mind (will, intention, thought) and body. This rhetorical usage of the *zone* was evident through Gunnell's narrative, whereby she claimed to have no recollection of events and was operating on a kind of auto-pilot. These contrasting uses of the *zone* or flow state demonstrate its flexibility as an accounting device for sports performers.

There are other options available to the athlete when accounting for success and failure such as 'doing modesty' when winning, or blaming others or circumstances when losing, and the *zone* is another, more extreme, device used in this accounting process. Rhetorically, *zone* talk enables the athlete to remove agency and 'do modesty' when they have won, but as Redmond demonstrates, it is also a way of claiming that they could have won, a normally problematic claim when they are unable to prove it. The uses of different devices were discovered through analysis of the *zone* narratives. These included constructing the accounts as extreme, inverting "I was doing x ...when y" or using "at first I thought....and then I realised", using supernatural metaphors and portraying situated irrational thinking. These amongst others, are ways of making the account appear as more credible. On managing irrationality as well as immodesty, depicting this kind of temporary, within-*zone*

irrationality not only verifies and evidences that you were in the *zone*, but also, by contrast, that you were perfectly rational when *not* in it, such as now, when telling the *zone* narrative. Lastly, as the *zone* is a highly subjective experience, whatever its evidential grounds, it is difficult to challenge someone that they were not in it.

Rhetorical uses of the *zone*

Throughout the paper, a number of rhetorical uses have been identified as parts of *zone* accounts. These have been dealt with in the analysis but it is useful to consider them briefly all together. The first relates to the *zone* being constructed as an unconscious state, whereby the athlete does not remember what occurred, and contrasting this directly with research that is attempting to consciously put athletes into the *zone*. By constructing the *zone* as unconscious it acts as a way of diluting agency for the athletes when accounting for their successful performances, in that they had no knowledge or control over their actions. In direct contrast to this, athletes are also, as is the case with Redmond's narrative, able to construct the *zone* as conscious and be able to report thoughts and feelings throughout it. In addition, in the sport psychology literature the *zone* is constructed as being potentially controllable, yet in the accounts given by the athletes in this paper, the *zone* is constructed as being automatic and not controllable, as something that just overtook them. Again, this is linked to its use in diluting agency when accounting for performance. The *zone* invokes a mind-body dualism. At times the *zone* constructs mind and body as separate entities, at others, they are constructed as working together in harmony. A last rhetorical usage is the irrationality that is portrayed when talking about being in the *zone*, marked by the uses of extreme metaphorical language. This is starkly contrasted with the rationality displayed by those when telling *zone* accounts, that is they

construct themselves as rational people, not disposed to making extreme claims who found themselves in an extraordinary situation.

Conclusions

This paper has provided a discursive psychological analysis of the *zone*, a term that is evident within both sport psychological theory and practical discourse. The analysis demonstrates how the zone can be used as one way to account for athletic performance, which elsewhere has been shown to be interactionally difficult (Locke 2004). It does so by providing athletes with a way in which to remove agency for their accounts of exceptional performances. Through the rhetorical contrasts that the flexibility of the zone and flow state concepts make available to speakers (unconscious-conscious, irrationality, in control-out of control, mind-body separation and dualism), they are able to talk about real (Gunnell) or potential (Redmond) success without appearing to be making immodest claims.

With regards to sport psychology's typical quantitative and realist treatment of mental concepts, this paper demonstrates what a qualitative, discursive psychological approach can offer to the further development of research into zone and flow states. In particular, viewing zone stories as situated accounts of performance set up to manage accountability, rather than say, treating accounts as evidence of the zone's existence. By its neglect of social and cultural ideas, sport psychology as an academic and practical discipline, at times lacks a kind of common-sense ecological validity. By ignoring these wider cultural and methodological perspectives it has failed at times to grasp the bigger picture. An example of where this is apparent is on its study of emotion. Anxiety was regarded for many years as the critical factor for sporting performance (e.g. Martens et al, 1990). After a decade or more of researching this,

