

“It all started so long ago” – Researchers’ reflections on a longitudinal study

Media analysis is an established area of sport sociology and has been a theme for systematic investigation since the mid-1980s. In this paper we reflect on our research experiences of undertaking a longitudinal study in print media analysis since 1996. Following a collaborative inquiry framework we combined autoethnographic narrative interwoven with a focus group interview. This paper aims to document our personal and professional experiences of a research group during an extended study **and shares some recommendations based on our reflections**. Themes of longitudinal challenges, disappointment and sisterhood as researchers and friends are presented. By exploring our research experiences and, through them, the changes to the research area and processes we hope to illuminate our research journeys for others to critique and understand.

Keywords: autoethnography; sport; media; longitudinal study

Introduction

As a group of researchers we have undertaken a longitudinal study of sporting print media analysis since 1996. We have gathered data from a two week summer period in 1984, 1994, 2004 and 2014 with the intention of documenting the portrayal of female athletes in British newspapers. In the beginning it was not intended nor expected that this would become a longitudinal study. This has emerged organically as our curiosity and desire to compare results to the next ten years developed after each data collection resulting in a commitment to 'one more time'. A research project spanning over 20 years will inevitably have different challenges to a shorter term one and it was these challenges that provided the stimulus for this paper.

At the start of the project we all worked in academia, within close regional proximity and two of us worked for the same institution, but at the point of our last data collection two were retired and we were challenged by geographical distance between us. We have experienced technological changes and the difficulties associated with a longitudinal study so we thought that there would be a benefit in sharing our experiences to illuminate some of these challenges. The purpose of this paper is not to explore or to present the findings of the longitudinal study, published elsewhere, but rather to subjectively reflect on the process. We believe that the process of sharing our experiences may have value for other researchers and we have chosen to adopt this framework because it aligns with our feminist principles. The work was a collaborative piece of reflection and was driven by the same sense of sisterhood which drove the original research project.

This paper aims to share those experiences by adopting a collaborative inquiry framework and combining autoethnographic narratives interwoven with a focus group interview with the intention that we can enlighten our process not just to explain but so

that others can understand (Lake, 2015). Our broad research question is “what methodological insights can be shared when reflecting on a longitudinal study?”. “This story is going to tax my brain and memory, I feel as if it all started so long ago!” were the opening reflections from one of our stories when we tasked ourselves with the purpose of writing a reflective account of the research journey undertaken. We were aided in our reflection by the research diary that had been maintained throughout the project and this tool was invaluable to the research project and in writing this reflective account. Following the steps of Brackenridge (1999), who reflected on 13 years of research from one area, we aim to share our reflections on the research journey, provide the personal story to engage the reader (Ellis and Bochner, 2006) and then to share with other researchers our key lessons from the project:

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story (McAdams 1993, p. 11).

Methodologically we think there are two notable points to this paper: the reflections on the process in a longitudinal study and the method by which those reflections were captured.

Print Media Analysis

The area of print media analysis is common place within sport sociology and has a long and established history (██████████, 2017). Much of this research has focussed on the disparity between male and female athletes with various considerations of text, photographs, types of newspapers, types of sports or events and is relatively international but with an emphasis from North American and European

authors. The research methods associated with this body of work ranges from quantitative analysis to qualitative analysis with some authors presenting both. Our projects involved a two week period in the British press from 1984-2014 collecting data every ten years and reviewing both quantitative and qualitative results. Since the start of this project we have seen the rise of the internet and digital information to a pervasive effect that was not predictable in the mid-1990s. Print media is on the decline with an estimated over 150 million UK daily newspapers in 1985 decreasing to just 100 million daily newspapers by 2010 and similarly just under 80% of UK households receiving a daily newspaper in 1985 which decreased to 40% by 2010 (Communications Management 2011). The future of our research careers and this research area is limited so we wanted to document some of the research journey that we have encountered and we will frame that journey within reflexivity, narrative and autoethnography.

