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Running Head: REFLECTIVE WRITING

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

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This paper is based on prior and on-going research into reflective practice in sport.

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## 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 Streat (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](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 & Streat, 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 an 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           Notwithstanding 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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