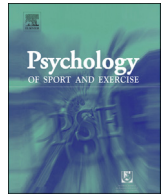




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Self-starvation and the performance narrative in competitive sport

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To provide an alternative to medical understanding of disordered eating in sport through an emphasis on personal perspectives.**Design:** This study draws on narrative theory to interpretively analyse the life of Holly, a female athlete who engages in severe self-starvation.**Methods:** More than 7 hours of life history data was gathered over a period of 8 months through unstructured interviews. Holly's story was analyzed through principles of narrative analysis, with attention afforded to both narrative content and structure.**Results:** Holly's life is characterized by a struggle to align her life experiences with a culturally specified "performance narrative" that lauds normative success. When neither her academic nor sporting endeavors are perceived to fulfil the achievement narrative, Holly is thrust into emotional turmoil and begins to conceive of self-starvation as a means to achieve.**Conclusions:** The performance narrative spans both academic and sporting cultural domains and it can play a role in athlete disordered eating.

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The eating disorders in sport literature base suggests that pressures to be thin for performance gains saturate the sporting environment and this places athletes at increased risk of eating disorder development (Dosil, 2008). Athletes considered most vulnerable are elite females participating in "lean sports", such as figure skating and gymnastics, where the focus on weight and thinness is particularly overt (Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000). A variety of prevalence studies support this sport-eating disorder relationship and point towards as much as twice as many athletes than non-athlete controls possessing clinical eating disorders (Torstveit, Rosenvinge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2008). Due to a dearth in risk factor studies however, there are few certainties as to the exact mechanisms that lead to the occurrence of eating disorders or disordered eating in athletes (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2007) and only speculative accounts exist regarding athlete specific treatment provision (Currie, 2007). Understanding athlete eating disorders continues to be a partial affair.

The wider eating disorders literature has been criticised for an unduly narrow medicalized approach that fixates on symptoms and causes and marginalizes understanding of experiential features (Botha, 2009). The danger here is that scientific knowledge becomes detached from those it was intended to treat (Frank, 2007).

This detachment can be dehumanising (Rich, 2006). This is also a problem in the sport psychology eating disorders literature where medical approaches have been adopted widely and uncritically (see Papathomas & Lavalée, 2012). According to Busanich and McGannon (2010), the objectivist principles of medical science portray disordered eating as primarily an individual pathology rather than something that is also heavily influenced by social, historical and cultural factors. These authors argue that to extend knowledge in this field, researchers must attend to the personal "meanings behind athletes' eating and body practices and the psychological effects that result" (p. 401). These "meanings" have been largely neglected by scholars.

Frustrated by the singular way in which eating disorders have been understood, a small number of researchers, within both general psychology and sport psychology, have sought to offer an alternative perspective. Within general psychology, Shohet (2007) produced a detailed narrative analysis of interview data drawn from 3 females with experiences of anorexia nervosa. Shohet identified two narrative types she referred to as the "fully recovered" and the "struggling to recover" narratives. The fully recovered narrative was characterized by stability and coherence. A coherent narrative is a complete one and involves an explanation of consequence. A coherent narrative becomes stable when it is fully accepted and less subject to change. The fully recovered narrative was stable because it was typically drawn from popular and robust cultural understandings of why eating disorders occur (e.g. perfectionism).

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With a ready-made explanation internalized, individuals could focus on recovery. The struggling to recover narrative was considered more authentic than stable, with tellers more critical of mainstream explanations and more likely to ponder the complexity of experience. These individuals often understood their eating disorder as both good and bad. For Shohet, this lack of narrative coherence made it difficult for individuals to commit to a particular recovery route. The implications are that how an eating disorder is understood narratively impacts the way it is experienced in the future.

A further narrative account explored the lives of 4 women with anorexia nervosa from an emotional and relational perspective (O'Shaughnessy, Dallos, & Gough, 2013). Drawing on life story data, the following broad narrative themes were identified: 1). loneliness 2). threatening environments 3). difficulty imagining perspectives of others 4). relationships troubles and 5). narrative incompleteness. The authors emphasised that these contextual insights enrich our understanding of eating disorders and would not have been possible had they adopted a medical focus. None of the women's stories drew from popular, mainstream theories to explain their anorexia but rather constructed their experience in terms of troubled relationships. One of the most pertinent findings of the study concerned the overarching impact of narrative constructions on life with an eating disorder. Echoing Shohet's (2007) principle argument, how women made sense of the past, shaped their "psychological defences for coping with current events and in turn shaping their futures" (p. 57). An incomplete story, essentially narrative incoherence, contributed to participant vulnerability and an inability to move on.

