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Article

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Aspiration, inspiration and illustration: Initiating debate on reflective practice writing.

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1   Abstract

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3   The present article contemplates the future of reflective practice in the domain of applied

4   sport psychology and, in so doing, seeks to engender further critical debate and comment.

5   More specifically, the discussion to follow re-visits the topic of 'reflective-levels' and builds

6   a case for 'critical reflection' as an aspiration for those engaged in pedagogy or applied sport

7   psychology training regimens. Assumptions and commentators associated with critical social

8   science (e.g., Habermas, 1974; Carr & Kemmis, 1986), action research (e.g., Carr & Kemmis,

9   1986; Leitch & Day, 2000), and critical reflection (e.g., Morgan, 2007) suggest a number of

10   foundation points from which critical reflection might be better understood. Finally, writing

11   about ones- self via the processes of critical reflection and through reflective practice more

12   generally are briefly considered in cautionary terms (Bleakley, 2000; du Preez, 2008). Auto-

13   ethnography in sport (Gilbourne, 2002; Stone, 2009) is finally proposed as one potential

14   source of illustration and inspiration for reflective practitioners in terms of both content and

15   style.

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26   Aspiration, inspiration and illustration: Initiating debate on reflective practice writing

27   A growing body of literature has provided insights into the processes and outcomes

28   that might be associated with reflective practice. For example, Holt and Strean (2001)

29   illustrated the reflections of a neophyte practitioner, and since then several other papers from

30   early career practitioners have emerged (e.g., Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007; Jones,

31   Evans, & Mullen, 2007; Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007; Lindsay,

32   Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2006; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008). In contrast to

33   those offerings by early career practitioners, The British Psychological Society (BPS) Sport

34   and Exercise Psychology Review Special Issue (2006) collated seven reflective accounts

35   from *experienced* practitioners who had provided sport psychology support at the Olympic

36   Games in Athens. In addition to the above accounts of reflective practice Anderson, Knowles

37   and Gilbourne (2004) have made a more generic case for reflective practice being deployed

38   to support applied training within sport psychology. Collectively, the literature from the

39   sport domain has helped to promote a more thorough understanding of what reflective

40   practice is (and indeed isn't).

41   There is evidence to suggest that reflective practice is being increasingly recognized

42   as an important process within the broader canvas of applied sport psychology. In the UK for

43   example, the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science (BASES) supervised

44   experience program (2004-2009) required supervisees to engage in critical reading of key

45   journal sources and to use this material to stimulate their own engagement in and evidence of

46   this process. The 2009 programme has now located reflection as a key skill within one of ten

47   competencies, offers direct training and guidance on techniques and states that competency in

48   reflective practice must be achieved (http://www.bases.org.uk/Supervised-Experience).

49   Within the BPS guidelines for Stage Two training there is an expectation that reflective

50   practice will take place and be evidenced through a reflective log or diary. Furthermore,

51   transfer from the (BASES) accredited status to BPS Chartership is subject to candidates

52   providing a portfolio containing (amongst other requirements) "substantial evidence of

53   reflective practice" (http://www.bps.org.uk/careers/society_qual/spex/downloads.cfm).

54   These developments indicate that reflective practice is becoming a common process

55   within UK-based sport psychology training. This together with the recent accounts of

56   reflective practice being used internationally in sport psychology training and practice (e.g.,

57   Holt & Strean, 2001; Tod, 2007; Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000), underscores the importance

58   of sustaining a critical dialogue on themes and processes that might influence the direction

59   and efficacy of reflective practice more generally. The present article is, in part, based on the

60   above view and considers the future of reflective practice in both supportive and critical

61   terms.

62   *Challenges for those engaged in reflection.*

63   As reflective practice becomes increasingly embedded with applied training it is

64   likely that the writing of reflective experiences for applied training and applied/research-

65   based peer review publications of reflective accounts will become more widespread. Recently

66   completed doctoral research (Knowles, 2009) suggested that when reflective practice is

67   associated with a professional training program then program directors may feel a need seek

68   out means through which to integrate reflective practice into the associated professional

69   development curricula (e.g., B.Sc/M.Sc Sport Psychology programs accredited by the BPS).

70   Alongside these pragmatic/pedagogic considerations Knowles (2009) also suggested that

71   educators, supervisors/mentors and reflective practitioners continue to explore, possibly in a

72   more philosophical sense, what the reflective process might be trying to achieve and what it

73   might become. In general terms, it is possible to speculate these reflect a few of the

74   challenges for those practitioners and educators/mentors who will expect to utilize or evaluate

75   reflective practice. It seems timely then to consider how reflection and the writing of

76   reflective accounts might develop and mature in the years ahead.

77   Challenges that emerge from asking such a wide ranging questions do, at some point,

78   relate to the "end-product" of reflection both in terms of how reflection impacts upon

79   personal awareness and also how such awareness might be conveyed via the style and content

80   of reflective writing. The way reflective experiences are presented in text impacts upon both

81   pedagogy-related assessments and on reflective writing that emerges from applied training. In

82   an attempt to stimulate debate on this issue the present article seeks to critically explore the

83   issue of reflective levels and consider, more specifically, how *critical* reflection might be

84   first, understood and secondly, conveyed in writing. In undertaking this task the present paper

85   seeks to propose ideas for those who might presently, or in the future, write and/or evaluate

86   reflective texts.