anxiety researchers split the concept into facilitative (good) and debilitating (bad) anxiety (Burton, 1988; Jones & Swain, 1992). After another round of studies, many began to question whether anxiety was the only important emotion or one of many (Prapavessis & Grove, 1994; Jones, 1995), and only in 2005 was a preliminary research tool created to measure different emotions that may effect sporting performance (Jones et al., 2005), this new questionnaire having a striking resemblance to the old anxiety questionnaires. Arguably, if sport psychology as a discipline had been less concerned with being 'scientific', most often translated into research as quantitative, and instead had looked outside its discipline to other work on emotion and its social and cultural links, progress towards emotions in sport may have been made much sooner. Even now, with this new scale, the interactional currency of emotion terms in performance narratives is ignored.

As has been claimed elsewhere (Sparkes & Partington, 2003), more analytical diversity is needed within sport psychology in order to reach a greater understanding of sporting experience. With the case of anxiety and emotion research, Locke (2003) noted how athletes used emotion discourse as part of their accounts of performance, claiming that poor performances stemmed from a lack of emotional experience. Much as discursive psychology did for social psychology as a discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s, due to the implicit Cartesian dualist notions that surround the subject matter of sport psychology, the application of discursive approaches to its subject matter will enable a much needed reworking of it as a discipline. This paper aims to take a step towards doing just that.

References

- Antaki, C. (1994). *Explaining and arguing: The social organization of accounts*. London: Sage.
- Antaki, C. and Widdicombe, S. (1998). Identity as an achievement and as a tool. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe, editors, *Identities in Talk*. London: Sage.
- Atkinson, J.M., and Heritage, J., editors, (1984). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (1985). Prejudice, categorization and particularization: From a perceptual to a rhetorical approach. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15, 79-103.
- Billig, M. (1996). *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bogen, D., and Lynch, M. (1989). Taking account of the hostile native: Plausible deniability and the production of conventional history in the Iran-Contra hearings. *Social Problems*, 36, 197-224.
- Coulter, J. (1990). *Mind in action*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow. The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M and Csikszentmihalyi, I. S., editors, (1988) *Optimal Experience. Psychological studies of flow in consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Culver, D., Gilbert, W. and Trudel, P. (2003). A decade of qualitative research in

- sport psychology journals: 1990-1999. *The Sport Psychologist*, 17, 1-15.
- Edgette, J. and Rowan, T. (2003). *Winning the mind game: Using hypnosis in sport psychology*. Camarthan, Wales: Crown House Publishing.
- Edwards, D. (1994). Script Formulations. An analysis of event descriptions in conversation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13, 211-247.
- Edwards, D. (1997). *Discourse and Cognition*. London: Sage
- Edwards, D. (1999). Emotion discourse. *Culture & Psychology*, 5, 271-291.
- Edwards, D. (2000). Extreme case formulations: Softeners, investment, and doing non-literal. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 33, 347-373.
- Edwards, D. (2004). Discursive psychology. In K. Fitch and R. Sanders, editors, *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Edwards, D. (2005). Moaning, whinging and laughing: The subjective side of complaints. *Discourse Studies*, 7, 5-29
- Edwards, D. (2006). Discourse, cognition and social practices: The rich surface of language and social interaction. *Discourse Studies*, 8, 41-49.
- Edwards, D. (in press). Managing subjectivity in talk. In A. Hepburn and S. Wiggins, editors, *Discursive research in practice: New approaches to psychology and interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (2001). Discursive psychology. In A. McHoul and M. Rapley, editors, *How to analyse talk in institutional settings: A casebook of methods*. London and New York: Continuum International.
- Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (2005). Discursive psychology, mental states and

