

Understanding Problematic Sporting Stories: Narrative Therapy and Applied Sport Psychology

In this paper we examine how postmodernism can inform the practice of sport psychology. More specifically, we will discuss how a therapeutic approach known as “narrative therapy” can enable athletes to reclaim control over their sporting practices and eliminate problem stories undermining their performance.

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“First he analysed the psychological demands of running, then he gave me some personality tests. And after that a bunch of exercises I’d never heard of before. He called them intervention strategies.”

“What did he say they were for?”

“He said they would enable me to run in ‘the zone’, whatever that meant, as well as control and eliminate any disturbing thoughts that may be interfering with my performance.”

“So did you use them?”

“Oh yeah. I recorded tapes with positive affirmations; I sat alone in my room for fifteen minutes a day visualising myself running easily, and I filled my walls with slips of paper with my short and long term goals written on them.”

“Did any of that help?”

“Not really. I still had bad races mixed with good races and I still got nervous before important competitions. Also, I felt like some detached observer of my own self, where my mind and body were separate and distant entities. It was all really uncomfortable for me.”

“Was that when you started questioning the whole premise of sport psychology?”

“Yeah, I knew there had to be a better way to approach psychological issues in sport. But back then I just didn’t know where to look.”

“And now you think that narrative therapy could possibly be a better way or at least offer some suggestions?”

“Yeah, I do.” (Jim Denison and John Winslade in conversation)

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Simply stated, sport psychology is the scientific study of people and their behaviour in sport.¹ Sport psychology belongs to the larger sports science family that includes biomechanics, exercise physiology, motor development and sports medicine. Thus, sport psychology derives its approach to the study of behaviour from a natural science model. The primary aim of most applied sport psychologists, who also call themselves “mental coaches,” is to help elite athletes achieve peak performances. Oftentimes, though, sport psychologists are not licensed psychologists. Instead they have training in sports science, physical education or kinesiology. Approaches that can be taken by sport psychologists include behavioural, psychophysiological, and cognitive-behavioural orientations.² And it is through the application of one or more of the following four intervention strategies that sport psychologists typically attempt to assist their clients:

1. Goal setting as a motivational tool: Athletes should appreciate that achievement is a do-it-yourself process, motivation is an event that transpires within the individual rather than in interaction with others, and that goal setting is the greatest motivational tool available to them.
2. Dealing with anxieties through relaxation: Athletes must assume responsibility for keeping their mental arousal levels within manageable limits.
3. Confidence through concentration: Effective concentration includes being in the here and now, selective attention to critical cues, and a focus on one thing at critical times.
4. Imagery training for performance enhancement: The more athletes use and control their imagination to help them reach their goals, the more likely they will be to actually achieve those goals.

It was only after my running career ended in 1990 and I began graduate school in sport sociology that I started to understand my initial discomfort with sport psychology. In my studies, I learned about the philosophy of science and the ways in which power shapes the production of knowledge.³ I became aware of how exclusive and narrow natural science research can be and the dangerous ways this can impact on people’s lives – especially when applied programs and policies are developed without any consideration of the people’s lived experiences they are intended to serve.⁴ I began to see research findings into athletes’ experiences and so-called “objective intervention strategies” from a whole new perspective. “Facts” and “findings” became “stories,” not “laws.” And motivational tools and imagery exercises became “suggestions” not “prescriptions.”

I began to understand that high performance sport is a cultural formation informed by language and convention, not objective measures of truth.⁵ For example, even performance standards I once chased, like the United States’ Olympic Trials 1500m qualifying standard, I realised, were based on the available funds to pay each qualifier’s expenses. I also saw how science can devalue indigenous knowledge such as an athlete’s own intuition and bodily stories.⁶ Eventually I felt empowered through my studies to search for alternative ways of understanding people’s experiences in sport: ways that embodied a sociological imagination⁷;

ways that recognised that more than one truth can exist and that knowledge is not value-free but drawn from someone's interpretation.⁸

Under the "natural" science gaze, behavioural "problems" are assumed to be understood and controlled (read: "medicalised") in the same way that cardiac output can be measured and changed: in a direct linear fashion. Following this line of thinking, one's motivation can be adjusted, or one's confidence boosted, or one's anxiety reduced by selecting the appropriate intervention. There must exist a simple linear narrative that runs from problem to diagnosis and treatment. Similarly, once a person determines her goals and plots a path to achieve them she should be able to carry on freely in this direction until they are attained. This means that all responsibility for change falls upon the individual. In the case of sport, an athlete who gets highly anxious before a competition is expected to learn specific relaxation techniques to calm down, as opposed to the coach or the governing body of the sport considering how the way they define success or talk about winning may be having a negative impact on athletes. All prospects for leading a healthy life, therefore, are seen to be within us and it is our responsibility (or perhaps in consultation with a psychologist) to allow it to emerge.