87   Writing reflectively: Revisiting reflective levels.

88   At this moment in time the dominant method of representation for reflection appears

89   to be via a written account presented at intervals within, or at the conclusion of, a period of

90   training. Given that reflective practice, reflective writing and the evaluation of both is a

91   relatively new experience for many of those who practice within the sport and exercise

92   sciences the process might be seen as one that is evolving. At such an embryonic moment it

93   seems reasonable to ponder questions such as "What should be reflected on?" and "How

94   reflective-experience might be written down?" These and other questions are considered here

95   by placing an emphasis on the demonstration of different *reflective levels*. The notion of

96   'reflective level' in the sport domain was first discussed by Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, and

97   Nevill (2001). At that time, it was proposed as a means by which both writer and reviewer

98   might locate and plot development from a lower (pragmatic and localized practice-based

99 reflection), through a phase that demonstrated emotional engagement and towards a

100 higher/critical level of reflection.

101   One troublesome by-product that emerges from the promotion of a reflective

102 hierarchy (or any hierarchy for that matter) is that lower levels in the hierarchy might be

103 devalued when contrasted with higher elements. Texts that seek to demonstrate critical

104 reflection are quite common, particularly across the Action Research literature (e.g., Morley,

105 2007) and this desire to demonstrate critical engagement suggests that a certain value has

106 been placed on such an attainment. Awareness of such tendencies led Knowles (2009) to

107 caution readers against the perception of reflection that is *technical* (linked typically with

108 issues of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability), and reflection that is *practical* in

109 nature (associated with the exploration of personal meaning) being viewed as (somehow) less

110 valuable or less 'mature' than reflection which demonstrates *critical* engagement (see

111 Anderson et al., 2004 for further detail on these terms).

112   In the present text the idea that one form of reflection might always be viewed as

113 superior to another is seen as a difficult proposition to sustain. For example, it would appear

114 logical for technical or critical observation to be viewed as both reasonable and/or

115 inappropriate depending on the context in which the reflection takes place. In other words it

116 seems fair to suggest that different scenarios are better suited to different types of reflection.

117 Two illustrations are used here to clarify this line of thinking. First, if a particular sport

118 psychology intervention consistently generates a lack of positive response from the client

119 then the practitioner might benefit from a period of technical and/or practical reflection,

120 "what is it about this intervention that isn't working?" or "why does the client seem so

121 reluctant to work with me?" A different example might find a sport psychologist sensing a

122 longitudinal and ill-defined dissatisfaction with their own practice. In this more opaque case

123 reflection across all three levels of interest might be useful but critical reflection might be

124   particularly valuable in assisting the psychologist to view their work in a more expansive,

125   profound and insightful manner.

126   It has already been noted that the demonstration of critical reflection need not

127   necessarily be a prerequisite for peer review dissemination. The contemporary reflective

128   literature houses a number of manuscripts that are based primarily upon technical and

129   practical reflections and these are both informative and interesting. We make this observation

130   to stress the utility of technical and practical reflection and to ensure that the arguments that

131   follow do not make readers feel that we somehow downgrade this form of reflection or

132   writing.

133   The above points aside, the remainder of the paper does focus (almost exclusively) on

134   the issue of critical reflection and a number of rationale are offered to support this emphasis.

135   First of all critical reflection is not widely evidenced in the reflective sports literature (see

136   Knowles et al., 2007). Secondly, the challenges associated with critical reflection might be

137   unclear to many. Finally, and by tackling certain issues associated with points one and two,

138   there would appear to be a need to identify and offer illustrations from a literature source that

139   engages with critical thinking and can provide evidence of how this genre might appear to the

140   reader. Consequently auto-ethnography is presented here as one potential source of critical

141   writing that demonstrates different forms of author-engaged writing-style. To further support

142   these three observations an overview of the role of critical reflection within reflective practice

143   (critical reflective practice) would appear timely and the next few lines attempt to sketch out

144   a foundation point from which the present paper can progress.

145   It is clear that the demonstration of critical reflection is not an expectation within

146   undergraduate curricular or a factor in the *early* phases of applied training for that matter (as

147   perhaps seen with Woodcock et al., 2008). It has also been established that critical reflection

148   does not act as criteria for publication. Those observations aside, the case for critical

149   reflection being demonstrated towards the *concluding* stages of postgraduate

150   education/applied instruction (i.e. BPS Stage Two in the UK) is a more compelling

151   proposition and we return to this point in the concluding section. To extend participation in

152   critical reflective practice beyond the realm of professional training is it positioned here as a

153   means by which experienced practitioners can also develop and document effective practice

154   with clients. The discussion to follow is based on a perceived need to explore both the

155   possibilities and the difficulties associated with critical reflective practice. The text to follow

156   seeks first of all to clarify what critical reflection might include and secondly considers where

157   those interested in or engaged with reflective practitioners/practice might look for further

158   guidance, illustration and inspiration.