Reflexivity, Narrative and Autoethnography

Reflexivity is now considered to be an important research skill and involves the continual reflection of the impact of the researcher on the research process including a recognition of the power dynamics within the research process. Described as a “legitimate source of knowledge” (Brackenridge, 1999) reflexivity is particularly key in qualitative research in which the researcher is central to the research tools employed such as interviewing. Acknowledging that there is no correct procedure for the reflective process (Day, 2012) and that it is considered to be vague without clear definitions, self-reflection is a legitimate form of reflexivity (Tuckerman and Rüegg-Stürm 2010). A reflective approach can be described as an opportunity for “sense-making” (Marshall, 2019; Columbo, 2003) allowing for researchers and practitioners to more fully explore the meaning of their work with an understanding that there will be an impact upon the

researcher, their development and their work (Jones et al., 2019). There are a number of definitions in the field (Marshall, 2019; Day 2012) but Marshall (2019) undertakes a systematic analysis in order to provide some clarity. Concluding that reflection can be conceptually categorised as cognitive, integrative, iterative and active he proposes a new definition of reflection as “a careful examination and bringing together of ideas to create new insight through ongoing cycles of expression and re/evaluation” (Marshall, 2019 p. 411). Du Preez (2008) suggests that there is a relationship between narrative and reflective practice in that reflecting on the process may result in the emergence of new identities and ultimately new meanings.

Scientific writing has been main stream in quantitative and qualitative forms of research in which the realist tale (Sparkes 1996) presents the research in a positivistic orientated format typified by the author evacuated text (Geertz 1988). Changes to a more personal and evocative style of writing has been apparent for some time and *The Sociology of Sport Journal* published a dedicated volume in 2000 which explored narrative and story in the development and understanding of sociological research. The prospect that as social scientists we could explore the social world through a completely different lens and that “storied representation as an accepted form of scholarship” (Denison and Rinehart 2000 p. 2) was tantalising. This particular issue opened up a different style of research thinking and writing and like others (Liberti 2004; Sparkes 2002) has since influenced some of our ways of thinking. Richardson (2000) suggested that the narrative turn started to emerge in social sciences generally as early as the 1970s and Denison and Rinehart (2000) suggest that the development of sociological narrative in sport sociology can be traced as far back as 1991 with mainstream sociology recognising the interest in writing stories about ‘others’ to our own narratives since the 1970s (Davies, 1998).

Narrative enquiry as a research field has previously struggled to be categorised as a legitimate form of research but this criticism stems from those who see it as an alternative and competing method rather than a complementary method (Thomas, 2010). It has the capacity to explore events, the meaning of those events and how it is told but can also refer to the research process (Thomas, 2010). Narrative enquiry allows for expression of identity (Phipps, 2008) and may involve stories about others or ourselves. Narratives about ourselves as researchers may be likened to reflective practice (du Preez, 2008) which have previously only been presented as “confessional tales” from field notes (Anderson, 2006 p. 376) documenting some of the research processes and often appear located in papers as an appendix. The change to document these narratives so that the researcher is also the researched lies at the heart of autoethnography, one form of narrative enquiry which offers exposure to the research process by locating the researcher within (du Preez, 2008).

Autoethnography is a form of “author engaged writing style” (Knowles and Gilbourne, 2010 p. 507) and different styles within sport have involved reflective accounts of the researcher’s experiences (such as Brackenridge 1999; Gilbourne 2002) to those which involve the telling of stories, ethnographic fiction, as part of the reflective approach (Tsang, 2000). A central characteristic of the autoethnographic tradition is the writing in of the researcher into the research process (Chang, 2008 cited in Nash 2015) in such a way that the researcher is intimately exposed and the writing invites the reader to care and empathise (Ellis and Bochner 2006). This level of revelation by the researcher is considered to open an exposure to risk because of the

intimacy of the dilemmas and identities uncovered (Sparkes 2002; Philaretou and Allen 2006).

It is often described that there are two different styles of autoethnography: the evocative (Ellis and Bouchner, 2006) and the analytical (Anderson, 2006) but Lake (2015) suggests there are many autoethnographies. Table 1 identifies the different characteristics of evocative and analytical autoethnography.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

By reviewing some of the key characteristics in the table above it may seem logical to locate this work in the analytical stream because we are full members of the group under study but at the same time we have engaged in reflexivity and hope to share our emotional and intellectual impact. Therefore features of this work cross both streams of autoethnography and these tensions between analytical and evocative autoethnography are eloquently expressed by Ellis and Bochner (2006) who note that their interpretation of the evocative stream is the researchers are full members of the group and the only point of difference they see lies in the links to understandings of a broader social phenomena (Ellis and Bochner, 2006). Like Ellis and Bochner (2006 p. 3) we therefore conclude we are shying away from “these categorical distinctions” and see this work as more of a “blend of evocative and analytic prose. Maybe that’s the best we can hope for” (Elli and Bochner, 2006 p. 15).

