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Taking sporting autobiographies seriously as an analytical and pedagogical resource in sport, exercise and health

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ABSTRACT

This article makes the case for taking sporting autobiographies seriously as both an analytical and pedagogical resource. First, the nature of autobiography is clarified and the interest shown by other disciplines in this genre is discussed. Next, the prevailing negative view of sporting autobiographies and the assumptions underlying them are outlined. These are then countered by the presentation of a more positive view that challenges a number of alleged 'problems' associated with sporting autobiographies that include being tainted by commercial commitments, the presence of the ghostwriter, and not being able to guarantee unmediated authenticity and 'truth'. Various forms of narrative analysis (thematic, structural, performative/dialogical) are then described and examples of each of these being applied to sporting autobiographies are provided. Finally, attention is given to the use of sporting autobiographies as a pedagogical resource and the ways in which they might be productively used with students are discussed.

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In order to better understand various phenomena in sport, exercise and health (SEH) researchers are often interested in the stories that participants tell about their lives and experiences. These stories can be told in informal talk and in formal interviews, they are available in the mass media and new digital media, and they can also be found in published diaries, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and other forms of life writing (Jolly 2001; Plummer 2001; Roberts, 2002; Sparkes and Smith 2014). The terms biography and autobiography are often used interchangeably and the distinction between them can be fuzzy as each focus on the life of the author. At the risk of simplification, we might say that a biography is the story of a person's life in the words of another person, while an autobiography is the story of a person's life told in her or his own words. Typically, a biography is written in the third person, while an autobiography is written in the first person. Thus, the distinguishing mark of the autobiography in contrast to the biography is the union of authorial signature and narrator.

Speaking less simplistically of the fundamental differences between biography and autobiography as forms of life writing, Cockshut (2001) notes that it rests on the inescapable difference between subject and object, which is reflected in a difference of sources.

The first source of biography was oral tradition, possibly based on the impression of eye-witnesses. As cultures became more literate, this was supplemented, and often overtaken, by documents, especially letters ... The primary material of autobiography is memory; even when autobiographers bring copious documents to their task, the reader will be aware of the author's memory of the letter he or she wrote or received, and of his or her power of exclusion

and choice. The autobiographer need not mention anything of which he or she is ashamed, or which conflicts with his or her literary plans; the biographer may be intent on revealing things that his or her subject might have wished suppressed, or traits of character that were hidden to the subject. (Cockshut 2001, p. 78)

Reflecting on such differences, Smith and Watson (2010) note that in biography 'scholars of other people's lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject' (p. 5). In contrast, in autobiographical writing the following takes place.

[S]ubjects write about their own lives predominantly, even if they write about themselves in the second or third person, or as a member of a community. And they write simultaneously from externalized and internal points of view, taking themselves as both subject and object, or thematizing that distinction ... the biographer can circle the car with the driver in it to record the history, character and motivations of the driver, the traffic, the vehicle, and the facts of transportation. But only the life narrator knows the experience of traffic rushing towards her and composes an interpretation of that situation, that is, writes her subjectivity. (Smith and Watson 2010, pp. 5–6)

In the past, across a variety of disciplines (e.g. literary theory, history, and anthropology) and cross-disciplinary fields (e.g. cultural studies and women's studies), the genre of autobiography has been the subject of critical analytical attention. The autobiographical dimensions of human life and the narrative appreciation of the passage of time for lives has now been much studied, through, for example, the hermeneutics of Ricoeur (1992) and Kearney (2004), the philosophical ethics of Macintyre (2007) and Taylor (1989), and the sociological and psychosocial discussions of Denzin (1989) and Brockmeier (2000). More recently, stimulated by the dual crises of representation and legitimation along with the textual and narrative turns in the social sciences that led to a re-thinking of conceptual schema, topics of inquiry, and the procedures and practices that drive intellectual inquiry, other disciplines began to consider autobiography as worthy of attention. For example, in their editorial introduction to a special edition of the journal *Sociology* on 'Biography and Autobiography in Sociology,' Stanley and Morgan (1993) note that despite a history of neglect there were now sufficient grounds to justify a sustained sociological interest in autobiography that seeks to achieve the epistemological sophistication of analysis and debate that have occurred within the other disciplines named above.

Stanley and Morgan (1993) point out that while sociologists, at an implicit level of concern, have been busy in the production and analysis of 'lives,' through the investigation of whole lives (e.g. life histories, oral histories) and of particular life events (e.g. through ethnography, interviews), that the data generated has typically been treated as unproblematically referential of the material realities of the lives so 'described.' Against this, they suggest, at an explicit level of concern and as part of the turn to textuality, that sociologists treat autobiographies as social products, and give greater analytical attention to the processes of writing and reading these texts.

This means that rather than seeing biography and autobiography as immediately referential to lives, we treat them as works of artifice and fabrication, drawing analytic attention to their use of genre conventions, temporal and other structuring, rhetoric and authorial 'voice.' Here, rather than treating biography and autobiography as unproblematic resources, they are instead conceptualised as topics of investigation in their own right. (Stanley and Morgan, 1993, p. 2)

Evidence that autobiographies have since been treated with sustained sociological interest and worthy of attention in their own right is evident in the work that followed (e.g. Swindells 1995; Roberts 2002), and the formation by the British Sociological Association in 1992 of the Auto/Biography Study Group that has regular conferences and publishes its annual yearbook dedicated to exploring this topic (e.g. see Sparkes 2015a). Supporting such developments within sociology, and in response to similar surges of interest from other disciplines, Smith and Watson (2001) produced the first edition of their book entitled, *A guide for interpreting life narratives: Reading autobiography*, which was followed by a revised edition in 2010. In these volumes they provide a comprehensive critical introduction and a theoretical approach to life writing, the wide-ranging field of autobiographical texts, practices, and acts.

Given the enthusiasm that has greeted the study of autobiographies in other disciplines, and given the large numbers of sporting autobiographies that now commissioned by leading publishing houses, one might assume that a similar surge of interest has taken place within SEH. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. According to Stewart *et al.* (2011), 'despite providing a potentially rich source of data

within the field of sport-related-studies, published autobiographies have, to date, been a neglected resource' (p. 582). In support of this view, Thing and Ronglan (2015) state that, 'To our knowledge, sociological analyses of sports biographies as texts have hardly been conducted' (p. 1). There are various reasons for this state of affairs that we will now discuss.