159   *Critical reflective practice: Establishing what it might mean.*

160   One way of beginning a conversation on critical reflective practice is to consider

161   critical reflection first of all. Being critical in the sense of noting, "that practice did not work,

162   I need to work out why and change it" or, "I am overly involved emotionally with this team

163   and need to step back", is of course very useful but these two statements indicate critique

164   (rather than critical reflection) and moreover suggest that technical and practical reflection

165   can harbor such observations. This notion of critique can be associated with critical thinking

166   as espoused by Ziegler (1995). These examples, however, are not at all related to critical

167   reflection (as outlined in the discussion to follow) as this we associated primarily with the

168   notion of critical social science. Knowles et al. (2001) described critical reflection as follows:

169   At this level, issues of justice and emancipation enter deliberations over the value of

170   professional goals and practice. The practitioner makes links between the setting of

171   everyday practice and broader social structure and forces and may contribute to

172   ethical decision making in practice. (p. 192)

173   In making the above point we are wary that notions of "justice" and "emancipation"

174   may seem rather esoteric even fanciful, however, in professional practice matters of justice

175   (such as fairness and equity) and emancipation (a sense of being set free from constraining

176   influences) are central to ethical practice that seeks to help and avoid coercion. In that regard,

177   the above terms may, at first glance, spear some distance away from the day-to-day grind of

178   everyday work, yet, and in our view, are central to it. In the discussion to follow themes of

179   justice and emancipation will appear several times, will also be related to different literature

180   sources and be constantly related to the notion of critical social science.

181   *Locating critical debate within action research literature*

182   The action research literature houses a philosophy and nomenclature dominated by

183   references to 'critical' engagement. Commenting on typologies that have been used to guide

184   action-research, Gilbourne (1999) suggested that evidence for critical engagement related to

185   an awareness and examination of self in juxtaposition to wider contextual matters such as

186   institutional power, a view that also embraced the possibilities afforded by personal

187   empowerment and emancipation of self and/or others. Similarly, Leitch and Day (2000) in a

188   paper that sought to integrate reflective practice and action research argued that teachers'

189   who undertake action research in the classroom, often neglect or give insufficient attention to

190   the nature of the reflective process. Their case hinted towards a critical agenda as they

191   proposed that reflection is not a cursory experience but rather a multi-faceted and potentially

192   empowering process, sentiments that have been echoed by a number of commentators over

193   the years. For example, Schön (1983) emphasized the complexity of the reflective process by

194   differentiating between reflection-on and reflection-in-action. He argued that reflection-on-

195   action was a process of *systematic* and *thoughtful* analysis that drew knowledge from

196   experience. In contrast reflection-in-action was related to the thinking that takes place 'in-

197   vivo' (thinking on one's feet!).

198   The above notions of reflection being a truly cognitive exercise, one that embraces

199   self and the plight of others, appears common to critical themes that are present in the

200   writings of Dewey (1933) and Carr and Kemmis (1986). A glance across the action research

201   literature (particularly in the domains of education and health) suggests that the thinking of

202   Carr and Kemmis (1986) serves as a common philosophical foundation from which a number

203   of reflective epistemologies have emerged. Through reference to the earlier work of

204   Habermas (1972/ 1974), Carr and Kemmis argued for different levels of human 'interest'

205   being linked to types of knowledge which were in turn attached to different paradigms of

206   science. In discussing the thinking of Carr and Kemmis (1986), Gilbourne (1999) stressed the

207   alignment between technical, practical, or emancipatory interests and empiricist, interpretive

208   and critical sciences respectively. To Carr and Kemmis the importance of embracing what

209   they termed 'critical social science' was essential in order to renew and reassess the

210   relationship between theory and practice and their views are central to the overall case that

211   we seek to make in the present paper. In explaining their rationale they point to the

212   emergence in the 1970's of modern science and argued that one consequence of this was that

213   "rationality was now exhaustively defined in terms of conformity to the rules of scientific

214   thinking, and, as such, (was) deprived of all creative, critical and evaluative powers" (p. 133).

215   The above sentiments resonate with elements of Schön's (1983/ 1987) critique depicting

216   science as the basis for technical rationality, a way of explaining how the world works in

217   clean and precise terms. Schön saw the world in more contextual terms and described the

218   workplace through the imagery of a 'swamp', life in the swamp being anything but tidy. Such

219   thinking was related to the need to listen and so come to understand how people viewed their

220   swamp and how they had managed to survive within it.

221   Understanding and encouraging others to engage with the multi-layered challenges

222   that are to be found in any social situation appears central to the thinking of Carr and Kemmis

223   (1986) also. As they develop their thesis for a critical social science approach to theory and

224   practice and by referring extensively to the work of Habermas (1972/1974) they emphasize

225   that they, like Habermas, are not against science per se but rather seek to promote a form of

226   social science that moves past uncritical renderings and accounts that offer illuminations.

