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

Zoe Knowles PhD

School of Sport and Exercise Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

David Gilbourne PhD

Cardiff School of Sport, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cardiff, UK.

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

Correspondence on this article should be sent to Dr Zoe Knowles, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Henry Cotton Campus, Webster Street, Liverpool, UK, L3 2ET. [Z.R.Knowles@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:Z.R.Knowles@ljmu.ac.uk)

## Abstract

The present article contemplates the future of reflective practice in the domain of applied sport psychology and, in so doing, seeks to engender further critical debate and comment. More specifically, the discussion to follow re-visits the topic of ‘reflective-levels’ and builds a case for ‘critical reflection’ as an aspiration for those engaged in pedagogy or applied sport psychology training regimens. Assumptions and commentators associated with critical social science (e.g., Habermas, 1974; Carr & Kemmis, 1986), action research (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Leitch & Day, 2000), and critical reflection (e.g., Morgan, 2007) suggest a number of foundation points from which critical reflection might be better understood. Finally, writing about ones- self via the processes of critical reflection and through reflective practice more generally are briefly considered in cautionary terms (Bleakley, 2000; du Preez, 2008). Auto-ethnography in sport (Gilbourne, 2002; Stone, 2009) is finally proposed as one potential source of illustration and inspiration for reflective practitioners in terms of both content and style.

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

A growing body of literature has provided insights into the processes and outcomes that might be associated with reflective practice. For example, Holt and Streat (2001) illustrated the reflections of a neophyte practitioner, and since then several other papers from early career practitioners have emerged (e.g., Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007; Jones, Evans, & Mullen, 2007; Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007; Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2006; Woodcock, Richards, & Mugford, 2008). In contrast to those offerings by early career practitioners, The British Psychological Society (BPS) Sport and Exercise Psychology Review Special Issue (2006) collated seven reflective accounts from *experienced* practitioners who had provided sport psychology support at the Olympic Games in Athens. In addition to the above accounts of reflective practice Anderson, Knowles and Gilbourne (2004) have made a more generic case for reflective practice being deployed to support applied training within sport psychology. Collectively, the literature from the sport domain has helped to promote a more thorough understanding of what reflective practice is (and indeed isn't).

There is evidence to suggest that reflective practice is being increasingly recognized as an important process within the broader canvas of applied sport psychology. In the UK for example, the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science (BASES) supervised experience program (2004-2009) required supervisees to engage in critical reading of key journal sources and to use this material to stimulate their own engagement in and evidence of this process. The 2009 programme has now located reflection as a key skill within one of ten competencies, offers direct training and guidance on techniques and states that competency in reflective practice must be achieved (<http://www.bases.org.uk/Supervised-Experience>). Within the BPS guidelines for Stage Two training there is an expectation that reflective practice will take place and be evidenced through a reflective log or diary. Furthermore,

transfer from the (BASES) accredited status to BPS Chartership is subject to candidates providing a portfolio containing (amongst other requirements) “substantial evidence of reflective practice” ([http://www.bps.org.uk/careers/society\\_qual/spex/downloads.cfm](http://www.bps.org.uk/careers/society_qual/spex/downloads.cfm)).

These developments indicate that reflective practice is becoming a common process within UK-based sport psychology training. This together with the recent accounts of reflective practice being used internationally in sport psychology training and practice (e.g., Holt & Streat, 2001; Tod, 2007; Van Raalte & Andersen, 2000), underscores the importance of sustaining a critical dialogue on themes and processes that might influence the direction and efficacy of reflective practice more generally. The present article is, in part, based on the above view and considers the future of reflective practice in both supportive and critical terms.

#### *Challenges for those engaged in reflection.*

As reflective practice becomes increasingly embedded with applied training it is likely that the writing of reflective experiences for applied training and applied/research-based peer review publications of reflective accounts will become more widespread. Recently completed doctoral research (Knowles, 2009) suggested that when reflective practice is associated with a professional training program then program directors may feel a need seek out means through which to integrate reflective practice into the associated professional development curricula (e.g., B.Sc/M.Sc Sport Psychology programs accredited by the BPS). Alongside these pragmatic/pedagogic considerations Knowles (2009) also suggested that educators, supervisors/mentors and reflective practitioners continue to explore, possibly in a more philosophical sense, what the reflective process might be trying to achieve and what it might become. In general terms, it is possible to speculate these reflect a few of the challenges for those practitioners and educators/mentors who will expect to utilize or evaluate

reflective practice. It seems timely then to consider how reflection and the writing of reflective accounts might develop and mature in the years ahead.