In my search for a better way to understand psychological issues in sport, I came across an approach to therapy developed in Australasia and based on postmodern theory called "narrative therapy"⁹ My colleague, and now co-author, (John Winslade) who was a practising narrative therapist had submitted a paper on narrative therapy to an education journal I co-edited. That was when we began to consider the possibilities of a narrative approach to sport psychology; that was when the conversation at the beginning of this paper took place, and when we first talked about writing this paper. I provided John with an understanding of the sport context and he explained to me the premise of narrative therapy.

"With its emphasis on the role of language to construct our thinking and not merely represent it," he said in conversation, "what is needed when helping people is a way of speaking that problematises the linguistic context and the process of arriving at a particular description of a problem as much as the content of what is spoken about."

Soon John and I were discussing how a narrative orientation could provide sport psychologists with a different set of assumptions and practices that might enable athletes to feel that their own experiences and stories are invaluable for understanding who they are and how to perform.

John then gave me an example of how this might work. "Let's assume," he said, "that an athlete is experiencing some kind of problem in relation to his training, or in analysing a sub-par performance is trying to make sense out of what went wrong. Most likely, before any conversation with a coach or a sport psychologist commences, the person concerned and his problem will have been constructed in language by previous discussions among athletes, coaches and maybe even the media. Available thinking about this issue, therefore, will be constrained by the patterns of thought privileged by the discourse in which this problem is couched. In this way, the description or label of the problem becomes part of the problem itself for it suggests a limited range of ways forward out of the problem."

"Like burnout," I said.

“Yes, describing someone as *burnt out*, for example, implies a deficit in the individual’s management of self. It sets in place a set of assumptions which guide us to know how to go on and fix *him*. Starting with a different linguistic frame to describe burnout, such as, ‘external pressure,’ may lead to a new set of thoughts about the nature of burnout, locating it in the discursive interactions that take place around training perhaps, which in turn may influence us to go on and correct it a different way.”

Narrative therapists attend very closely to the way people speak about themselves and thus produce themselves.¹⁰ In this sense, meaning is constructed socially and arises from the language people use in particular contexts, rather than being given and applied in those contexts.¹¹ There is no knowable objective reality that language points to; instead, the way we speak about ourselves constitutes a constructed identity and who we are is a constantly changing reality – a dynamic process of being rather than something essential or hidden somewhere inside us. This is not to suggest that the material world does not exist, only that what we say about it is influenced by the meaningfulness of the contexts and histories in which we find ourselves. For example, the stories we tell about our childhood experiences, where we come from, our profession, our ambitions, and our likes and dislikes, provide a context that gives coherence to our lives. Narrative therapists argue, then, that to change the way we organise and understand our world we must begin by changing the way we use language. New ways of speaking have the power to create new lives.¹²

Of specific concern to John and I, is the kind of language use that describes problems with reference to the grand narratives of psychology, particularly humanistic psychology with its extreme emphasis on individualism. These grand narratives legitimise certain ways of speaking that are for all intents and purposes cultural constructions and raise them to such a level of unquestioned certainty that individuals are required to submit to their “natural” authority (the authority of scientific truth). In the process, other ways of knowing, other ways of speaking, other ways of describing problems or local alternative knowledges can be subjugated or marginalised.

As we suggested earlier, a narrative approach to sport psychology would recommend some new starting points for discussing problems. For if words stand for things we can always name things differently. Therefore, let us now outline the kinds of methods we are exploring as possibilities.