227   Therefore they propose a move towards engagement that effectively challenges what might

228   be viewed as established and so (potentially) uncover distortions and inequalities. In so doing

229   they acknowledge, through what Habermas terms "the ideal speech situation", that thinking

230   creatively and with the true interests of others at heart, cannot be undertaken if compulsion or

231   coercion (by powerful others, such as mentors) only allows a particular view to flourish.

232   Whilst it is widely accepted that freedom of speech is part and parcel of science, our

233   emphasis on coercion speaks to a more subtle form of control one that inhabits hierarchy and

234   systems (such as accreditation) whereby participants adhere to "the rules" in the same way

235   that their mentors had done before the. In that sense coercion is more covert than overt, more

236   institutional than personal.

237   Carr and Kemmis (1986) explain a distinction between critical theory and critical

238   social science. The former emerges from a process of critique and so, in the case of modern

239   day sport psychology, might be a perspective that has grown from interpretive qualitative

240   inquiry (mental toughness might be a good recent example). These critical theories often

241   inform practice and again, within the domain of sport psychology, applied practice

242   interventions are informed by a range of macro theoretical positions (i.e., self-efficacy and

243   achievement goal-theory) and these offer good exemplars of critical theory. However, within

244   critical *social science* the aim is to enlighten practice by considering and challenging the

245   efficacy of theory and to query the processes that organize knowledge and deliver action.

246   These aspirations are thought to be attained through personal and shared reflection (in the

247   case of sport psychology that might be with groups such as coaches, athletes and so forth).

248 From such actions and from such points of challenge, theory can be deconstructed and

249 reconstructed but, and to repeat and earlier point, the climate that allows such engagement is

250 one without coercion and with an open mind to one's own risk of self deception (see Carr &

251 Kemmis, 1986, pp.148-149). Self-deception might be associated with a reluctance to

252 challenge. An uncritical acceptance of prior learning to the degree that it is seen

253 unquestionably to represent some form of 'truth', a truth that is beyond chastisement, might

254 be one example of this.

255   The present discussion has already suggested that themes present in Carr and

256 Kemmis's (1986) depiction of critical social science appear in differential elements of the

257 action-research literature and these often contain the signature of Habermasian thinking. Carr

258 and Kemmis presented action research as a model of critical social science arguing that "in

259 short, action research is a deliberate process for emancipating practitioners from the often

260 unseen constraints of assumptions, habit precedent, coercion and ideology" (p. 192).

261   The above sentiments resonate with later education-based texts that have explored

262 critical engagement in one capacity or another. For example, in a text that calls for critical

263 collaborative action research Aspland, Macpherson, Proudford and Whitmore (1996) argue

264 that critical engagement requires "underlying assumptions and beliefs to be acknowledged

265 (and for) curriculum trends and policies (to be) seen as problematic and contestable and for

266 further action (to be) tied to critical frameworks which focus on social justice and

267 empowerment for all" (p. 102).

268   Similar aspirations are apparent in the action research literature and are often couched

269 in the descriptors of protocol typologies that describe different categories of action research.

270 In the domain of healthcare Hart and Bond (1995) proposed a category of action research that

271 emphasized the aspiration to *empower* those who might be oppressed. In a similar manner,

272 Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) had earlier coined the term "professionalizing" research

273   which contained an assumption to enhance. Similarly Reason (1988) in his explanation of co-

274   operative inquiry (a close relative to action research) argued that "the notion of critical

275   subjectivity means that we are more demanding than orthodox science, insisting that valid

276   inquiry is based on a very high degree of self-knowing, self-reflection and co-operative

277   criticism" (p. 13). These examples from the 1980's and 1990's suggest convergence around a

278   typology of action research that contains references to the emancipatory-critical axis

279   proposed by Carr and Kemmis (1986). These texts, and texts that emerged later seem to

280   coalesce around a view that critical engagement be it through reference to critical interest,

281   critical social science (both discussed by Carr & Kemmis, 1986), or through various named

282   typologies of action research, relate in some way to the individual reflecting on their and

283   other's role in the specific context of their day-to-day practice. These discussions also reflect

284   on how this process engages with a wider contextual landscape that might include reference

285   to institutional power and economic and/or political oppression.

286   *Depictions of critical reflection within the reflective practice literature*

287   When the process of critical reflection is considered more directly (as opposed to

288   looking at reflection within a critical protocol such as action research) it is striking that many

289   Habermasian themes outlined above, such as emancipation and the exploration of personal

290   and shared distortion, re-surface but are expressed as being derivative of a different but

291   associated literature-base. Morley (2007) offers an excellent and contemporary example of

292   this tendency to share common critical aspirations whilst demonstrating divergence in

293   relation to inspiration via literature, in discussing what critical reflection means to her she

294   writes:

295   It (that is critical reflection) draws attention not just to values that inform our practice,

296   but also to the process of how we implement critical values in practice. Critical values

297   in this sense are 'primarily concerned with practicing in ways which further society

298   without domination, exploitation and oppression' focusing 'both on how structures

299   dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social

300   structures and relations' (Fook, 2002, p. 18). My understanding of critical reflection is

301   therefore that it allows us to examine our own implicit, previously unexamined

302   assumptions, which might limit or undermine our intended or espoused practice

303   (Fook, 2002). This may include challenging our own self-interests and scrutinizing

304   how our own social positioning and implicit beliefs, values and assumptions may be

305   complicit with inequitable social arrangements. (pp. 62-63)

306 Morley (2007) goes on to stress that critical thinking opens doors to new possibilities and so

307 can have a liberating potential and again she cites Fook (2002) "This capacity for unsettling

308 or destabilizing commonly held or accepted beliefs is potentially one of the most powerful

309 sets of strategies that arise from…critical understanding" (p. 90).