Sporting autobiographies: the negative view and misplaced assumptions

In many ways, the neglect of sporting autobiographies by researchers in SEH is not surprising. According to Smith and Watson (2010) they are often lumped together under the heading of 'celebrity autobiographies' that include movie stars, military leaders and other public figures. They point out that in the contemporary commodification of culture, the growth industry of self-advertisement ensures that celebrities can cash in on the memoir boom. In such a situation, the desire of readers for gossip and vicarious immersion in the often fantasy world of the 'stars' can be satisfied. Likewise, 'many are written to capitalise on fleeting fame and possibly rejuvenate it ... A few involve stories of people who are famous for being famous as in the case of Paris Hilton' (p. 163).

Against such a backdrop, writing in the *New York Times Play Magazine*, Curtis (2007) used the way 'Jockography' as a demeaning way to describe sporting autobiographies. Having drawn attention to the fact that most of these are ghostwritten by sportswriters and journalists, he notes that jockographies tend to follow a structure that begins with an account of the athlete's most memorable play, chronicles how sport got him or her through an unhappy childhood, and tracks their rise to major league stardom. As part of his dismissal of this genre, Curtis claims that most sporting autobiographies are a form of 'ludicrous performance art', and that overall they reveal that 'pro athletes have brutally repetitious, uninteresting lives' and that such works 'may be intended as post-retirement victory laps, but many read like a cry for help' (p. 36). This said, Curtis is forced to admit that some sporting autobiographies are memorable in drawing attention to the experiences (often dehumanising) of those involved and that some do intervene in larger contemporary discussions.

At one level many might be inclined to agree with the negative judgement made by Curtis (2007). A number of scholars in SEH have noted the negative aspects of sporting autobiographies in general. According to Bale *et al.* (2004), Overman (2003), Pipkin (2008), and Whannel (2002) these include the following: limited in their expressive form, predictable in their plot, formulaic in nature, superficial in content, banal and cliché-ridden, dominated by anecdote and gossip, lacking in analysis and short on human insight, and economically driven by the youth market. All this combined, Howells and Fletcher (2015) suggest, is likely to influence the 'length, depth and specific content of the stories told, which will dictate the inclusion and relevance of the psycho-social related content' (p. 46). Another problem they identify is that the accounts provided in sporting autobiographies are influenced by the 'writers' motives and biases, their ability to recall events and experiences, and others' expectations and potential judgments' (p. 46). Against this backdrop, Taylor (2008) notes that historians of sport have generally 'been loath to treat the self-narrative of an individual life as anything more than a somewhat dubious form of source material' (p. 471).

Besides the negative features listed above, two problems are often presented as being insurmountable for the acceptance of sporting autobiographies as a 'serious' resource for analysis by researchers in SEH. These revolve around the production of sporting autobiographies as a 'commercial commitment' (Thing and Ronglan 2015) by publishers for the purposes of profit, and the fact that many are 'ghost-written' or co-authored (often with a commissioned journalist). In their own ways, both of these problems are presumed to undermine the alleged 'unmediated authenticity' that Smith and Watson (2010) note are reputed to exist when the author or narrator of the autobiography is the person who lived the experiences described (also see Couser 2001).

In terms of challenging these negative views and misplaced assumptions we would point out that poor and formulaic writing is not the sole preserve of this genre. Many published papers in SEH, both qualitative and quantitative leave a great deal to be desired in literary terms. Furthermore, given the conventions of writing that are expected and accepted in the academy, such as, those associated with

the scientific tale for reporting quantitative work and the realist tale for reporting qualitative work (Sparkes 2002; Sparkes and Smith 2014), then scholarly publications are no less formulaic than those of sporting autobiographies. Indeed, in terms of promoting 'formulaic' writing, there are few equivalents to the guidelines provided by the 6th edition of the American Psychological Association Manual (2009) that devotes 259 pages to informing academics how they should write their papers for publication in journals that use this style.

Second, we would argue, following Craig *et al.* (2014) and Sparkes (2013), that all academics working under a pervasive audit culture saturated with calculative practices (e.g. performance indicators) used to measure the worth of individuals and organisations are, just as much as authors of sporting autobiographies, and perhaps even more, inescapably enmeshed in their own web of 'commercial commitments'. As Burrows (2012) points out, each individual academic in the UK is now (potentially) subject to over 100 different (nested) measures. These include the major domains of citations; workload models; transparent costing data; research assessments; teaching quality assessments; and university league tables. All of which, as Burrows suggests, given their emphasis on numeric representation, order and rank, and their focus on the 'measurable', 'increasingly function autonomously as a data assemblage able not just to mimic markets but, increasingly, to enact them' (p. 355).

Take, for example the h-index. Despite many methodological concerns over the conceptualisation, reliability, and validity of this index, Burrows (2012) points out that this number has become a rhetorical device with which the neoliberal academy has come to enact 'academic value'.

The number is used: to inform the short-listing of candidates for new posts; as an academic 'marketing device' on CVs; as a 'bargaining chip' in professorial salary negotiations; as a variable in statistical models designed to predict RAE outcomes; to rank colleagues in REF 'preparedness' exercises; in decisions about institutional restructuring; and to inform decisions about whether or not to accept papers written by particular authors in journals. (pp. 361–362)

The h-index clearly functions to instantiate academic 'value' in the individual researcher or research group. Based on this, monetary resources (e.g. appointments and promotions) follow. Publishing papers in peer reviewed journals, therefore, is a basic feature of the economics of academic life and is directly linked to the possibilities of financial gain at the individual, faculty, and university level. If this is not an indicator of 'commercial commitment' then we are not sure what is. The point is, however, that such a charge and the cultural suspicion concerning the conditions under which publications are produced in journals are rarely if ever used to demean publications in journals or used to suggest that they are not worthy of analytical attention.

Moving on, we now consider the issue of the 'ghostwriter' and how his or her presence, regardless of their insightfulness or writing ability and trustworthiness, is used to demean the value and importance of the sporting autobiography produced. If the ghostwriter is a problem for sporting autobiographies then it is equally a problem for qualitative researchers who generate data from interviews and then write about the lives of others. As Richardson (1992) reminds us, 'no matter how we stage the text, we – the authors – are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them. As we inscribe their lives, we bestow meaning and promulgate values' (p. 131). For Rhodes (2000) this view questions the assertion that researchers can create images of others represented in writing and asks us to consider the nature of the position of the writer in constructing research. He takes the position that research is a form of textual practice and that researchers are themselves textual practitioners.

In exploring how this textual practice is performed through his writing about a person called Bob Carey based on interviews with him, Rhodes (2000) first points out that although, at first glance, it might appear that the story presented is told by Bob and is about Bob's experience that this is not the case. For sure, the piece is written about Bob's experience, but as Rhodes notes, he too is deeply implicated in it. His implication is not as a character in the story, nor as someone who lived through it, but rather, the production of the text resulting from an interview interaction arranged by him with Bob. That is, it was generated as a result of Rhodes' research interests in people's experiences with organisational change, it was produced (as a written text) by him, and it is made available to the reader in the form it is because he chose to do so. The story that he presents of Bob is not the transcript of an interview nor

is it something that Bob wrote independently and allowed Rhodes to reproduce. In view of this, Rhodes states: 'I am, therefore, in the text, but rather than being explicit, I am hidden; I am like a ghost' (p. 511).