Challenges that emerge from asking such a wide ranging questions do, at some point, relate to the “end-product” of reflection both in terms of how reflection impacts upon personal awareness and also how such awareness might be conveyed via the style and content of reflective writing. The way reflective experiences are presented in text impacts upon both pedagogy-related assessments and on reflective writing that emerges from applied training. In an attempt to stimulate debate on this issue the present article seeks to critically explore the issue of reflective levels and consider, more specifically, how *critical* reflection might be first, understood and secondly, conveyed in writing. In undertaking this task the present paper seeks to propose ideas for those who might presently, or in the future, write and/or evaluate reflective texts.

#### Writing reflectively: Revisiting reflective levels.

At this moment in time the dominant method of representation for reflection appears to be via a written account presented at intervals within, or at the conclusion of, a period of training. Given that reflective practice, reflective writing and the evaluation of both is a relatively new experience for many of those who practice within the sport and exercise sciences the process might be seen as one that is evolving. At such an embryonic moment it seems reasonable to ponder questions such as “What should be reflected on?” and “How reflective-experience might be written down?” These and other questions are considered here by placing an emphasis on the demonstration of different *reflective levels*. The notion of ‘reflective level’ in the sport domain was first discussed by Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, and Nevill (2001). At that time, it was proposed as a means by which both writer and reviewer might locate and plot development from a lower (pragmatic and localized practice-based

reflection), through a phase that demonstrated emotional engagement and towards a higher/critical level of reflection.

One troublesome by-product that emerges from the promotion of a reflective hierarchy (or any hierarchy for that matter) is that lower levels in the hierarchy might be devalued when contrasted with higher elements. Texts that seek to demonstrate critical reflection are quite common, particularly across the Action Research literature (e.g., Morley, 2007) and this desire to demonstrate critical engagement suggests that a certain value has been placed on such an attainment. Awareness of such tendencies led Knowles (2009) to caution readers against the perception of reflection that is *technical* (linked typically with issues of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability), and reflection that is *practical* in nature (associated with the exploration of personal meaning) being viewed as (somehow) less valuable or less ‘mature’ than reflection which demonstrates *critical* engagement (see Anderson et al., 2004 for further detail on these terms).

In the present text the idea that one form of reflection might always be viewed as superior to another is seen as a difficult proposition to sustain. For example, it would appear logical for technical or critical observation to be viewed as both reasonable and/or inappropriate depending on the context in which the reflection takes place. In other words it seems fair to suggest that different scenarios are better suited to different types of reflection. Two illustrations are used here to clarify this line of thinking. First, if a particular sport psychology intervention consistently generates a lack of positive response from the client then the practitioner might benefit from a period of technical and/or practical reflection, “what is it about this intervention that isn’t working?” or “why does the client seem so reluctant to work with me?” A different example might find a sport psychologist sensing a longitudinal and ill-defined dissatisfaction with their own practice. In this more opaque case reflection across all three levels of interest might be useful but critical reflection might be

particularly valuable in assisting the psychologist to view their work in a more expansive, profound and insightful manner.

It has already been noted that the demonstration of critical reflection need not necessarily be a prerequisite for peer review dissemination. The contemporary reflective literature houses a number of manuscripts that are based primarily upon technical and practical reflections and these are both informative and interesting. We make this observation to stress the utility of technical and practical reflection and to ensure that the arguments that follow do not make readers feel that we somehow downgrade this form of reflection or writing.

The above points aside, the remainder of the paper does focus (almost exclusively) on the issue of critical reflection and a number of rationale are offered to support this emphasis. First of all critical reflection is not widely evidenced in the reflective sports literature (see Knowles et al., 2007). Secondly, the challenges associated with critical reflection might be unclear to many. Finally, and by tackling certain issues associated with points one and two, there would appear to be a need to identify and offer illustrations from a literature source that engages with critical thinking and can provide evidence of how this genre might appear to the reader. Consequently auto-ethnography is presented here as one potential source of critical writing that demonstrates different forms of author-engaged writing-style. To further support these three observations an overview of the role of critical reflection within reflective practice (critical reflective practice) would appear timely and the next few lines attempt to sketch out a foundation point from which the present paper can progress.