310 Morley (2007) also makes direct reference to the literature that has guided and underpinned

311 her conception of reflective practice:

312   The primary frameworks and perspectives I use to understand and inform critical

313   reflection are critical theories such as feminism (Clift, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Van

314   Den Berh & Cooper, 1986), structural (Moreau, 1979), radical (Fook, 1983), and

315   critical postmodernism (Fook, 1996, 2002).

316 Within this collection of perspectives Morley (2007) argued that her analysis of language

317 allowed her to understand how social 'practices produce and construct meaning', how

318 universal narratives mirror modernist conceptions of power and how a constructivist

319 approach to knowledge allows the possibility of an inductive generation of theory (a bottom-

320 up view/construction of knowledge).

321   Other contributors to the reflective practice field approach their work through

322   reference to Habermasian thinking, for example, O'Connor, Hyde and Treacy (2003) in their

323   text on reflection in nurse teachers note that:

324   …emancipatory knowledge developed through self-reflection has become a focus of

325   interest to nurses in empowering them to throw off the shackles of their oppressed

326   history (Harden, 1996). Such knowledge, pursued through the critical social sciences,

327   has been heralded as part of the solution in addressing the restraining conditions

328   evoked by domination, repression and ideological constraints in relation to thought

329   and action (Habermas, 1971). (p. 108)

330   Their paper concludes with a view that striving for critical reflection would appear to

331   be a positive aspirational goal but also note how challenging this aspiration actually is.

332   *Summarizing what critical reflection might be*

333   This brief consideration of how critical reflection might be described and understood

334   hopefully provides those associated with reflective practice in sport psychology with food for

335   thought. From the examples we have presented it is clear that various literature sources might

336   inform or guide policy makers, mentors and practitioners who are interested in the underlying

337   reasoning that supports critical reflective practice. As authors we have found it interesting to

338   note that differential literature sources provide the backdrop for similar end-points that

339   emphasizes a sense of emancipation and encourages personal growth through an awareness

340   and exploration of self that embraces a sense of morality and justice in practice and promotes

341   the possibility of challenge and change.

342   Such profound challenges suggest that critical reflection is not only complex (partly

343   as a consequence of the assumptions associated with it) but also, we would argue, because a

344   number of historical demographic factors conspire to work against the development of a

345   critical mindset particularly for those who work within the world of applied sport

346   psychology. Given the nature of the above debate it is ironic that many of these 'factors'

347   relate in one way or another to power. For example, the discipline's dominant positivistic or

348   experimental methodology, though productive and thorough in research terms, does,

349   nevertheless, encourage undergraduate and postgraduate sport psychologists to become

350   familiar with a writing *style* that is author evacuated and devoid of personal nuance. In

351   addition, this way of thinking and writing actively discourages students to consider personal

352   feelings and opinions as they are, by definition, emotive, unscientific and (some would say)

353   of little value.

354   The sense of irony is heightened further as others would doubtless argue that the

355   emergence of qualitative research would surely act to counterbalance the above restrictions

356   on authorial voice but the suggestion here is that this is not really the case, well not in the

357   realm of sport psychology at any rate. A number of commentators (e.g., Biddle, Markland,

358   Gilbourne, Chatzisanrantis, & Sparkes, 2001; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Knowles et al.,

359   2007) have identified that qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology leans heavily

360   towards a post-positivist doctrine in which prior theory, often established via quantitative

361   means, drives and shapes the nature of any qualitative inquiry. Qualitative texts therefore

362   tend to be theory-led and reinforce an author evacuated style of presentation (Brown,

363   Gilbourne, & Claydon, 2009). Sparkes (2002) refers to such texts as "realist tales".

364   This tendency to foreground established theory is counter to elements of critical

365   reflective practice which promotes an engagement with self both in-context and self amidst

366   the complexities of culture and society. Consequently, we would argue, that the distal nature

367   of the authorial voice, in both quantitative and qualitative texts offers little literary

368   encouragement or indeed illustration for the reflective practitioners of the future. Against the

369   backdrop of these underlying methodological challenges it is not so surprising that most

370   contemporary reflective practice texts in sport psychology provide examples of technical and

371   practical reflection (e.g., Clarke, 2004; McCann, 2000). Examples of reflection derived from

372   critical interests are more difficult to find, at least within texts that are housed within the

373   sport-based reflective practice literature.