For Rhodes (2000), the research text he produced based on Bob's experiences as told in interview, employed a research practice of *ghostwriting*. He uses this term to refer to a practice where a researcher engages with a research participant and, as a result, creates a new text that both tells a story of that participant and implies the involvement of the researcher.

This notion of ghostwriting comes from the literary practice in which a writer authors a text but another person takes credit for its authorship. In such a text, the ghostwriter absents him or herself as an explicit character in the text. From this perspective, the transcription and interpretation of interviews in research can also be seen as a form of ghostwriting in that it is the researcher who produces the text, yet the text is supposedly a representation of the experiences and ideas of the person interviewed. It is a way of writing for and on behalf of someone else. (Rhodes 2000, p. 514)

In conceptualising the textual practice of research as a form of ghostwriting, Rhodes (2000) provides a useful way of thinking about the relationship between the researcher and the researched and for accounting for the reflexivity involved in the process. Importantly, his use of the ghostwriter metaphor as a way of understanding research enables researchers to acknowledge their role in the production of the textual representations of their research participants. Once qualitative researchers involved in interview based research acknowledge themselves as ghostwriters then they, and others in the academic community, will have to admit that their ghostly practices might not be as far removed from those used by their counterparts who collaborate with athletes in the production of sporting autobiographies. This humbling thought might reduce the disdain that 'academics' have for professional ghostwriters and lead to more interesting questions being asked about them. These might include the following: How do they go about their ghostly practices and with what effect on the reader and what can we learn from this about the processes and products of representation in different contexts?

Finally, with regard to the problems of unmediated authenticity and 'truth' in sporting autobiographies, it needs to be recognised that these are 'problems' for any interview-based study and qualitative research in general. As Power *et al.* (2012) reminds us, any expectations that autobiographies can or should represent an objective 'truth' is an ideal that no qualitative data can truly claim. It should also be acknowledged that any concerns for the 'truth' of autobiography also holds true for oral narratives' (p. 41). Such 'problems', however, only become insurmountable if one believes that people have open, pure, and untrammelled access to a transcendental self that can not only be known by them for what it really is but also told by them in way that directly represents and corresponds to this reality. Such a belief commits one to a metaphysics of presence that assumes real, coherent, stable individuals living lives of equivalent meaning. Here, according to MacLure (2009) the storyteller 'knows who she is, says what she means, and means what she says' (p. 104). From this perspective, Grant *et al.* (2013) argue, the researcher's task 'is to access and uncover these meanings from the inner life of the person via the clear window of language' (p. 7). In this regard, Roos (1996) recalls a 'paradise' in which those early social scientists who rediscovered the autobiography as sociological data tended to approach this material in a straightforward and euphoric manner. That is, they took it as 'the ideal material to get to know what *really* happens or what *really* happened in society, as well as to explain what has *really* happened' (p. 1, emphasis added).

This belief and commitment has come under sustained critique in recent years from a variety of perspectives. This led to what Roos (1996) refers to as the 'fall from paradise of true autobiographies' as social scientists became aware that 'no text is innocent, independent of certain theoretical, conceptual and textual frames. Nothing we describe or see in the world we just see: it comes to us and through us always mediated by the current way of seeing things' (p. 1). Against the backdrop of this 'fall', Grant *et al.* (2013) note that for poststructuralists, and we would argue many narratologists, the view that the stories people tell provide a clear window into an inner life of the self, and that the self and the voice telling the story are identical, is untenable.

The argument that voice is inevitably dialogic coheres with a postmodern understanding of a cacophony of voices inhabiting and constituting a self. These voices are often contradictory, sometimes inhabiting the foreground,

sometimes erased, invalidated or distorted by historical and contemporary relations of power. Given the above, voice cannot be considered an innocent and straightforward account for a 'self'. Power, subjectivity and desire shape the ways in which individuals speak to their present situation and their lives. Further, consciousness can never be fully present to itself through language. (p. 7)

In a similar vein, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) suggest that narrative analysts no longer view storytellers as having 'unmediated access to experience, nor do they hold that experience can be conveyed in some pristine or authentic form separate from the institutions and events of the day' (p. 103). For them, within an interactional environment, people work at assembling and composing their stories as they artfully pick and choose from what is experientially available to articulate inner lives and social worlds. Thus, the representation of self in a story is what Carter (2008) calls 'motivated biographical work' (p. 1066) that is, therefore, contrived and assembled rather than spontaneous. This view is emphasised by Smith and Sparkes (2009a) in their following statement.

A narrative approach offers an alternative to the conventional assumption within sport and exercise psychology that assumes people's talk transparently communicates something in the person that exists prior to its expression or is a mirror into their own true and unitary self. It likewise differs inasmuch as selves and identities are not cast as cognitions lodged inside a person's head, innate, thing-like entities that are stable across all time and place, and/or as inherent possessions of the self-sufficient individual. Instead, narrative inquiry recasts and expands our understandings by suggesting that selves and identities are constructions that are made through and by narratives in relation to others ... But, whatever the case, emphasis shifts from selves and identities as individualistic, real, and interior-based, to them being constructions derived from narratives and performed in relationships. (Smith and Sparkes 2009a, p. 5)

Frank (2010) further reminds us, any story told by an individual in an interview or an autobiography is about something that has been enacted elsewhere and so is an enacted truth. This truth is not a copy of the original. Rather, Frank argues, 'they are enactments in which something original comes to be, as if for the first time, in the full significance that the story gives it' (p. 40). In saying this, he rejects the *mimetic* understanding of stories which is based on the idea that stories merely imitate a reality independent of the story, and that 'they are surrogate versions of what the storyteller would have experienced, had she or he been where the storyteller was, proximate to the events being described' (p. 88). Thus, a story is not a clear window through which the viewer can see the world it describes. Rather, any story is more like a window through which sketches of a phenomenon can be seen. Here, 'the viewer does not attempt to look through it to something beyond, much less assume that the sketch perfectly represents what lies beyond. Instead, the sketch itself is well worth looking at' (p. 89).

All the above directly challenges the myth of unmediated authenticity and any notion of a untainted, singular, universal, 'truth' inhabiting the pages of sporting autobiographies. They also challenge the myth of autonomy and the illusion of self-determination that haunts how sporting autobiographies are conceptualised. As Eakin (1999, 2008) reminds us, even though we tend to think of autobiography as a literature of the first person, the subject of autobiography to which the pronoun 'I' refers is neither singular nor first. Rather, the first person of autobiography is plural in its origins and subsequent formation with the 'I' being constructed relationally within a narrative identity system that draws on the resources provided by the cultures people inhabit to shape how they both understand and articulate their many senses, or registers, of self.