There has also been a recent uprising of qualitative work within eating disorders in sport. For example, Papathomas and Lavalley (2010) adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis to study female athletes' disordered eating experiences. The interpretive focus allowed athletes to communicate their own understandings of eating disorders in sport. It was shown that athletes' concerns went beyond well-documented symptomatology to focus on more general issues such as the struggle to disclose mental illness, a perceived lack of social support, and difficult identity challenges. Again, these unique and unforeseen insights would not have been possible through more prescriptive, medicalized research.

In an earlier study, Papathomas and Lavalley (2006) conducted a life history analysis of a male athlete diagnosed with bulimia nervosa. The participant in this study, a former elite youth soccer player called Mike, engaged in over 11 hours of one-to-one, loosely structured interviews. Affording such an extended time period allowed Mike the freedom and flexibility to construct a rich and detailed narrative account. A key contribution of this research was identifying the role of Mike's narrative in helping him understand this painful experience. By explaining the eating disorder as a means to personal growth, the illness was given a purpose. In direct contrast to the incomplete stories told by the women in the O'Shaughnessy et al. (2013) study, as well as some of those in Shohet's (2007) research, Mike's narrative was coherent and therefore meaningful. This narrative understanding was associated with Mike accepting his illness, committing to recovery and moving on with his life.

Busanich, McGannon, and Schinke (2012) showed how personal narratives might shape the development of unhealthy eating behaviors. Their analysis explored how both males and females come to understand the relationship between food, the body and exercise. This study highlighted that the performance narrative of elite sport, a dominant cultural storyline whereby only success and achievement leads to self-worth and self-identity, was associated with negative body-image, weight obsessions, calorie deprivation and extreme forms of exercising. The notion that a culturally popularized narrative can influence eating behaviors is another important step in theorizing athlete eating disorders differently.

The aim of the present study is to provide an alternative, complementary commentary on eating disorders. We explore the growing belief that personal narratives are important in medicine (Charon, 2006) and in mental illness (Carless, 2008). We propose that a move away from medicalized perspectives, towards a more meaning-focused approach, can provide new insights into the experience of eating disorders and disordered eating. To achieve this, a narrative analysis is applied to life story data constructed by Holly, a female athlete engaging in regular acts of self-starvation. An in-depth focus on a single case, as opposed to briefer accounts of numerous participants, is an important strategy when exploring a person's intricate understanding of complex life experience. Athletes' personal accounts of living with an eating disorder are disproportionately underrepresented in the literature and as a result there is a lack of appreciation for the broader, contextual facets of the illness. This study asks specifically; what are the broader, contextual factors of athlete disordered eating? Holly's story was of particular interest as she participated in netball and basketball; two sports perceived as low-risk for eating disorder development and hence often overlooked. From a narrative perspective, an exploration of the life story can shed light on the manner in which personal, social and cultural influences interact to shape narrative construction. The study also seeks to illuminate how a constructed narrative impacts on identity, experience, and action.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry involves the analysis of the stories people tell as a way of understanding experience and action (Polkinghorne, 1995). With a focus on socially constructed personal meanings, narrative inquiry is typically underpinned by a relativist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology (see Sparkes & Smith, 2013 for a detailed discussion on these philosophical concepts). In contrast to many other forms of qualitative inquiry, which focus exclusively on thematic content, narrative inquiry also views the overarching structure of a story – its basic plot – as an important analytical feature.

Smith and Sparkes (2009) have identified numerous reasons why narrative inquiry can be useful and beneficial for sport and exercise psychology research. We now draw on some of those reasons with specific reference to how the eating disorders in sport literature can be advanced. In the first instance, Smith and Sparkes emphasize that the interpretive assumptions that inform narrative inquiry can help enlarge the narrow methodological repertoire that characterizes much of sport psychology. As we have argued, this is a particularly valid rationale for eating disorders research which is dominated by a medicalized form of scientific inquiry that can limit other ways of knowing.

Second, narrative inquiry encourages "a focus on the ways relations between people shape, enable and constrain lives" (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 6). It acknowledges that interactions with others are crucial to constructions of meaning and experience. This relational focus provides a useful counter-perspective to psychology's tendency to individualize eating pathology. It allows for the exploration of how significant others, such as coaches, fellow athletes and family members, might impact on how an athlete interprets and duly experiences life with an eating disorder.

Third, narratives are sensitive to both the personal and social auspices of human experience. People's life stories are imprinted with idiosyncratic details that reflect personal circumstances and the specific context of the teller's perceived world. It is exactly these personal details of experience that are noticeably absent from current understandings of athlete disordered eating. At the same

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