374   A brief critical interlude

375   Before considering the possibility that auto-ethnographic texts might act as a

376   platform, guide or point of illustration for critical reflection, it is helpful to give space to

377   those who might be less convinced by this particular view. As an example, Bleakley (2000),

378   contests a number of suppositions that might be utilized to promote the benefits of reflective

379   writing. In his critical essay '*Writing with Invisible Ink'* he challenges the earlier views

380   expressed by Bolton (1999) who associated reflectively derived creative writing with

381   dynamic learning, self-assertion, self and professional development and positive therapeutic

382   effects. Bleakley (2000) was particularly scathing of those who supported a form of reflective

383   writing that veered towards the confessional. Rather than support the notion, as suggested by

384   Holly (1989), that (reflective-confessional writing) allows us to come to know ourselves, he

385   wondered whether such writing might just imprison the writer into a form of subjection in

386   which reflective texts meander in and around a particular (accepted) set of parameters.

387   Bleakley (2000) indicated that such writing might become morose and narcissistic rather than

388   enlightening and attacked (what he termed) the postmodern world for producing amongst

389   other things:

390   educators hooked on reflective practices that secure confessional narratives from their

391   trainees as an initiatory rite embodies as institutional portfolios of evidence of

392   learning…Where the wealthy have 'personal trainers' for their narcissistic fitness

393   needs, mass education (or in our case applied training) has the training of the personal

394   as an explicit goal. (parentheses added p. 18)

395   It is fair to say Bleakley (2000) was not terribly impressed with the drift towards

396 confessional writing and though he maintained a degree of hope for the reflective writing

397 project he was inclined to suggest that such stories might under-achieve, be subsumed under

398 a culture of narcissism and so diminish in expectation over time.

399   These are harsh criticisms yet given the heady assumptions associated earlier with

400 critical social science and critical reflection it is not difficult to see how these assumptions

401 might first, establish parameters that 'confine' writing and secondly how critical aspirations

402 might be neat enough in academic terms but maybe problematical in terms of experience and

403 the writing of it. Self indulgence is, of course, something that resides in the eyes of the

404 beholder. Some readers might find a segment of text or a whole manuscript indulgent, others

405 might find the same passage of writing and/or manuscript more fascinating and insightful.

406 This dilemma aside, writers of reflective texts are best guided by published works of a similar

407 vein, for these will have been peer reviewed and so, to some the least, will not have fallen

408 victim to the cries of indulgence. On a more personal and straightforward note, writers need

409 to be vigilant and guard against text that might house a sense of self promotion or self

410 congratulation. Asking those one trusts to read and feedback in an open and critical manner is

411 another tried and tested technique. These cautious sentiments are worthy of attention and

412 form part of the wider debate on the future of reflective practice and particularly the

413 boundaries and practices that might define it.

414

415 Considering the auto-ethnographic text as a point of illustration for critical reflection/writing

416   Not withstanding the above critique, having considered various definitions of critical

417 reflection and also highlighted associated literature sources, we now consider the more

418 immediate challenges of writing-reflectively from a more up-beat perspective. Rutter (2006),

419 when discussing reflective writing from the domain of social work, asserts that reflective

420   practitioners may have a range of complex cognitive and affective issues to convey but

421   struggle to express these in written form. One conclusion to emerge from her thinking relates

422   to a need for others to show reflective practitioners what reflective writing might *look like*.

423   This issue of illustration is a challenge and in an attempt to move towards some kind

424   of solution we have considered how auto-ethnographic texts might assist those who are

425   engaged in reflective processes from whatever station (administrative, mentor/supervisor or

426   practitioner). Risner (2002) in his consideration of reflective practice as writing suggests that

427   an 'auto' approach to writing reflectively offers the potential for participants:

428   To understand self and others, to recognize our own place within oppressive

429   structures we seek to eliminate and to inform our potential for individual and

430   collective action for making a better world. (p. 8)

431   Risner (2002) also argues that the process of reflective writing and the 'storying' of

432   reflective experiences can be undertaken around three steps:

433   1.   retrieving the story in words, illustration and movement, looking again at one's life

434   journey, re-searching biographical particulars

435   2.   zooming-in (Watson, 1998) for particularly looking underneath and between the lines

436   of narrative, reading one's words, shapes, qualities, preferences, energy and imagery

437   3.   zooming-out (Watson, 1998) or reading the larger concerns revealed from the

438   uniqueness of the personal narrative. Zooming-out for the reflective practitioner allows each

439   narrative reflection to speak again, not merely on a purely personal level, but more broadly in

440   dialogue with critical theories for emancipatory change.

441   We suggest that these suggestions are helpful not least as they partly return the focus

442   to earlier philosophical assumptions associated with critical reflection. The above ideas for

443   structuring the reflective writing process may also resonate with those authors who have

444   engaged with auto-ethnographic writing, a highly personalized account which by definition is

445   contextually located around the authors own life with a focus on significant, often

446   challenging issues. Auto-ethnographic texts are often infused with emotive content, promote

447   the notion that someone's own story has implications for others and also might offer insights

448   that include a sense of journey, of change and might also embrace a societal dimension.