Moreover, even though I think there is a legitimate sense in which autobiographies testify to the individual's experience of selfhood, that testimony is necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed. How much of what autobiographers say they experience is equivalent to what they really experience, and how much of it is merely what they know how to say? (Eakin 1999, p. 4)

From a narrative view point of view, people learn to story their lives and give meaning to their experiences under conditions that are often not of their own making. As such, people are not free to tell just any story they wish about themselves. This is because people are born and develop within cultures that provide them with a menu of narrative forms and contents from which to draw in the process of understanding and constructing particular, and recognisable, senses of self over time and in different circumstances (McAdams 2006; Sparkes and Smith 2011; Smith and Sparkes 2012). While this narrative menu provides a number of templates and plot lines for autobiographers, it does not wholly determine

how an individual story is told. Thus, there is a constant interplay between agency and structure in the autobiographical act as a bio-social process that is readily available for analysis by researchers in SEH depending upon their intents and purposes.

We hope that the counter-arguments we have put forward above go some way to challenging the negative view of sporting autobiographies as an analytical resource in SEH. In so doing, we do not wish to dismiss the dual concerns of 'commercial commitment' and 'unmediated authenticity.' While, for some, these concerns may be warranted, for us they are somewhat exaggerated. As we have indicated, academics just like autobiographers are embedded within networks of commercial commitments yet their work is not dismissed on this basis. Likewise, once the 'problem' of unmediated authenticity and autobiographical 'truth' is rethought as we have suggested, it shifts from being a problem to a possible resource for scholarly analysis. This is particularly so if one adopts a narrative approach towards storytelling and uses this to frame the questions asked about sporting autobiographies.

Making the case for the use of sporting autobiographies: a more positive view

We stated earlier that sporting autobiographies can be located in the domain of celebrity autobiographies and so are viewed with suspicion. There are, however, some useful distinctions that need to be made. For example, Smart (2005) points out that many sports stars tend to maintain a position away from celebrity culture and instead occupy a position of authenticity discernable from their visible achievements, talents, work ethic and quantifiable success. Furthermore, in sporting autobiographies the performing body over time is the central focus of attention. This need not necessarily be the case in other types of celebrity autobiographies. It is interesting to note, therefore, that Freeman (2001) and Young (2001) document celebrity autobiography and sporting autobiography separately, with the latter suggesting that sporting autobiographies are a cultural phenomenon in their own right. If this is the case, then they deserve serious analytical attention from the scholarly community. This is particularly so given the large volume that are produced each year for public consumption.

The biographical and autobiographical literature on sport is vast (see Cox 2003). Taylor (2008) notes that first-person accounts of lives and careers in sports – from athletes, trainers, managers, officials, and administrators – easily outnumber journalistic and academic studies and 'represent probably the most substantial body of published material on the history of sport' (p. 470). They constitute a cultural phenomenon. For Taylor, therefore, regardless of literary quality, and beyond the fragments of verifiable information that can be gleaned from sports autobiographies, scholars should focus on their development as cultural texts, produced and consumed in significant and increasing numbers, and with the power to shape how athletes and non-athletes perceive specific sports and their star performers.

As a specific social phenomenon in numerical terms, and contrary to the concerns we outlined in the previous section, it needs to be recognised that many sporting autobiographies are well written, involve complex plot lines, and provide illuminating insights into the lives of athletes and those involved with them before, during, and after their playing careers are over. In this regard, Smith and Watson (2010) directly counter what they see as the mocking use of the term 'jockography' by Curtis (2007) by pointing out that sports memoirs incorporate many autobiographical templates. These include, the conversion narrative, the coming-of-age and overcoming-of-origins story, the physical limitations story, and the trajectory of early hope, achievement, disillusionment, and distilled wisdom. In positive terms, they note the following, 'as a site employing multiple models of storytelling rather than a single genre, sports memoir is a hybrid form of life writing' (p. 163).

Also speaking in positive terms, Overman (2003) emphasises that there are a growing number of well-written life stories by and about athletes that stand apart from the negative stereotype and provide narratives that 'provide meaningful insights into the private lives of public personalities' (p. 5). Pipkin (2008) supports this view and states that many sporting autobiographies are 'much more than a paste-and-cut assemblage of great moments that culminate in "that championship season". In the best sports autobiographies, there is a clear selection process that tells a fuller and richer story offering not just facts and statistics but an interpretation' (p. 2).

For Pipkin (2008) such autobiographies have the qualities of a story that emphasises not facts, although these are important, but personal experiences. In this regard, he argues factual accuracy (i.e. historical truth) is less interesting and usually less significant than the different, and deeper, kind of truth athletes reveal in telling about their experiences. For him, therefore, in contrast to the typical lens used for studying sports that tends to be positioned *outside* the lines, sporting autobiographies can be used to take us, as researchers, *inside* the lines.

In *Sporting Lives* I use sports autobiographies as my primary resources and the athletes' own views of their experiences as the subject of my analysis because my overriding concern is not historical accuracy or the objective reliability of the athletes' testimony but the way their subjective expressions of their experiences reflect a view of sports, one different in key aspects from those written by journalists, historians, sociologists and others who do not sit inside the lines. (Pipkin 2008, p. 3)

Similarly, reflecting on her reasons for choosing published sporting autobiographies to examine some of the narratives of alcoholism among professional athletes, Palmer (2015) comments as follows.

While acknowledging the limitations of historical memory, my concern here is less with a quest for 'truth' or to validate the reliability of autobiographical accounts and more to explore the potential of auto/biography to locate, conceptually, stories of addiction within an athlete's social and sporting life more broadly, and their contribution to readings of contemporary celebrity culture. (Palmer 2015, p. 4)

As we indicated earlier, and as Palmer (2015) and Pipkin (2008) suggest, the kind of 'truth' revealed in autobiographies about experiences is an enacted truth. It is a sketch viewed through a window that is well worth looking at for what we can learn from it. Once this position is adopted, and once sporting autobiographies are understood as specific forms of narratives and stories, then they can become interesting analytical resources in their own right for researchers in SEH. For example, Eakin (1999) approaches autobiography in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, 'asking what such texts can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being "I" – and, in some instructive cases that prove the rule, their sense of not being an "I"' (p. 4). Likewise, Bjorklund (1998) states, 'Autobiographies are a bountiful source of information about vocabularies of the self, and they allow us to study changes in self-understanding over time' (p. 8). More recently, Palmer (2015) makes the case that sporting autobiographies 'can offer a point of entry into wider theoretical debates about the construction and presentation of identity in sporting celebrity culture' (p. 2).