- descriptions. In H. te Molder and J. Potter, editors, *Conversation and cognition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Faulkner, G. and Finlay, S.J. (2002). It's not what you say, it's the way that you say it! Conversation analysis: a discursive methodology. *Quest*, 54, 49-66.
- Finlay, S.J and Faulkner, G. (2003). "Actually I was the star": Managing attributions in conversation [64 paragraphs]. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 4 [on-line journal]. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-03/1-03finlayfaulkner-e.htm>
- Faulkner, G. and Finlay, S.J. (2005). Attributions and accountability: Comments on Rees, Ingledew and Hardy (2005). *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6, 205-211.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice Hall.
- Gilbert, G.N. and Mulkay, M. (1984) *Opening Pandora's Box: A sociological analysis of scientists' discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanin, Y.L. (1980). A study of anxiety in sports. In W.F. Straub, editor. *Sport Psychology: An analysis of athletic behaviour*. New York: Movement Publications.
- Hanin, Y. L. and Syrja, P. (1995). Performance affect in junior ice hockey players: An application of the individual zones of optimal functioning model. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 169-187.
- Hester, S. and Eglin, P., editors, (1997). *Culture in action: Studies in membership categorization analysis*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2005). Panic and perjury: A psychosocial exploration of agency. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, 147-163.

- Hutchby, I. and Wooffitt, R. (1998). *Conversation Analysis: Principles, practices and applications*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Jackson, S.A. (1995). Factors influencing the occurrence of flow in elite athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 7, 135-163.
- Jackson, S. A. (1996). Toward a conceptual understanding to the flow experience in elite athletes. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 67, 76-90.
- Jackson, S.A. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). *Flow in sports. The keys to optimal experiences and performances*. Leeds: Human Kinetics.
- Jackson, S.A. and Eklund, R.C. (2004). *The flow scale manual*. Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.
- Jackson, S.A. and Marsh, H.W. (1996). Development and validation of a scale to measure optimal experience: The flow state scale. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 18, 17-35.
- Jefferson, G. (2004). 'At first I thought': A normalizing device for extraordinary events. In G.H. Lerner, editor, *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jimmerson, J.B. (2001). A conversation (re)analysis of fraternal bonding in the locker room. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 18, 317-338.
- Jones, J. G. (1995). More than just a game: Research developments and issues in competitive state anxiety in sport. *British Journal of Psychology*, 86, 449-478.
- Jones, J. G. and Swain, A.B.J. (1992). Intensity and direction dimensions of competitive state anxiety and relationships with competitiveness. *Perceptual and Motor Studies*, 74, 467-472.
- Jones, M.V., Lane, A.M., Bray, S.R., Uphill, M. and Catlin, J. (2005). Development

- and validation of the Sport Emotion Questionnaire. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 27, 407-431.
- Kerr, J. H. (1997). *Motivation and emotion in sport: Reversal theory*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- Lindsay, P., Maynard, I. and Thomas, O. (2005). Effects of hypnosis on flow states and cycling performance. *The Sport Psychologist* 19, 164-177.
- Locke, A. (2001). *The mind-field of sport: Emotion, mind and accountability in athletes*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Loughborough University, UK.
- Locke, A. (2003). "If I'm not worried, I'm nervous, does that make sense?": The use of emotion concepts by athletes in accounts of performance. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 4 [on-line journal] Available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-03/1-03locke-e.htm>
- Locke, A. (2004). Accounting for success and failure: A discursive psychological approach to sport talk. *Quest*, 56, 302-320.
- Locke, A. and Edwards, D. (2003). Bill and Monica: Memory, emotion and normativity in Clinton's Grand Jury testimony. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42, 239-256.
- Lynch, M. (2002). From naturally occurring data to naturally organized ordinary activities: comment on Speer, *Discourse Studies*, 4, 531-537.
- Lynch, M. and Bogen, D. (1996). *The spectacle of history: Speech, text, and memory at the Iran-Contra hearings*. Durham: NC: Duke University Press.
- McGannon, K. and Mauws, M. (2000). Discursive psychology: An alternative approach for studying adherence to exercise and physical activity. *Quest*, 52, 148-165.
- Martens, R., Burton, D., Vealey, R.S., Bump, L.A. and Smith, D.E. (1990).