In beginning a conversation with an athlete, the sport psychologist might pay much greater attention to the way in which the problem is described and to the discourse into which that way of describing it fits. This might require expressing some curiosity about the way in which the problem has arisen, not just in the physical realm, for example lethargy in the case of burnout, but in the world of language and meaning. An example may be the idea that good athletes are obedient and obedient athletes focus all of their attention on their sport – which in the case of burnout may explain why an individual is tired and apathetic from over-training. Particular care might be taken with descriptions that ascribe some characterological deficit to the individual. Again, in the case of burnout, this may entail being careful that the athlete doesn’t consider himself to be weak or sick. These types of interpretations should be deconstructed¹³ or unpacked and their history and cultural origins (in the personal world of

the athlete and the social world of sport) should be discussed. Then burnout may be seen not as a personal deficit, but as a result of the discursive restrictions highly competitive sport places on the development of alternative identities.

Next, a search for a richer description of the problem might be undertaken. The problem might be located in the culturally available stories in the person's life or within her or his community context. To this end, the technique of speaking in an externalising kind of way can be useful.¹⁴ Externalising conversations seek to establish a rhetorical separation of the person from the problem through speaking about it as if it is, in effect, another person or object which is unduly influencing the athlete at the moment. For example, in the case of an athlete who considers herself unfit and out of shape because she has gained some weight, the search for richer descriptions may go beyond the person's eating and training routines to include the influence of magazine articles, body product advertisements and other socially constructed images surrounding the female body.

In this way, the athlete can then be invited to position or name her problem in her own way rather than in the terms of the dominant theories of sport psychology. Therefore, what was once an "eating disorder" becomes a personalised description such as the "blob photo story" (referring to an unflattering news photograph which set off a line of thought about body image and the taking up of a highly restrictive eating regimen). This alternative description is more highly personalised and allows us to notice that cultural prescriptions and other people's responses are involved in creating this problem. Importantly, the authoritative diagnostic voice of the expert is subsumed beneath the voice of the athlete as a subject in the process of making meaning of her own life rather than as an object of the ready-made meanings derived from the application of the grand narratives of sport psychology.

The next task the sport psychologist and the athlete might work together on is that of discovering possibly under-used, unnoticed local knowledge of how to address a problem that may already lie in the athlete's existing repertoire. Fragments of this knowledge will very likely exist as unique outcomes.¹⁵ Frequently, however, they will not be storied in any coherent way and therefore little store will be set by them. For example, an accomplished athlete in the middle of a slump may remedy her problem according to a generalised piece of sporting knowledge by training harder. This action is based on the way athletes and coaches have constructed slumps: as a personal performance problem resulting from poor fitness or inadequate physical skills.

Such a construction (focused on the individual) fails to consider how success may be experienced in terms of greater expectations. When we enquire into the unique outcomes of her own experience we might find that earlier in her sporting career she was an unknown athlete training with little pressure from herself or others. At this time she enjoyed surprising people by performing beautifully. Now she is known and faces intense expectations from her coach, her national sporting organisation and maybe even her country to continue her winning ways. To end her slump, therefore, she may need to form a "doing it my way" story which draws on the routines and ways she used before being known. Crucially, the power to heal herself exists within her knowledge of her own experience, rather than in the objective knowledge of the coaching manual. However, to make this power more available, she needs

to be engaged in a conversation that accumulates these fragments of past experience or of knowledge and weaves them together into an alternative story, in which the problem issue is dissolved or made redundant or is overcome. In the process of building this conversation, instances of refusal to bow to the dictates of expectation, even in momentary ways, may be discovered. As these are strung together and connected with the history of life without the intrusion of expectations, a new story is fashioned. This new story can be thickened in various ways in conversation so that it grows in salience in the thinking of the athlete and in the conversations that take place in the world around her.

As we bring this paper to its conclusion, we want to emphasise that with these suggestions we are not trying to make the point that all of the interventions developed by sport psychologists to assist athletes are useless or that narrative therapy holds all of the answers. Rather, we hope that some of the ideas and examples in this paper can influence sport psychologists and coaches to look beyond the grand narratives of sport psychology and to allow their clients' or athletes' voices, concerns, knowledges and stories to be heard. In this way, sport psychologists may begin to assist athletes in a manner that is not divorced from the context in which they lead their lives.

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- 8 See endnote 4.
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- 12 See endnote 10.
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- 15 See endnote 9.

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