While a number of approaches to studying sporting autobiographies are available (see Jolly 2001; Smith and Watson 2010), we suggest that the application of various forms of narrative analysis is a fruitful way to proceed. These include the following: thematic analysis, structural analysis, and dialogical or performative analysis (Smith and Sparkes 2009b, 2012; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For Riessman (2008), all narrative inquiry is concerned with content, that is, 'what' is said, written, or visually shown. But, in a thematic analysis, content is the exclusive focus to the exclusion of 'how' something is said, 'to whom,' or 'for what purposes.' She notes that thematic analysis can be applied to a wide range of narrative texts, including autobiographies.

With regard to a structural analysis, the questions asked shift attention from the 'telling' to the told and from an exclusive focus on the narrator's experience to the framing devices that shape the narrative or autobiography itself. There is still a concern with content (the *whats*) but the focus of analysis shifts to *how* stories are put together and the kind of narratives types that are drawn on to scaffold and structure the story being told.

A dialogical or performance narrative analysis shifts the focus yet again away from the *whats* and *hows* of storytelling and asks according to Riessman (2008) who an utterance may be directed to, when, and why, that is, for what purposes? Developing this aspect of dialogical analysis, Frank (2010) stresses the need for narratives to be taken as *actors* that *do* things which produce particular effects and make a difference in terms of how people choose to interpret events in their lives, construct certain aspects of self, and how they consequently react. For him, 'what people know as experience hitches a ride on stories those people know; the stories shape what becomes experience ... The storyteller speaks, but the story teaches – a complex synergy' (pp. 22–25). Thus, stories are not only performed – they perform, *doing* something for the teller and the listener.

Having described the characteristics of thematic, structural, and dialogical or performative kinds of narrative analysis, we now turn our attention to how these have been used by scholars in SEH to interrogate sporting autobiographies. In so doing, we hope to further strengthen our case for using sporting autobiographies as an analytical resource for exploring specific phenomena. We begin with those who have subjected this genre to a thematic analysis before considering those who have combined this with a structural analysis. Following this, we provide an example of a study that includes a dialogical analysis by illustrating the impact of a published autobiography on the 'actual' life of an athlete with regard to how he interpreted his experience in a specific set of circumstances.

Sporting autobiographies as an analytical resource: thematic, structural and dialogical narrative analysis in action

In an early foray into the field, Overman (2003) conducted a *thematic* analysis of fifty autobiographies of elite male athletes from a range of sports with the intention of exploring their relationships with their fathers. This analysis provides a counter-narrative and an alternative to the dominant discourse of athletes' lives that draws on heroic models emphasising popular stereotypes at the expense of individual distinctions. His typology of fathers transcends this bias by indicating a wide variety of relationships between athletes and their fathers that moves us beyond the constructs of 'typical athletes', 'family' and 'modal parent'. All of which offers a corrective to the data-laden conclusions of empirical studies couched in descriptions of central tendencies and correlations. Moving beyond family background, in his book entitled *Living out of bounds: The male athlete's everyday life*, Overman (2008) develops his thematic analysis of male sporting autobiographies to examine issues such as, sex and sexuality, sport and race, the athlete and his body, and retiring from sport. Having identified common themes that have persisted over time and across sports, Overman emphasises that there is no representative experience in sport and no typical athlete. For him, this realisation is significant, given that we routinely employ stereotypical labels like 'jock' to describe men in sport.

While Overman (2003, 2008) sought to problematize a dominant discourse and associated stereotypes, Burke and Sparkes (2009) took a key theoretical concept and focused on how it was actualised in a specific group. They did this by exploring how cognitive dissonance is experienced by thematically analysing the published autobiographies of six high altitude climbers. Their analysis illuminates three key themes in relation to this phenomenon with the climbers: psychological discomfort; the self as decent but afflicted; and reconstructing the past for the present and future self. Burke and Sparkes argue that their exploration of the climbers' autobiographical accounts not only opens a window on how time is being used in peoples' experiences with cognitive dissonance 'but also adds to the existing cognitive dissonance literature by shedding light on the underlying processes involved in reducing or eliminating discrepancies between cognitions and how people go about subtracting dissonant cognitions, adding consonant cognitions, and decreasing the importance of dissonant cognitions' (p. 343). Likewise, in terms of how their thematic analysis illuminates the climbers' understandings of what constituted their senses of self as a guiding force in shaping their autobiographical accounts in general and their experiences of cognitive dissonance in particular, Burke and Sparkes suggest that this adds a further insight to the self-consistency perspective leaders in the field of cognitive psychology.

In contrast to the studies named above that rely on a thematic analysis, other work has combined both a structural *and* a thematic narrative analysis. For example, Sparkes (2004) combines these to explore Lance Armstrong's (2000) autobiography (co-authored by Sally Jenkins) entitled, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*. His thematic analysis illustrates the ways in which pre-cancer, Armstrong developed a disciplined and dominating body (Frank 1991) and how this led him to have an marked affinity for the *restitution* narrative (Frank 2013) when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Sparkes proceeds to show how this narrative structures the ways in which Armstrong tells his story in terms of its content and how this shapes his interpretation of events, his embodied experiences, and relations with others during the early phase of treatment. The combined thematic and structural analysis further reveals how later in his treatment Armstrong adopts a *quest* narrative (Frank 2013) that significantly

alters how he interprets his embodied experiences, and relations with others. This work develops our understanding of how body-self relationships are structured by various narrative forms in ways that shape both individual and group experiences and actions.

In his book entitled *Sporting lives: Metaphors and myths in American sports autobiographies*, Pipkin (2008) explores several key themes that are embedded in many athletes' stories, 'themes common in many ways to the larger culture but shaped by the way that sports make the world of the athlete a particular construction' (p. 14). Combining a thematic and structural analysis, Pipkin examines what he calls a 'narrative arc' that stretches from the joyful expanses of the 'The echoing green' when entering sport as a child to the cold hillside of the 'end of Autumn' that revolves around retirement. In between, he examines the 'Body songs' told by athletes whereby they read their bodies as if they were texts, and he reveals how this process is shaped by the social worlds in which they live and the more intimately known bodies that they inhabit. A similar task is undertaken in a chapter that looks at the role the performing body plays in the moments of 'Magic', or peak experience, described by athletes in their autobiographies.