- Development and validation of the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2). In R. Martens, R.S. Vealey and D. Burton, editors, *Competitive Anxiety in Sport*. Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics.
- Middleton, D. and Edwards, D. (1990). Conversational remembering: A social psychological approach. In D. Middleton and D. Edwards, editors, *Collective Remembering*. London: Sage.
- Murphy, M. and White, R.A. (1995). *In the Zone: Transcendent experience in sports*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Nicholls, A., Holt, N.L. and Polman, R.C.J. (2005). A phenomenological analysis of coping effectiveness in golf. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 111-130.
- Nideffer, R.M. (1992). *Psyched to Win*. Illinois: Leisure Press.
- Perlini, A.H., Haley, A. and Buczel, A. (1998). Hypnosis and reporting biases: Telling the truth. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 32, 13-32.
- Pomerantz, A. (1986). Extreme Case formulations: A way of legitimizing claims. *Human Studies*, 9, 219-229.
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality. Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage.
- Potter, J. (2002). Two kinds of natural. *Discourse Studies*, 4, 539-542.
- Potter, J. and Edwards, D. (2003). Rethinking cognition: On Coulter on discourse and mind. *Human Studies*, 26, 165-181.
- Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and Social Psychology Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Prapavessis, H. and Grove, J.R. (1994). Personality variables as antecedents of precompetitive mood state temporal patterning. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 22, 347-365.

- Rees, T., Ingledew, D.K. and Hardy, L. (2005a). Attribution in sport psychology: Seeking congruence between theory, research and practice. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6, 189-204.
- Rees, T., Ingledew, D.K. and Hardy, L. (2005b). Attribution in sport psychology: Further comments on Faulkner and Finlay (2005). *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6, 213-4.
- Sacks, H. (1984). On doing 'being ordinary.' In J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage, editors, *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*. Volumes I and II. Edited by G. Jefferson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shainberg, L. (1989). Finding the zone. *New York Times Magazine*, 38, pp. 34-36.
- Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C. (2002). Men, sport, spinal cord injury, and the construction of coherence: Narrative practice in action. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 143-171.
- Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C. (2004). Men, sport, and spinal cord injury: An analysis of metaphors and narrative types. *Disability and Society*, 19, 613-626.
- Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C. (2005). Analyzing talk in qualitative inquiry: Exploring possibilities, problems and tensions. *Quest*, 57, 213-242.
- Sparkes, A.C. and Partington, S. (2003). Narrative practice and its potential contribution to sport psychology: The example of flow. *The Sport Psychologist*, 17, 292-317.
- Speer, S.A. (2002). 'Natural' and 'contrived' data: A sustainable distinction. *Discourse Studies*, 4, 511-525.
- Stainton Rogers, W. (2003). *Social psychology. Experimental and critical*

- approaches*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Sugarman, K. (1999). *Winning the Mental Way: a practical guide to team building and mental training*. Burlingame, CA: Step Up Publishing.
- ten Have, P. (2002). Ontology or methodology?: Comments on 'natural' and 'contrived' data: A sustainable distinction. *Discourse Studies*, 4, 527-530.
- Wagstaff, G. F. (1996). Compliance and imagination in hypnosis. In R.G. Kunzendorf, N.P. Spanos and B. Wallace, editors, *Hypnosis and Imagination*. New York: Baywood Publishing.
- Wetherell, M. (2005). Unconscious conflict or everyday accountability? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, 169-173.
- Widdicombe, S. & Wooffitt, R. (1995). *The language of youth subcultures. Social identity in action*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Wooffitt, R. (1991). 'I was doing X ...when Y': Some inferential properties of a device in accounts of paranormal experiences. *Text*, 11, 267-288.
- Wooffitt, R. (1992). *Telling tales of the unexpected: The organisation of factual discourse*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Young, J.A. (1999). *Professional tennis players in flow: Flow theory and reversal theory perspectives*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Monash University at Melbourne, Australia.

Author Note

The author wishes to thank Derek Edwards and the two reviewers for their detailed and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This research was part-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Grant award R00429824362.

About the Author

Abigail Locke is a lecturer in psychology in the Department of Human Sciences at Loughborough University. She is also the current editor of *Social Psychological Review*. Her research interests include discursive uses of mental states, sports discourse, and medical and health communication, in particular antenatal care.

Appendix : Zone data

The following two extracts are the full extract transcribed from the Equinox programme "Losing It".