Methods

Our approach to this paper adopts a collaborative inquiry framework (Drame *et al.*, 2012) in which we are all both participant and researcher. Acknowledging that “reality is messy” (Brackenridge, 1999) we had to co-construct a way of navigating

through our subjective lived experiences to a method that would allow us to make sense of those experiences and be able to share them with the reader. We discussed the research design as a collective and agreed upon the key components and time lines. Following similar approaches of stories, conversation and reflection (Drame *et al.*, 2012) in order to document and explore our reflections we individually wrote a narrative account of the research project and our reflections on the process and this personally reflective account of the research project constitutes an “over representation of reflection” (Marshall, 2019 p. 410) which allows for a dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2010). We did not set any word limits and the three accounts ranged from 791 words to 1383. We gave ourselves six weeks to reflect upon and write the stories and then collated them prior to our next meeting. At the start of the next meeting we planned the approach to the focus group and then shared the stories and read them individually. This allowed us to use the stories to make sense of our own experiences (Jones *et al.*, 2019). Having read them we used them as a stimulus to undertake a non-traditional focus group during which we discussed our stories, responses to the stories, challenges and issues relating to a longitudinal study. This was a non-traditional focus group as it lacked an independent interviewer, the framework (rather than an interview schedule) was discussed in advance and we organically navigated ourselves through the areas we wanted to cover using the stories as a basis upon which to make comment or ask questions. This mirrors a similar approach adopted by the BBC and the British Library as part of their *Listening Project* which aims to produce an “archive of insights into contemporary Britain: people of all ages from every corner of the nation have taken part and share what they think about their lives and loves, enthusiasms and disappointments, successes and failures” (Perks, cited in BBC 2017 p. 1). The purpose

of the conversations is to provide “fascinating insights into history - through the words of those who experienced it” (BBC 2017 p. 1). **The focus group lasted for 75 minutes.**

The focus group was transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVIVO 11 along with the three stories and all were coded using inductive coding **by one of the research team.** Once initial coding had been completed a second non-traditional focus group took place in which the emergent themes were discussed across the research team in order to serve as a process of member checking (Sparkes 1998) **which led to further insight into the themes. This second focus group lasted 50 minutes.** Three major themes of Longitudinal Challenges, Disappointment and Sisterhood as Researchers and Friends emerged and are explored in the next section through both narrative (story) and focus group data. This project gained ethical approval from the faculty ethics committee and in order to maintain the only level of anonymity available direct quotes are not attributed to any individual within the team.

Discussion of Results

Longitudinal challenges

This theme reflects the practically driven difficulties of undertaking research over a long period of time such as the ability to remember “this story is going to tax my brain and memory” (Story) and some of the practical challenges. We were careful to keep a research diary from the start of the project but over a long period, and especially in this project when there are long gaps between activity with no additional developments occurring the ability to remember was a challenge:

One thing is that I didn't think was worthy of mentioning but is the importance of what you've done is the research notebook. And ... a

physical chemist at Iowa State he was the one who advised me when you do research keep a research notebook. And every time you have a meeting or every time you are changing something ...make a note of it. And this has been really significant over the 30/40 years ... we forget. (Focus Group)

There were times when we had to carefully unpick the notes from the research diary in order to rehearse the key elements of the research design and analysis. Memory work is a central part of autoethnography and researchers agree that it can be flawed, presenting difficult challenges, may not be an accurate representation but has been likened to the “compost heap of memory” (Randall 2007 cited in Randall and Phoenix 2009 p. 128). Challenges from the length of time was also true for our use of the software packages that we used both for the qualitative and quantitative data:

The decade also included version upgrades of SPSS. It was now SPSSX and we had to import our 1984 and 1994 data and verify it came through correctly. (Story)

... at the time I was on NUDIST 2 and I think it went to 8 before NVIVO and now we are on NVIVO 10¹. And so one of my difficulties is that every time we get to a new dataset there is a new software and it's about learning the nuances of this one are different to the nuances of the last one and how do I ...how do I do what I used to do in that one in this one ... And how are you going to compare because you have a longitudinal study (Focus Group)

I have used NUDIST all the way through NUDIST4 and SPSSX and bells and whistles I could make it hum and I couldn't do that anymore (Focus Group)

¹ Now NVIVO 11

The software challenge has been particularly challenging
Because we had to export our data and import it into the new
version. And then we had to verify that what we ended up with
was what we needed and what we expected. That is very tricky.
(Focus Group)

Another aspect of the longitudinal element has been the recognition that early decisions taken were not always the best ones. We acknowledge that “we learned as we collected data” (Story) and consequently we were sometimes haunted by our regrets about those choices because it both serves to reinforce those less than perfect decisions and at the same time it requires a need to replicate those decisions:

The things that we didn't get right to begin with have kind of haunted us through the rest of our data collections and obviously will for 2024 as well because that is something that we can't actually change because we can't change the data itself but I think that this very interesting. (Focus Group)