It is clear that the demonstration of critical reflection is not an expectation within undergraduate curricular or a factor in the *early* phases of applied training for that matter (as perhaps seen with Woodcock et al., 2008). It has also been established that critical reflection does not act as criteria for publication. Those observations aside, the case for critical

reflection being demonstrated towards the *concluding* stages of postgraduate education/applied instruction (i.e. BPS Stage Two in the UK) is a more compelling proposition and we return to this point in the concluding section. To extend participation in critical reflective practice beyond the realm of professional training is it positioned here as a means by which experienced practitioners can also develop and document effective practice with clients. The discussion to follow is based on a perceived need to explore both the possibilities and the difficulties associated with critical reflective practice. The text to follow seeks first of all to clarify what critical reflection might include and secondly considers where those interested in or engaged with reflective practitioners/practice might look for further guidance, illustration and inspiration.

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

One way of beginning a conversation on critical reflective practice is to consider critical reflection first of all. Being critical in the sense of noting, “that practice did not work, I need to work out why and change it” or, “I am overly involved emotionally with this team and need to step back”, is of course very useful but these two statements indicate critique (rather than critical reflection) and moreover suggest that technical and practical reflection can harbor such observations. This notion of critique can be associated with critical thinking as espoused by Ziegler (1995). These examples, however, are not at all related to critical reflection (as outlined in the discussion to follow) as this we associated primarily with the notion of critical social science. Knowles et al. (2001) described critical reflection as follows:

At this level, issues of justice and emancipation enter deliberations over the value of professional goals and practice. The practitioner makes links between the setting of everyday practice and broader social structure and forces and may contribute to ethical decision making in practice. (p. 192)



In making the above point we are wary that notions of “justice” and “emancipation” may seem rather esoteric even fanciful, however, in professional practice matters of justice (such as fairness and equity) and emancipation (a sense of being set free from constraining influences) are central to ethical practice that seeks to help and avoid coercion. In that regard, the above terms may, at first glance, appear some distance away from the day-to-day grind of everyday work, yet, and in our view, are central to it. In the discussion to follow themes of justice and emancipation will appear several times, will also be related to different literature sources and be constantly related to the notion of critical social science.

#### *Locating critical debate within action research literature*

The action research literature houses a philosophy and nomenclature dominated by references to ‘critical’ engagement. Commenting on typologies that have been used to guide action-research, Gilbourne (1999) suggested that evidence for critical engagement related to an awareness and examination of self in juxtaposition to wider contextual matters such as institutional power, a view that also embraced the possibilities afforded by personal empowerment and emancipation of self and/or others. Similarly, Leitch and Day (2000) in a paper that sought to integrate reflective practice and action research argued that teachers’ who undertake action research in the classroom, often neglect or give insufficient attention to the nature of the reflective process. Their case hinted towards a critical agenda as they proposed that reflection is not a cursory experience but rather a multi-faceted and potentially empowering process, sentiments that have been echoed by a number of commentators over the years. For example, Schön (1983) emphasized the complexity of the reflective process by differentiating between reflection-on and reflection-in-action. He argued that reflection-on-action was a process of *systematic* and *thoughtful* analysis that drew knowledge from experience. In contrast reflection-in-action was related to the thinking that takes place ‘in-vivo’ (thinking on one’s feet!).

The above notions of reflection being a truly cognitive exercise, one that embraces self and the plight of others, appears common to critical themes that are present in the writings of Dewey (1933) and Carr and Kemmis (1986). A glance across the action research literature (particularly in the domains of education and health) suggests that the thinking of Carr and Kemmis (1986) serves as a common philosophical foundation from which a number of reflective epistemologies have emerged. Through reference to the earlier work of Habermas (1972/ 1974), Carr and Kemmis argued for different levels of human ‘interest’ being linked to types of knowledge which were in turn attached to different paradigms of science. In discussing the thinking of Carr and Kemmis (1986), Gilbourne (1999) stressed the alignment between technical, practical, or emancipatory interests and empiricist, interpretive and critical sciences respectively. To Carr and Kemmis the importance of embracing what they termed ‘critical social science’ was essential in order to renew and reassess the relationship between theory and practice and their views are central to the overall case that we seek to make in the present paper. In explaining their rationale they point to the emergence in the 1970’s of modern science and argued that one consequence of this was that “rationality was now exhaustively defined in terms of conformity to the rules of scientific thinking, and, as such, (was) deprived of all creative, critical and evaluative powers” (p. 133). The above sentiments resonate with elements of Schön’s (1983/ 1987) critique depicting science as the basis for technical rationality, a way of explaining how the world works in clean and precise terms. Schön saw the world in more contextual terms and described the workplace through the imagery of a ‘swamp’, life in the swamp being anything but tidy. Such thinking was related to the need to listen and so come to understand how people viewed their swamp and how they had managed to survive within it.