Equinox: Brian Moore/Sally Gunnell

1 BM: ((glossing)) sports scientists have long acknowledged the
2 importance of total mental control (.) yet few before
3 have tried to measure it (.) the reason is simple (.) its
4 an intensely personal (.) almost mystical experience
5 (4.0)
6 in nineteen ninety three (.) as she prepared for the
7 world championships in Stuttgart(0.8) Sally Gunnell (0.2)
8 was suffering from a cold (.)
9 SG: to me it's all the >sort of< (0.2) the way you portray
10 yourself before hand y'know its very important that
11 you're giving off very (0.2) positive vibes so I would
12 y'know make sure that no one could hear me cough and
13 (.) make sure I was still wandering around feeling y'know
14 yeah this is it y'know you've gotta run against me
15 and I'm feeling good here
16 ((clips))
17 it was all like acting almost (.) y'know I was trying
18 to just (.) create this character and try and push down
19 the (.) the little negative me inside that was heh y'know
20 was really y'know not quite right sort of thing
21 (0.4) and then by the time I'd got to the line
22 and w- >y'know< we're talking (1.0) five ten seconds
23 before hand constantly y'know saying this is it (.) go
24 for it (.) y'know you might never get this chance again
25 BM: ((glossing)) Gunnell was drawn in lane four (0.8) her
26 great rival (0.2) the American Sandra Farmer-Patrick (.)
27 was just outside her in lane six
28 ((clips))
29 SG: it's weird really but u:m (0.2) yo:u (1.0) totally forget
30 everything (.) I I can't really (.) recall why I mean its
31 probably only ever happened to me probably twice in my
32 whole (0.6) career
33 ((clips))
34 SG: but I don't (0.8) ever remember (0.8) coming off (.)

35 the last (1.0) hurdle and and knowing that she was there
36 (.) and this is what happened she was actually right
37 ahead of me and she was ahead of me all the way in but I
38 don't (0.6) remember this and it was only me sort of like
39 fighting and going over the line and (0.8) y'know I
40 stood over the line and it was like (1.0) my life was
41 almost starting again (.) it had almost been on hold for
42 that last (0.4) y'know fifty two (.) seven seconds
43 ((clips))
44 SG: and it was like well what's happened (.) y'know I
45 didn't know that I'd actually won (.) and that I'd
46 actually broken the world record everyone thought oh
47 she's very calm y'know (.) she's just walking around
48 (0.2) but I was looking to see you know what actually
49 happened in that race (.) I had no idea it was as though
50 I'd just run my own (.) >y'know< (.) tunnel vision all
51 the way round I don't remember any of it
52 ((clips))
53 SG: it seemed like (.) ages until actually you know the
54 commentator (.) had had actually announced >and the
55 announcement said< y'know Sally Gunnell new world record
56 holder world champion
57 ((clips))
58 BM: at that point you woke up
59 SG: yeah it was a little bit like that (.) it was a little
60 bit um (0.2) like waking up (.) u:m (.) I think the thing
61 is that (.) in my mental preparation beforehand (.) u::m
62 (.) y'know I go over the race so many times with me
63 winning (0.2) a:nd (.) I think because I go over it so
64 many times (.) it is almost like a tape recording and
65 once I get out there and run the race (.) I feel very
66 much I suppose you- you're getting in to ya (0.2)
67 subconsciousness in your mind that y'know I've been
68 there before
69 ((clips))
70 BM: and its almost like a religious experience
71 SG: yeah you feel as though someone's almost (.) helping you
72 I must admit just because it (.) it does feel so alien
73 (.) at times (.) y'know as I said before it

74 doesn't actually (.) particularly feel like (.) me out
75 there and you almost get into its like a tr↑a↓nce (.) and
76 uh you feel as though someone y'know I always said (.)
77 someone's watching you and just sort of like you know (.)
78 pulling you round (.) the track and and and (0.2) and
79 letting you flow around that track yeah it's a yeah (.)
80 it is (.) an amazing feeling
81 BM: what Sally Gunnell had just experienced was a state of
82 mind now recognised by most sports scientists (.) as the
83 key to top performance under stress (.) it's often
84 referred to as the zone

((commercial break))