449   In a stylistic sense auto-ethnographic texts also offer a clear point of illustration to

450   those who seek to write in the first person. As noted earlier "I" is not a term that sport and

451   exercise scientists are encouraged to use, indeed most research methods programs will

452   discourage any tendency to personalize a text be it an essay or research account. The author

453   evacuated, theory-laden approach to writing is the common nomenclature of science

454   generally and of the sport and exercise sciences more specifically. Yet a reflective text is

455   bound in the experiences of the individual and as such must reach out towards a different

456   authorial voice, one that embraces self and emphasizes self alongside others. Such

457   assumptions encourage reflective practitioners to move across the keyboard to type "I" and

458   for many that is likely to feel quite strange.

459   It is of course possible to argue that spending time on the issue of writing in the first

460   person (in the "I") is a wasted exercise as technical and practical reflective texts already offer

461   examples of that way of writing of that 'style' and they do. The use of "I" in a critical

462   reflective account moves beyond "I did this", "I felt uncomfortable", "I felt sad". These

463   statements are fine (of course) but they do tend to lack any sense of evocative, emotional

464   and/or disconcerting connection between self, experience and society more generally. Auto-

465   ethnography and the use of "I" in such texts reflect observations that embrace wider

466   dynamics. For example, an auto-ethnographic text might explore self as a part of a system

467   (such as accreditation training), without any direct connection to critical social science and

468   auto-ethnographic text may begin to challenge the way a system works, query a systems

469   power, ponder a systems sense of truth and certainty. Getting to grips with the sense of

470   writing reflective practice texts in the first person is important as the reflective process is

471   primarily an internal dialogue. So writing in the 'I' brings a greater sense of ownership and

472   even authenticity to the text, it brings permission to experience and to write as experienced

473   rather than experience and write about the experience from a distance. Consider this short

474   (auto-ethnographic-reflective) segment offered by Gilbourne (in Gilbourne & Richardson,

475   2006):

476   Less expectation then for the psychologist to 'turn things around', less hype, fewer

477   fireworks just indispensable support. In the world I have portrayed I am mindful that

478   the support-performance axis remains elusive. Furthermore, I see that the intuitive

479   (appealing) logic that links covert caring support to performance is largely beyond the

480   measurement of science. To be candid I am untroubled by that. More generally (and

481   in my most weary of moments) I wonder whether overplaying the performance

482   accountability agenda risks leading the profession into troubled waters….when

483   psychologists in a laudable desire to begin working with athletes, overstate the

484   association between PST and performance, then (to my mind) they forge the very

485   sword upon which their applied work might fall. (p. 335)

486   This brief extract queries the dominance of science, challenges the wisdom of a truism

487   that accompanies science-based practice (namely that applied sport psychology practice leads

488   to improved performance in athletes) and suggests a new way forward one based on caring

489   and the intuitive skills that accompany such an aspiration. These conclusions were arrived at

490   via a long term engagement with reflective practice undertaken as part of an embedded

491   methodology (ethnography in this case) and the stylistic pitch was influenced by the intra-

492   personal tones of auto-ethnography.

493   As another example, Stone (2009), a UK based Professor of language and linguistics,

494   uses auto-ethnography writing as a research tool through which he explores his own past

495 experience and present consequences of anorexia, excessive exercising and psychosis linking

496 starvation of the body to the repression of traumatic memory. The style of writing is

497 purposely hesitant and uncertain reflecting the way people might typically think about feel

498 about and construct events particularly when the constructions are seen through the lens of

499 mental illness and memory suppression. The following vignette is offered as an illustration of

500 a text which captures not only his own behavior that of his mother:

501   His memory, so cloudy now, was of cars arriving, of doctors, of his mother. Of a bed,

502   of sedation. And, the next day, of the drive to the hospital. On the way they stopped

503   and he bought chocolate. This was significant; even then he realised it. It was a kind

504   of giving in. Finally, he had surrendered to his need. He remembered, or thought he

505   remembered, his mother's pleasure at this purchase. So perhaps she had noticed his

506   physical deterioration after all. (p. 69)

507 Brendon's mother appears seemingly pleased at his purchase of chocolate is a major point of

508 departure from one view (she doesn't even know I'm ill) to another (she may have known

509 this all along). This is a profound shift and one that had come to the fore through reflection

510 and contemplation on that one incident. Auto-ethnographic influences, therefore, are not just

511 a matter of style or pitch, auto-ethnography also crosses hitherto secure academic lines in

512 which activity or experience is not *simply* described (as a technical or practical reflective text

513 might describe) but is used as a pivotal moment for suggesting change. To produce such texts

514 writers need to submerge into their own experiences to juxtaposition social, economic or

515 political constraints and position self through raised awareness and possibly liberation

516 (Gilbourne, 1999). Readers are subsequently encouraged to walk in the shoes of the author to

517 see what he saw, to appreciate his dilemmas, and feel something of what he felt. Reflective

518 writing that attempts to achieve such high levels of engagement usually carries with it the

519 aspiration that readers will be moved to reflect further on their own lives (Gilbourne, 2002).

