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## Qualitative research in sports and exercise psychology: A timely comment

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It demonstrates how far that qualitative research has come in the past decade, that in this Olympic year, QMiP Bulletin has produced two special editions pulling together examples of the breadth of qualitative research into sport and exercise psychology.

As noted elsewhere (Locke, 2004), much research in sports science has traditionally been a 'realist enterprise', conducting research based on a priori predictions with the aim of uncovering what will improve performance. Much of sport and exercise psychology traditionally rested on, and some continues to rest on, social-cognitive models. That made studies using many of the qualitative methodologies epistemologically difficult because of the strong positivist ilk of sport psychology at the time. This has been reflected in the work that has typically been published in the mainstream sport psychology journals. Culver, Gilbert and Trudel (2003) noted how over a decade (1990-1999) in three prominent sport psychology journals, 84 of the 485 used a qualitative approach. Meaning that the majority of articles published in these journals used quantitative research methods only. These figures are somewhat misleading though as of the qualitative research that was making its way through to these journals in the 1990s, many used, and continue to use, content analysis as the qualitative method of choice. For example, Jowett & Meek (2000) used content analysis to study the coach-athlete relationship and Poczwardowski & Conroy (2002) studied coping responses in elite athletes using

content analysis. As has been argued elsewhere, Kidder and Fine (1987), when discussing qualitative methods as a whole, content analysis can be regarded 'little q' methodology as typically the results it produces have some numerical form and are ways of thematically streaming the data, and in essence, rests on using hypothetico-deductive research designs which are still the basis of experimental research design. The 'Big Q' qualitative methods include methods that are drawn upon commonly in work from QMiP members today – discursive methods, IPA, narrative approaches, grounded theory and so on.

These figures don't tell the whole story though. Whilst obviously due to both the topic of study and methodological slant of the discipline, most of the work conducted and published was of this realist, and highly quantitative nature, qualitative work in the discipline was being conducted but it was reaching a wider and more diverse readership, rather than relying explicitly on the sport psychology journals. In this sense, there was a real danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy that sport and exercise psychology as a discipline was in the main, a realist enterprise, because the majority of work that came under its remit in its journals was of that genre. As I write this, it strikes me that there are parallels to be drawn here between this situation and the upcoming Research Excellence Framework in the UK. As we know, many qualitative psychologists in the departments that have a particular focus on qualitative work will probably be entered into other units of assessment, most notably Social Work and Social Policy and Allied Health Professionals, amongst others. As such then, the REF panels for Psychology could wrongly assume that very little research work in psychology is qualitative as it is not represented at REF level in psychology. As we know, this would be clearly a wrong assertion, and one that would be damaging to not qualitative psychologists, but to the discipline overall.

Qualitative research as we would recognise it, in terms of the diversity of methods – discourse analysis, grounded theory, narrative analysis and phenomenological approaches began to come into sport and exercise psychology from the mid to late 1990s onwards in a variety of guises. With few exceptions, this work, as the report on qualitative research in sport psychology journals demonstrates, was published in journals not necessarily tied to sport. For example, if we consider the research work by Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes that took a narrative approach to investigate men who had experienced spinal cord injury through sport, this work has been widely published but the sites for publication vary and include ‘Qualitative Research’ (e.g. Smith & Sparkes, 2002; Sparkes & Smith, 2003) and ‘Men and Masculinities’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2002), as well as sport psychology specific journals (Rees, Smith & Sparkes, 2003). Similarly the discursive work of myself and others made its way into journals that would have a sports science/qualitative readership, but were more cautious of approaching mainstream sport psychology journals. For example, the first three discursive papers that I was aware of in sport were published in *Quest* (Finlay & Faulkner, 2002; McGannon & Mauws, 2000; Locke, 2004), others made it journals such as *FQS* that ran a special edition on qualitative research in sport (Faulkner & Finlay, 2003; Locke, 2003), and *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (Locke, 2008). It wasn’t until the advent of the journal for *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* that there was a specific vehicle where a variety of qualitative methods were embraced and recognised for their contribution to the field. My work excluded, the majority of this qualitative work was based around more exercise psychology concerns and experiential approaches. For example, McGannon & Mauws (2000) suggested the application of discursive psychology to exercise adherence.

Qualitative work looking at issues more typically associated with the performance side of sport psychology was harder to reconcile. As, by definition, the focus of this work is on prediction and in many cases, intervention. However, some work was beginning to be conducted. For example, my doctoral work performed a discursive re-analysis of the sports psychology/performance related research, looking at issues around mental states such as 'emotion' (Locke, 2003) and 'the zone' (Locke, 2008) from a discursive point on this, to uncover their 'interactional currency' as something that was embedded within the sport psychology culture as a means of accounting for performance, managing agency and 'doing modesty' (Locke, 2004).

In terms of other qualitative approaches to sport and exercise psychology, we can clearly see what all of the different methods have to offer, as these two special editions have showcased. From experiential, phenomenological, narrative, feminist and discursive approaches. All of them have strong potentials to extend and develop the sport psychology discipline. One method that does not necessarily often get recognised in sport is conversation analysis.

Conversation analysis (CA) as a method has much to offer the study of sport, exercise and coaching as it focuses specifically on naturally occurring interactions. In essence, to study how social life is routinely performed. Indeed there are some studies already within the sporting realm that can offer insight into this area. For example Jimmerson (2001) offered a CA re-analysis of team-locker room data (and see also Faulkner & Finlay, 2002). The instructive work of Amanda LeCouteur (Le Couteur & Feo, 2011) within discursive sport psychology recently has begun to

explore specifically what CA can offer to the actual real-time study of competitive sports performance, in this case a competitive netball match, with interesting results, thus demonstrating a strong applicability of the discursive and CA methodologies to the study of sports practice – both coaching and actual performance. Finally, Suzanne Cosh and others (Cosh et al, 2012) have recently applied the actual study of conversation analytically inspired discursive psychology to athlete training interactions, in particular skin-fold testing for athletes.

This piece has been a brief review of the rise of qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology. I would suggest that whilst there was some resistance at the beginning to ‘Big Q’ qualitative research, which was clearly reflected across the whole psychology discipline, qualitative methods are now becoming an important part of both the discipline as a whole, and the particular sub-discipline of sport and exercise psychology. I would suggest that the richness and explanation that comes with qualitative research can only be a positive asset for any discipline.

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