Extending the notion of 'Body songs' told by the athletes in the sports autobiographies analysed by Pipkin (2008), the illness experience is the focus of attention for Stewart *et al.* (2011). They subjected 12 autobiographies of athletes from a variety of sports to both a thematic and a structural analysis to reveal how different metaphors are embedded in certain narrative types, how these work in combination to shape both the illness experiences of the athletes concerned, and how these experiences are articulated to others in various settings. Importantly, by enabling a better understanding of the metaphors available to athletes to use in their stories, their work shows both how and why it is very difficult for athletes to transition between narrative types and different kinds of body-self relationships over time. Equally, their combined thematic and structural analysis, along with that of Sparkes (2004) expands our understanding of what it means for athletes who become seriously ill when they are faced with a limited repertoire or stock of metaphors with which to make sense of their experience as they attempt to re-story their body-self relationships and communicate all of this to those around them as part of a complex and dynamic process.

An interest in the illness experience also informs the work of Palmer (2015) who, drawing on four autobiographies that recount the story of an athlete's struggle with alcohol addiction, examines some of the narratives of alcoholism among professional athletes, particularly their decline, recovery and, in some cases, their death. Set against the deviance or 'vice' narrative that shapes the portrayal of athletes with addictions by tabloid media as 'fools' or 'villains' following an off-field misdemeanour, Palmer uses autobiographical data to reveal complex stories of trauma, suffering and chaos that are obscured by the tabloidization of addiction. In so doing, she brings to the foreground the everyday reality of this illness, along with its costs and consequences, as told by the athletes themselves.

In combining a thematic and structural analysis, Palmer (2015) notes how the stories of celebrity athletes tend to follow a predictable narrative arc involving their rise, fall and redemption (Whannel 2002). In contrast, by showing how the restitution narrative as described by Frank (2013) operates as a framing device within the four autobiographies to shape the particular relationships between an individual and their illness, Palmer reveals a different narrative arc that involves the intersecting themes of fighting against the illness, the journey and the return. By examining each of these themes in detail, her findings capture the notion of discursive management and the select presentation of self through the material contained in the texts and that which is left out in the texts. For Palmer, 'autobiographies, the evocative nature of metaphors and the cultural scripts that are written about the experience of addiction can provide important devices through which to narrate a story, a presentation and a performance of self' (p. 10). Her theoretically informed analysis, therefore, adds to our understanding of how contemporary sporting celebrity is both constructed and experienced in differing sets of circumstance.

Howells and Fletcher (2015) used a sample of eight autobiographies of Olympic swimming champions, published between 2002 and 2012, to explore the adversity- and growth-related experiences of swimmers at the highest competitive level. Their analysis of the autobiographies reveals that all of the Olympic champion swimmers experienced adversity during their lives, and that they progressed

through a transitional process to positively transform their experiences into growth. When structured and framed by the 'performance' narrative described by Douglas and Carless (2006), that prioritises performance and results at the expense of other aspects of the athletes' lives, Howells and Fletcher noted that the swimmers perceived their adversity-related experiences to be traumatic and initially attempted to negotiate them by maintaining a state of normality through the development of an emotional and embodied relationship with water. This relationship involved the non-disclosure of traumatic adversities and the development of multiple identities. As these strategies eventually proved to be maladaptive and exposed the swimmers to further adversity, the stories told within the autobiographies then typically shifted to a more quest-focused narrative involving self-discovery that enabled the swimmers to seek meaning in their experiences and look to others for support (Frank 2013). The adoption of these strategies, Howells and Fletcher suggest, were necessary for the swimmers to experience growth, which was identifiable through superior performance, enhanced relationships, spiritual awareness, and prosocial behaviour.

According to Howells and Fletcher (2015), the findings, based on their structural and thematic analysis of these eight sporting autobiographies, provide broad support for theories of posttraumatic growth and suggest that assimilation processes may comprise initial phases of the transition between adversity and growth. They also suggest that, the adversity-related experiences identified in their study are noticeably more diverse than those reported in previous adversity-related growth research involving sport performers and, unlike previous research in this area, the swimmers sometimes identified their responses to events as becoming adversities in their own right. The analysis provided by Howells and Fletcher clearly makes a positive contribution to our knowledge in SEH regarding adversity and growth-related experiences in elite athletes, and as they state, 'A noteworthy strength of this study is the use of autobiographies that span top sport performers' lives and provide valuable and privileged insights into psychosocial processes and changes' (p. 46).

The studies named above highlight the benefits of subjecting sporting autobiographies to a thematic and/or structural analysis so as to confirm, develop, extend or challenge key theories and concepts used for explaining a given phenomenon. Some also hint at the performative or dialogical aspects of autobiographical texts as *actors* that *do* things in terms of producing particular effects, making a difference in terms of how people choose to interpret events in their lives, construct certain aspects of self, and behave to self and others on a daily basis. For example, Palmer (2015) hints at the public repair work autobiographies about athletes with addictions can accomplish.

The restitution narrative within the life script, when executed well, can shift the public response to a celebrity's fall from grace from one of initial outrage to one of public reparation, for the tropes of therapy – particularly the notion of addiction – now provide a shorthand way of explaining and excusing aspects of a celebrity's life across their sporting career. (Palmer 2015, p. 11)

One study that moves beyond hinting at the power of sporting autobiographies to act and do work in shaping the lived experiences of others is provided by Sparkes *et al.* (2012) in their life-history study of a young elite athlete named David who was diagnosed with cancer that eventually led to his death. Their thematic analysis of interviews and field observations revealed the dimensions David used in making upward social comparisons with others living with cancer or who had survived it, and in making downward social comparisons to others who had cancer but were not coping well. The structural analysis conducted by Sparkes and colleagues show how these upward and downward social comparisons along with the dimensions operating within them were actively shaped by the restitution narrative as described by Frank (2013) and how, in combination, these shaped David's cancer experience as an elite athlete.

Moving beyond their thematic and structural analysis of David's life history, Sparkes *et al.* (2012) note how, in making upward social comparisons relating to cancer, David constantly referred to Lance Armstrong and his published autobiography. They then illustrate how Armstrong's autobiography, and particularly the sections in the book that are shaped by the restitution narrative, which David chooses to focus on at the expense of others displayed within it (see Sparkes 2004), provided a narrative map

for him of how to act and interpret his cancer experiences over time with a view to 'beating' cancer and making a successful comeback to elite sport.

A more detailed dialogical narrative analysis of David's life history is offered by Sparkes (2015b) to further illuminate the performative dynamics of Armstrong's autobiography, showing how it did things and acted in powerful ways in David's life following his cancer diagnosis by informing his sense of what counted as good and bad, what should be valued and held in contempt, and how he should and should not act. Sparkes recognises that in doing its performative work and acting as a narrative map, Armstrong's autobiography played a significant role in teaching David how to be ill with cancer, how to interpret his own and others' cancer experiences and what stories to attend to or ignore from what was available in the cultural repertoire. As an actor, this autobiography assisted David to hold his own in a difficult condition, enabling him to maintain a positive view of himself as a cancer patient, hold onto a concrete sense of hope for a cure, and thereby cope with his illness. Importantly, this work shows that sporting autobiographies as part of the cultural repertoire available to athletes and non-athletes can, and do act in the lives of others in powerful ways and with significant consequences.