In particular the decisions which are referred to here were the decision to measure the physical space within the paper and the definition of what constituted the sports pages or section: “Sport was all over the paper; the business section, the life style section, everywhere! ...We had to decide what to do. The actual sport section seemed small at times. We decided to stick with our original methodology, only sport section of the paper and that without horse racing”. (Story)

Our main other challenge over the life span of the project has been the changes to the publication techniques used in print media. The introduction of desk top publishing and

the impact that brought in the production of newspapers meant that we had methodological decisions to make:

The format of newspapers had changed. The tabloids and the *Times* were in smaller book style formats while the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* remained large sheets organized into folded sections². We noted this changed the area, cm² comparisons. In addition all papers were layering photos and desktop publishing allowing text to wrap around photos. Both changes meant we needed to drop the variable area cm² and only count articles, photos and pages. (Story)

These challenges for the study were unique to the longitudinal nature of this research project and that the length of the study has organically grown rather than an intention at the beginning to produce a long lasting piece of research.

Disappointment

A theme of disappointment emerged from the data and this was evident both in terms of structure and agency. Initially, on a structural level this came from the motivation in wanting to undertake the project because of a view that there was no visibility of female athletes in the British print media and the disappointment in that absence motivated the onset of the project:

There was little of interest (in the print media) to me as women sports persons were not in the newspress. I thought that would change over the years with equal rights, feminism, Title IX.
(Story)

² During the lifespan of the project the *Guardian* has changed in format from a traditional broadsheet to a Berliner style broadsheet to a tabloid size.

I was disappointed, therefore, to note that there was virtually no reporting of women's sports in newspapers, let alone TV. 1992 was an Olympic year and that made some difference, but not much. By 1994 it had got even worse and (other researcher) & I decided to monitor newspapers for a period of time when female athletes should have had some prominence – during Wimbledon. (Story)

This initial disappointment that was experienced was a key driver to the project and was also reflected in our views about the success of the project. This theme reflects the disappointment from all members of the research group about a number of issues within the project: “it hasn't achieved as much as we would have liked to have done” (Focus group). Primarily this disappointment was about the lack of perceived success regarding certain aspects such as its dissemination, publication and a general sense that the project “encompassed quite a lot of disappointment” (Focus group). Throughout the project there were only a limited number of papers published and this was partly due to the lack of research funding: “I continue to feel that the work has not been widely read or disseminated despite the longevity of it” (Focus group). **A further factor in this was the amount of data that each collection point generated and the length of time it took to analyse those data.** The project continued therefore through sanctioned research activity or within our own free time and could therefore be described as curiosity driven research unlike the work of Thomas and Holland (2003) who were successful in gaining funding for their longitudinal project and able to maintain their research team. Further disappointments expressed that despite the passage of time and changes in other spheres of women's lives there has been little progress in the field:

That is what keeps me coming back to it – anger/frustration that not much appears to change; the speed of the change is at a snail’s pace and men continue to dominate the sports pages and sports channels. That, however, is also exciting as it piques my curiosity re why this is happening when women have made so much progress in other aspects of life – social and professional.
(Story)

On a personal level this disappointment was also perceived to be reflected in the career trajectory and that the two strands of career and project success were linked: “and I do think that mine kind of reflects some of my overall disappointment in the total academic career that I had and where perhaps it didn’t go and this however important as it was has almost mirrored some of that” (Focus group). Choices taken by the members of the research team to undertake a management career as opposed to a research career **which also contributed to limited success of published outputs:**

then fundamentally you and I have both chosen a management route through our career and if we had stayed as SLs or gone through a research route we would have been more prolific with it and more successful. (Focus group)

This was a difficult acknowledgement that despite the personal importance of the research field, research more generally had a lower priority in our management roles and therefore we were unable to devote large amounts of time to it.

Sport has been a social space in which women have been able to challenge the gender order but also a space which can replicate the gender order and this juxtapositioning of the multilayers of disappointment was extensive in both the stories and the focus group. As feminists our sense of the personal as political was a strong

ideological position through the project with a driver to affect social change and to recognise at the end that this had not been achieved was thought provoking. Unlike other researchers who warn against a danger of undertaking autoethnographic work to self-promote or self-congratulate (Knowles and Gilbourne 2010) our reflective journey helped us to understand and articulate what had not worked well, to make sense of that in a new way with a new meaning and new identities (du Preez, 2008). The feelings of disappointment within the group from an agency perspective therefore mirrored the structure of the social situation we were trying to illuminate through the research and **our disappointment in the lack of structural progress of the print media field.**