520   As the act of reflecting on-self is thought to encourage further reflection in-others then the

521   processes of writing and (eventually) reading aspires to move ideas and accounts from the

522   intra to the inter-personal and so seeks to gather a sense of momentum and influence. More

523   generally, and as noted in the citations from Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) and Stone

524   (2009), the angst and sense of 'journey' in most auto-ethnographic texts introduces

525   practitioners to the notion through their own reflective practices, they might develop different

526   points of view, challenge the status quo, query established truths, and be comfortable to lay

527   bare experiences that might evoke sentiments such as uncertainty and unease. In other words

528   such texts might offer a source of and so illustrate critical engagement in terms of reflection

529   and writing.

530   The quandary of embracing critical reflective practice based upon critical social science.

531   As this paper has been submitted to the professional practice section of TSP it is clear

532   that many readers might, at some point, expect some kind of applied comment. Indeed,

533   reviewers of the present manuscript have themselves requested a section that provided

534   guidelines for how "to do" critical reflection. In response, it is important to for us to reiterate

535   that we compiled this paper to encourage professional practice debate for this, seemed to us,

536   to be a valuable exercise in and of itself. However, and as we have been requested to revise

537   with some comment on the doing of critical reflective practice we offer a number of

538   observations. First, it might be better to maybe recalibrate the question. Rather than asking

539   how one might do critical reflective practice? It might be more productive to consider what

540   are the necessary conditions that might encourage critical reflection more generally? The

541   messages contained in the present manuscript have suggested that engaging with the nuances

542   of critical social science are essential to critical reflection, the two, we suggest, go hand-in-

543   hand. Consequently, doing critical reflection would appear to be dependent on a series of

544   permissions being granted and this notion impacts across a range of hierarchical levels within

545   applied sport psychology. If we accept that governing bodies and accrediting agencies/panels

546   and so forth operate at a strategic level and so influence activity at a more operational level,

547   then an interest in critical social science, and the literature associated with it, might be

548   accompanied by a desire or aspiration to see critical reflection demonstrated in the latter

549   stages of reflective practice applied training. In the case just sketched out here, permission,

550   for change that might embrace critical reflection might begin with initiatives promoted by

551   strategic governance in whatever form that might take. In turn, aspirations from the apex of

552   hierarchy may, over time, permeate curricular content and adjust reading lists accordingly. In

553   the present text we suggest that narrative inquiry and more specifically the genre of auto-

554   ethnography might be one way for pedagogy to introduce, illustrate and embrace elements of

555   critical social science. So, doing critical social science, at least in the form explained here, is

556   aligned to notions of permission and so, we suggest, is embedded to power. To explain, a

557   student who has worked hard to gain a good undergraduate and postgraduate qualification

558   (and possibly incurred debts in the process) and has the opportunity to be mentored in their

559   applied work by an established professor in the field, is unlikely to start ruminating,

560   contesting and challenging in the style that might be expected of a critical social scientist,

561   even if they have doubts over what they see and how they feel; why should they rock the

562   boat? If, on the other hand, when they begin working with their experienced mentor, if they

563   are given permission to think the unthinkable to challenge the most accepted elements of

564   practice and to constantly monitor their own sense of well-being as they consider issues of

565   justice and emancipation, then, they might, like their mentor, become critical social scientists.

566   However, this activity would be unfair in the extreme if any given mentor (critical or

567   otherwise) stood alone with their ideas and had little in the way of support from peers. In

568   such circumstances they would, in effect, be exposing their student to undue risk. So, when

569   reviewers ask us to 'tell us how to do critical reflection' we would suggest with all due

570   respect, and at this moment in time, it is better to think about how the applied sport

571   psychology profession might permit this way of thinking and so encourage a critical social

572   science agenda to flourish and grow. In asking ourselves this question we returned constantly

573   to the issue of gatekeepers and power a process that led us to wonder who owns the keys to

574   such permission?

575   Conclusion.

576   If those who administer the domain of applied sport psychology wish reflective

577   practice as a process, reflective writing as a product and evaluation as an associated

578   procedure to be associated with critical levels of engagement, then a number of challenges

579   will need to be met. These include a readiness to engage with a diverse and unfamiliar

580   literature base and, through the auspices of critical social science, display a willingness to

581   allow the foundations of contemporary practice to be regularly contested and challenged.

582   Consequently a critical journey needs to be shared by administrative/strategic thinkers as well

583   as mentors and practitioners. A practitioner "going it alone" may find the journey

584   uncomfortable. Historical/traditional and/or methodological barriers to a ready appreciation

585   of critical levels of reflection have also been suggested and the auto-ethnographic literature

586   (though challenging and unusual for many) has been signposted here as a potential source of

587   illustration in terms of content and style. Finally, we began the present paper by calling for a

588   new phase of debate on the future direction of reflective practice and hope that issues raised

589   here will help to begin that process.

590

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