For us, the examples provided above clearly illustrate that sporting autobiographies can be used as an analytical resource by researchers in SEH to good effect depending on their interests and purposes. Importantly, such an analysis can add to our theoretical understanding of specific phenomenon and thereby make a significant contribution to the field of study by either confirming or challenging prevalent theories and concepts. To this we would add the following benefits. First, sporting autobiographies are a relatively easy source of data to access about elite athletes when compared to accessing them for interview in the flesh. This means that larger numbers than would normally be possible for an interview based study can be sampled. Here, a good example is that of Overman (2003, 2008) who was able to gain 'access' to the lives of fifty elite male athletes for the analytical purposes of his research. Second, accessing sporting autobiographies is a low cost enterprise when compared to the usual costs of interview-based research (e.g. travel, accommodation and transcription costs). Finally, gaining ethical approval to use sporting autobiographies to investigate a specific phenomenon is much easier than gaining ethical approval to explore the same phenomenon by actually interviewing athletes themselves. This is particularly so when dealing with sensitive subjects, such as, drug use or mental health issues. Besides these analytical possibilities and benefits, sporting autobiographies also provide pedagogical opportunities. Some of these will now be explored in the next section.

Sporting autobiographies as a pedagogical resource

Just as we believe that sporting autobiographies provide an analytical resource for researchers in SEH, we also believe that they can be used as a pedagogical resource in a number of ways when working with undergraduate and postgraduate students. In this we are not alone. For example, Harrawood *et al.* (2013) makes the case for using autobiographies to teach concepts of addiction to counsellors-in-training, many of whom find it challenging to understand the trajectory of addiction and the choices people with addiction make. For them, autobiographies are one way to introduce the counsellor-in-training to the life experience of the addict. Likewise, Power *et al.* (2012) argue that autobiographies have a useful role to play in informing the practices of nurses by providing them with valuable insights into the personal lived experiences of illness, disability and health care (also see Norcross *et al.* 2001; Mathibe *et al.* 2008).

Autobiographical works can provide nurses with windows into the intimate, lived worlds of those they care for, through which understanding, empathy and insight into consumer's realities may be fostered. Furthermore, autobiographical accounts provide insights into the way interactions with nurses are experienced, and importantly remembered by care recipients ... There is a need to understand how people experience illness, disability, disability and healthcare, and autobiography can provide an ideal and accessible means. Autobiographical accounts are a rich reservoir of qualitative data and provide a valuable source of vicarious experience. (Power *et al.* 2012, p. 42)

Building on such work, we now consider a number of possibilities for using sporting autobiographies as pedagogical resources in SEH. An obvious place for their use is within qualitative research methods courses. For example, when teaching narrative forms of analysis, the articles cited earlier can be used as

examples of specific kinds (thematic, structural, and dialogical) in action. This task could, of course, be accomplished by students accessing articles that conduct these forms of analysis using interview data. The problem here is that for various reasons (e.g. ethical) such articles are rarely able to make available the full transcripts of the interview for inspection by the reader. The reader, therefore, is unable to examine the choices made by the researcher regarding the data selected in making their analysis and offering their interpretation. If readers don't have access to the full data-set the researcher used then they cannot know what they chose to omit which makes it difficult for them to challenge the researcher's interpretation. In contrast, as Frank (2012) points out, 'Not the least advantage of memoirs is that the public accessibility to complete texts allows colleagues to check how the researcher has adapted the story to fit the report' (p. 40).

Given that autobiographies are available in the public domain this means that students can access any of the sporting autobiographies named earlier and thereby have in front of them the full and identical data-set as the scholars who used them for their thematic, structural and dialogic narrative analysis. Students can therefore see what data has been chosen by the researcher to support their interpretation and, just as importantly, what they have omitted in doing so. This level of transparency regarding how the data is actually used in an act or orchestration by the researcher enables the reader to challenge the interpretive omnipotence normally claimed in the production of the realist tale as described by Sparkes (2002) and Sparkes and Smith (2014) that is the dominant mode of reporting in qualitative inquiry. In so doing, the reader is in a better position to consider not only the credibility of the interpretations offered by the researcher, but also to consider other possible interpretations that might be generated from the same data-set from different theoretical perspectives. To provide an example of this process in action the students could be introduced to the contrasting but supportive analyses provided by Butryn and Masucci (2003) and Sparkes (2004) who each offer a different theoretical take on Lance Armstrong's (2000) autobiography.

Beyond their use in research methods courses, sporting autobiographies can also act as a pedagogical resource on other courses that require students to enter into the lived realities of elite athletes and how they experience specific conditions and events. This has been an effective strategy as evidenced by the work of Harrawood *et al.* (2013) who used autobiographies of people with addictions in a course with counsellors-in-training to help them better understand the dynamics of addiction. The student feedback on the course suggests that they gained a greater theoretical understanding of addiction and the recovery process by applying abstract concepts to a set of real-life experiences. They also gained a better understanding of addiction and recovery as a process, not a series of discrete events, through being able to follow the experience through the downward spiral of addiction to the advances and relapses of recovery. In following the emotional content of an experience with addiction and recovery, the students also reported an increased ability to empathise with addicted clients. In addition, Harrawood and colleagues noted the following.

Students discussed many of the feelings and opinions about addiction that they held prior to taking the course. Their consensus was that the experience of reading the narratives of addiction helped to humanize addiction and allowed them to begin to shift away from a moral model of addiction wherein the primary cause is an inherent weakness in the client. Being able to look at addiction from an addict's point of view allowed for greater empathetic understanding and a less judgmental perspective. (Harrawood *et al.* 2013, p. 478)

It is likely that students would gain similar benefits from reading the autobiographies of athletes who reflect on their own addictions. Here, they could begin with those discussed by Palmer (2015) and then extend her sample to a wider range of sports and individuals. Likewise, students could gain access to the illness experiences of athletes by taking those autobiographies focused on by Stewart *et al.* (2011) and Sparkes (2004) and then develop a wider sample depending upon their interests and the course they are taking. Beyond this, students might select specific sporting autobiographies to explore the experiences of, for example, disabled athletes, lesbian and gay athletes, and black and minority ethnic athletes. In so doing, they might focus on how various ideologies, such as, disablism, homophobia and heterosexism, and racism, have shaped the experiences of these athletes in different ways.