Sisterhood as Researchers and Friends

Throughout our focus group discussion we recognised that the ability to keep the project alive had relied on friendship. An early seminar presentation in 1997 had resulted in a challenge from one of the audience members about the potential future of the project:

what happens when one of you moves to another university. What will happen to the research then?" and being left with a certainty that the project would continue beyond whatever other boundaries because of the friendship upon which it was built. I am really pleased that it has stood the test of time but know that much of that stems from the friendship that it is built upon. (Story)

This was developed across all of the group members:

it was (NAME)'s story that pointed out that it was our friendship and enthusiasm that kept us going so that we ironed out problems and continued to collect meaningful data which hopefully we will continue to do.

when you joined us that was a really key moment for me and like you I think our friendship would have continued but it would have been a very different type of friendship but I don't think we would have been as close as we are now and that is a real positive.

I then thought to myself would the project have survived without the friendship and I concluded that it wouldn't have done it just would have just fizzled out (Focus Group)

Ellis and Bochner (2006) suggest that there are feminist politics implicit within autoethnographic approaches in that traditional conventions of science and social science are the preserve of the elite and that more postmodern approaches to research enable research to be opened up to a wider group which appeals to our ideologies.

This was further developed by accepting that the underlying cause of the research i.e. to promote women's rights had expanded the notion of "sisterhood" to a group wider than the research team to include previous mentors and the athletes themselves:

I came up through the period in the 60s and 70s when in the United States when women were getting their opportunity to play competitive sport and before then it was like play games and just get together and play games but right after I graduated from University it became teams and actual competition and I watched the women that were my mentors and teachers and I watched how much they gave of their time washing clothes, baking cookies, driving vans, just incredible commitment ... (Focus Group)

One of the things about all of this which is often left unsaid is that there is a big bit about all of this which is about sisterhood. It is about sisterhood for the athletes that we are trying to get a better place (Focus Group)

The importance of the work undertaken and the fundamental belief and values upon which the research was built was a key driver to keep the momentum for the project and in the context of the “Me Too” movement just as important:

There is something about this wave that is happening now that reminds me of back in the late 60s and early 70s when it was just ‘girls are girls and boys are boys’ and everything is supposed to be like that and everything is black and white and there is not this grey area and we are not all in one basket we are in separate baskets. So get in your basket. That is kind of the feeling that I get now with a lot of the executive orders that come from Trump so that people of different countries trying to get back into the United States need to go back to those countries and get in their basket and gays and lesbians the licences that has now been made possible for restaurants and businesses to not serve gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Get back in your basket. And I just sort of think that gentleman was of that mind set³. Women have their place and they play sport but we are talking about the sport press and it is just fine because that is what people want to read. That is what people want to read. (Focus group)

³ This is a reference to an audience member at a conference presentation who would not accept the quantitative data presented and was mentioned in one of the stories.

The sisterhood experienced as part of the project was therefore a key driver both for the maintenance of relationships but also as part of the ideological underpinning for the research: “And it is about *sisterhood as researchers and friends*. And I think that’s been really important” (Focus Group).

Conclusion

One of our key moments in the research journey was in 2017 when we visited the Anita White Foundation archive at the University of Chichester to deposit the key contents and papers from the research project. It was important to us that we were able to make an aspect of our work accessible for future researchers. During the visit one of our team joked with the staff at the archive “it is a race to see which of use will die first: me or print media!”. In the light of the information technology revolution we now recognised that we should have moved to digital reporting at an earlier point within the research project but by the time we realised this point it was too late to make the change. We have now conceded that digital reporting should be left to different researchers and aim to conclude the project with one final data collection in 2024.

We would hope that by sharing our reflections this paper would satisfy some of Ellis and Bochner’s (2006) criteria for appraising autoethnography by ensuring that it is engaging for the reader, that it provides some understanding of our lived experiences and most importantly that it has some educational value for the reader (du Preez, 2008). As Brackenridge (1999) noted research is a shared experience and we have shared our experiences together and now with the readers.

We would want to share our recommendations based on this reflection. Throughout the project a clear research diary was maintained by one of the researchers

and this proved invaluable as the years progressed to recall key decisions made and the steps for collection and analysis. Such a diary or research log would be essential for any longitudinal study. We also acknowledged that in retrospect the research team would have benefitted from having a wider range of academic disciplines within the group, to extend beyond sport into journalism, so that the research had a deeper foundation.

Finally, we would want our paper to conclude with the words from one of our stories:

and this project is my attempt to give back ... Because they (women mentors) are amazing and I benefitted from that so maybe the data we collect and the way it is interpreted and the decisions that are made by other people will in some way reflect that. (Focus Group).

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