Equinox: Brian Moore/Derek Redmond

1 BM: athletes who've got in to the zone (.) have managed to
2 compartmentalise and control their minds (0.2) to what
3 scientists regard as an extraordinary degree (.) it's no
4 wonder it's something that few ever really experience
5 (4.0)
6 but imagine if you achieve that ultimate state (0.2) yet
7 had its rewards (.) snatched from you
8 (2.0)
9 despite a career plagued by injury (.) Derek Redmond
10 began the semi-final of the four hundred metres in
11 Barcelona in nineteen ninety two (0.4)
12 as a strong favourite (0.4) not only for a
13 final place (0.6) but for a medal
14 DR: I was in the zone heh heh heh heh I was (.) everything
15 had gone right (.) yeah at the start I said on your marks
16 ((clips))
17 DR: and I knew I'd won it
18 ((clips))
19 DR: mentally I'd (0.2) I'd won the race
20 ((clips))
21 DR: and I was just (.) floating down the back straight I felt
22 like I was running on air (.) I look at the film now (.)
23 just the way I was running was absolutely brilliant
24 ((clips))

25 and all of a sudden I heard a (0.2) what I thought was a
26 gun shot from the crowd (.) u::m (.) carried on running
27 next thing you know (.) (that-) I thought somebody had
28 shot me and I thought I'd been shot in the back of the
29 l[↑]eg and (0.4) that was it y'know your hamstring
30 goes there's nothing you can do you go up and you come
31 straight back down again (.) game over
32 ((clips))
33 DR: I remember (0.2) getting up (0.2) and thinking if you get
34 up now (.) you can still qualify (.) and they've got
35 fifty metres to go and they're all flying (.) I've got
36 two hundred and fifty metres to go and three hamstrings
37 (.) and I'm still thinking that I can qualify [I]
38 BM: [you]
39 really believed that you could still get through
40 DR: >if you had come up to me then and said I'd bet you
41 anything you won't< (.) you- you can't qualify I would
42 have said (.) you're on (.) I honestly felt (.) I
43 could still qualify (.)
44 BM: ((glossing)) Redmond was so deeply in the zone (.) that
45 his mind simply refused to accept what his body was
46 telling him
47 ((clips))
48 DR: the next thing I know someone puts their hands round my
49 shoulders as we're coming round the bend and I tried to
50 flick their (.) flick their arms off
51 ((clips))
52 DR: and I heard my dad say look it's me it's me (.) you know
53 you don't have to do this (0.2) I turned round and said
54 (0.2) I do
55 ((clips))
56 DR: he said to me well look we started everything together
57 (0.2) we'll finish this race together (0.2) a:nd (0.4) at
58 that point I couldn't hold it in any more and like (.)
59 everything came out
60 ((clips))
61 BM: did you feel (0.2) cheated in a sense
62 DR: o::h (.) pissed off (.) cheated (.) gutted (.) yeah
63 I really thought (.) I was owed something by somebody but
64 I didn't know who (.) u:m (.) and I really wanted the

65 whole world of athletics to stop until I got myself back
66 in shape and then we can all carry on again
67 ((clips))
68 DR: y'know if I had a wis:h (0.4) most people's
69 wish would be to have y'know all of the money in the
70 world (.) my actual wish would be to go back (.) and
71 finish that race (.) there's (1.0) absolutely
72 nothing I can do about it
73 ((clips))
74 there is definitely a part of me that (.) y'know is
75 dead and buried and (.) I'll never really (0.4) y'know
76 (0.2) get to see it again (.) and I'll never get that (.)
77 particular situation of those athletes at that time (.)
78 all in that shape (.) its gone for ever (0.2) y'know and
79 there's (1.0) nothing I can do about it
80 BM: ((glossing)) Redmond (.) never ran again (.) he'd won the
81 battle with his mind (.) only for his body to let him
82 d↓own (0.8) when the best in sport step out to
83 perform (.) they push their bodies and minds to limits
84 (.) the rest of us regard as superhuman (.) but if for
85 all their efforts they fail (.) their anguish and pain
86 reminds us that they are (.) after all (.) still mortal

((end of programme))