Given that students can access sporting autobiographies produced during different decades they can also explore how selected phenomena have been experienced and reported in different historical periods and in different sports. For example, with regard to how athletes experience living with cancer differently over time and how the style and form of autobiography can vary when describing these experiences, students might compare the jockey Bob Champion (and Jonathan Powell) (1981) *Champions story: A great human triumph*; the cyclist Lance Armstrong (and Sally Jenkins) (2000). *It's not about the bike: My journey back to life*; and the football player John Hartson (and Rachel Murphy) (2011), *Please don't go: Big John's journey back to life*. Likewise, to examine the impact of homophobia and heterosexism on the experiences of gay male athletes in different historical periods and different sports, students could compare the autobiographies of the diver Greg Louganis (1995) and the rugby player Gareth Thomas (2014). In a similar fashion, students can also select sporting autobiographies published in different countries to gain a cross-cultural perspective on the experiences of athletes and how these are reported in textual form.

As part of the process of reading sporting autobiographies, students can be encouraged to adopt a critical analytical stance towards the text as a socio-cultural product. A starting point here is provided by Smith and Watson (2010) with their 'tool kit' that provides twenty-four strategies with accompanying questions for reading life narratives. A number of these are directly relevant to students taking courses in SEH. For example, they pose the following questions that can be asked of an autobiography that bring the body and embodiment into focus.

Precisely when and where does the body become visible in the narrative? Which part, or functions, or feelings of the body? How does it become visible? What does the visibility mean? How are the narrator's body and its visibility tied to the community from which the narrator comes? ... Do particular bodily processes take on significance? Does the body, or parts of it, vanish from the narrative at some point? ... What's the relationship between the material body of the narrating 'I' and the body politic? (Smith and Watson 2010, pp. 239–240)

Linked to notion of embodiment are questions about identity that can be asked of the autobiographical text. For Smith and Watson (2010) these include the following. What models of identity were culturally available to the narrator at her/his particular historical moment? What qualities of experience seem to have been excluded in conforming to particular models of identity? Are there several identities in succession or alternation within the narrative text? By asking such questions about the body, embodiment and identity amongst others, students can begin the process of breaking up the text to both examine and problematize how and why the athletes themselves and their sporting autobiographies have been constructed and shaped in specific socio-historical and political contexts. As part of this process, students can ask questions about what is *not said* in the text and the normative assumptions that inform the telling. For example, drawing on perspectives provided by critical race theory, the autobiographies of white athletes could be examined for what they do not say about race and ethnicity in order to reveal how the ideology of 'whiteness' and its assumptions shapes their experiences and mode of telling about their lives.

Finally, by adopting a critical stance towards sporting autobiographies, students can reflect on the performative work that they do as actors. For example, questions can be asked about how sporting autobiographies might act as narrative maps for other athletes when dealing with events, such as, serious injury or life-threatening illness, addiction, or 'coming out' as lesbian or gay. In defining a narrative map, Pollner and Stein (1996) point out, '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' (p. 203). They stress that in gaining purchase on an unfamiliar world beyond the horizon of the here and now, newcomers may seek knowledgeable or experienced others for orientation, information, and advice regarding the psychosocial and physical landscape that presumably awaits them in the future.

Sporting autobiographies, as the work of Sparkes *et al.* (2012) and Sparkes (2015b) illustrate, can and do provide narrative maps that describe, advise and teach new comers about how to interpret their experiences and how to act when certain events happen to them. Accordingly, students can reflect on this process by asking questions about the kind of narrative map a sporting autobiography

is providing the reader with and what it is trying to teach them in terms of who they ought to be, who they might like to be, and who they can be in specific sets of circumstance. Alongside this, students can also reflect on the cultural resources that the narrative map draws upon and whether or not the map provided is empowering or constraining for themselves and others in terms of the social categories to which they belong.

By exploring the narrative maps provided by sporting autobiographies in relation to specific phenomenon, students can also reflect on their embodied engagement with the text and how the stories told in some of them are heard, immediately and intuitively, as belonging under their skin. In this sense, students can begin to critically examine their own *narrative habitus* and how this shapes their reception and reaction to any given sporting autobiography. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work, Frank (2010) describes the narrative habitus as a 'disposition to hear some stories as those one ought to listen to, ought to repeat on appropriate occasions, and ought to be guided by' (p. 53). It describes the embodied sense of attraction, indifference, or repulsion that people feel in response to stories which leads them to define some story as for us or not for us. Narrative habitus, therefore, 'is the unchosen force in any choice to be interpellated by a story, and the complementary rejection of the interpellation that other stories would effect if a person were caught up in them' (p. 53). Against this backdrop, students can ask of themselves why they are drawn to, and have elective affinities for, certain kinds of stories told in sporting autobiographies rather than other competing stories about a given phenomenon. As part of this process, the students can reflect on why and how it comes to be that from the range of possible stories available within the cultural repertoire for them to live by, they choose some and ignore others leaving them, as Frank puts it, to float by in the river of not-for-me. They can also consider the consequences of such choices for how they understand and act towards themselves and others over time and in different contexts.

Closing comment

Given our motivations to get sporting autobiographies on the agenda as an analytical and pedagogical resource against a background of historical neglect, the tenor of our presentation in this article has been necessarily celebratory of possibilities rather than critical of actualities. For this reason we have chosen not to make any comment about the quality of the articles we have used as examples of how sporting autobiographies have been subjected to various forms of narrative analysis. They have been offered as *examples* rather than *exemplars*. We are not saying that the articles we have included are ideal or perfect models that should be imitated in an uncritical manner. Rather, for the purposes of illustration, we are pointing to them as specimens of a particular kind of approach that has been used by researchers in SEH that are now available for closer scrutiny by the wider community of scholars who can draw on a variety of criteria to pass judgement on their quality and worth (see Sparkes and Smith 2009, 2014).

Our central purpose in this article has been to make a case for taking sporting autobiographies seriously as an analytical and pedagogical resource in SEH. We hope that the evidence and rationale we have provided is convincing and that we have managed to counter the general negativity associated with sporting autobiographies as a genre of life writing so that it can be viewed more positively and productively by researchers in SEH. As Power *et al.* (2012) remind us, 'Autobiographical accounts are a rich reservoir of qualitative data' (p. 42). Of course, this is not to say that the data made available in sporting autobiographies will be relevant or valuable to all research projects. As with any study, principled, informed and strategic choices will need to be made about when, where and how to use them given the specific purposes of the inquiry and the skills and interests of the researcher. The important point for us is that sporting autobiographies are placed on the agenda and become one of the possibilities from which researchers make their choices. In becoming a possibility, a space for critical dialogue opens up that can only be of benefit to the development of scholarship in SEH.

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