ⁱ When my initial interest began on the *zone*, I searched the Oxford English Dictionary and found reference to different usages of the word “*zone*”, these included geographical (climate/temperate zones), regions, (town) planning, football/basketball specific regions on the court, and references to zoology – a growth or structure surrounding some part in the form of a ring (Oxford English Dictionary 1989, Second Edition), but no mention of the word *zone* in the context of its usage in the current paper. Whilst writing this paper however, and looking at the Oxford English Dictionary again, it appears that in December 2002 under “draft addition” it added the following:

“*colloq.* (orig. *U.S. Sport*). A state of perfect concentration leading to optimum mental or physical performance. Chiefly with *the*, esp. *in the zone*”.

ⁱⁱ The analysis offered here neither endorses nor rejects the ‘reality’ of the *zone* as described by athletes, sports psychologists and commentators. The discursive psychological perspective presented in this paper differs in focus from sports psychological analysis in that it does not begin by treating the *zone* as a ‘real’ phenomenon, or athletes’ narratives as ‘actual’ descriptions of events. Instead, it treats their accounts of being in the *zone* as situated talk, performing specific interactional business. The main theme is that the *zone*, whatever else it may be, is a discursive resource used by both athletes and sports psychologists, in their accounts of performance, and it is this discourse phenomenon that is under investigation here. One strand of interest in discursive psychology is to explore the discursive usage of the *psychological thesaurus* (Edwards, 2004) As Edwards suggests “[o]nce we start to appreciate the rich and systematic uses to which everyday psychological concepts are put, their status as potentially inaccurate pictures of a real mental life going on behind the scenes becomes irrelevant and misconceived” (Edwards, 2004: 263).

ⁱⁱⁱ This tension between theory and practice is still clearly evident in the sports psychology literature. For example, in the recent debate on attribution theory in the journal *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* between Rees, Ingledew & Hardy (2005a, 2005b) and the discursive critique provided by Faulkner & Finlay (2005).

^{iv} For a recent debate on the bounds of agency, refer to Hollway & Jefferson (2005) and the commentary by Wetherell (2005). Discursive psychology addresses typical psychological concerns such as agency or intentionality (Edwards, 2006) as speaker concerns.

^v There are issues of editing with the Equinox data as although it appears to be sequentially organized to sound like continuous turn taking, it is important to consider that some talk sequences may have been constructed as such by the editing team. However, as the purpose of this paper is on the rhetorical organization and the construction of zone accounts, rather than a conversation analytic concern with a sequential analysis, this does not affect issues raised in this particular analysis. Indeed the categories of ‘real’ and ‘naturalistic’ data and what specifically constitutes them is of huge debate in the social sciences (see Lynch, 2002; Potter, 2002; Speer, 2002; ten Have, 2002). The full accounts, including the programme narrator’s introduction to them, are situated in the appendices.

Potter (1996) discusses the role of edited television documentaries with a specific regard to category entitlements, i.e. who is able to speak knowledgeably and competently about a specific topic. In the case of the Equinox data here, we can clearly see how this category entitlement is played out, particularly as the build up to the athletes’ accounts by Brian Moore, the programme’s narrator, is included.

^{vi} There is an indication of editing here by the documentary makers as Gunnell here refers to “she” and here she is talking about her rival, Sandra Farmer Patrick whom Brian Moore has previously introduced as her main rival in the race.

^{vii} Whilst giving her narrative of the race, Gunnell is sitting in an auditorium watching the race on the screen. Redmond’s narrative is produced under the same conditions.

^{viii} In the data presented by Jefferson (2004, 133-134) based on previous work by Harvey Sacks, is an example which is very similar in content to Redmond’s account, but one that follows the typical pattern of mundane thoughts before extraordinary events. The example is taken from “The Witnesses” and concerns a claim that on hearing a loud sound thought it was a motorbike backfiring (first thought) before realising that someone had been shot.

As Jefferson notes “a reported first thought recurrently constituted an innocuous, ordinary alternative to an extraordinary reality” (Jefferson, 2004: 137). She noted that the use of the initial “at first I thought” formulations concerns the typically extraordinary events that they are around and often concerns witnesses speaking on the record, perhaps for the mass media.