Understanding and encouraging others to engage with the multi-layered challenges that are to be found in any social situation appears central to the thinking of Carr and Kemmis

(1986) also. As they develop their thesis for a critical social science approach to theory and practice and by referring extensively to the work of Habermas (1972/1974) they emphasize that they, like Habermas, are not against science per se but rather seek to promote a form of social science that moves past uncritical renderings and accounts that offer illuminations. Therefore they propose a move towards engagement that effectively challenges what might be viewed as established and so (potentially) uncover distortions and inequalities. In so doing they acknowledge, through what Habermas terms “the ideal speech situation”, that thinking creatively and with the true interests of others at heart, cannot be undertaken if compulsion or coercion (by powerful others, such as mentors) only allows a particular view to flourish. Whilst it is widely accepted that freedom of speech is part and parcel of science, our emphasis on coercion speaks to a more subtle form of control one that inhabits hierarchy and systems (such as accreditation) whereby participants adhere to “the rules” in the same way that their mentors had done before the. In that sense coercion is more covert than overt, more institutional than personal.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) explain a distinction between critical theory and critical social science. The former emerges from a process of critique and so, in the case of modern day sport psychology, might be a perspective that has grown from interpretive qualitative inquiry (mental toughness might be a good recent example). These critical theories often inform practice and again, within the domain of sport psychology, applied practice interventions are informed by a range of macro theoretical positions (i.e., self-efficacy and achievement goal-theory) and these offer good exemplars of critical theory. However, within critical *social science* the aim is to enlighten practice by considering and challenging the efficacy of theory and to query the processes that organize knowledge and deliver action. These aspirations are thought to be attained through personal and shared reflection (in the case of sport psychology that might be with groups such as coaches, athletes and so forth).

From such actions and from such points of challenge, theory can be deconstructed and reconstructed but, and to repeat an earlier point, the climate that allows such engagement is one without coercion and with an open mind to one's own risk of self-deception (see Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp.148-149). Self-deception might be associated with a reluctance to challenge. An uncritical acceptance of prior learning to the degree that it is seen unquestionably to represent some form of 'truth', a truth that is beyond chastisement, might be one example of this.

The present discussion has already suggested that themes present in Carr and Kemmis's (1986) depiction of critical social science appear in differential elements of the action-research literature and these often contain the signature of Habermasian thinking. Carr and Kemmis presented action research as a model of critical social science arguing that "in short, action research is a deliberate process for emancipating practitioners from the often unseen constraints of assumptions, habit precedent, coercion and ideology" (p. 192).

The above sentiments resonate with later education-based texts that have explored critical engagement in one capacity or another. For example, in a text that calls for critical collaborative action research Aspland, Macpherson, Proudford and Whitmore (1996) argue that critical engagement requires "underlying assumptions and beliefs to be acknowledged (and for) curriculum trends and policies (to be) seen as problematic and contestable and for further action (to be) tied to critical frameworks which focus on social justice and empowerment for all" (p. 102).

Similar aspirations are apparent in the action research literature and are often couched in the descriptors of protocol typologies that describe different categories of action research. In the domain of healthcare Hart and Bond (1995) proposed a category of action research that emphasized the aspiration to *empower* those who might be oppressed. In a similar manner, Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) had earlier coined the term "professionalizing" research

which contained an assumption to enhance. Similarly Reason (1988) in his explanation of co-operative inquiry (a close relative to action research) argued that “the notion of critical subjectivity means that we are more demanding than orthodox science, insisting that valid inquiry is based on a very high degree of self-knowing, self-reflection and co-operative criticism” (p. 13). These examples from the 1980’s and 1990’s suggest convergence around a typology of action research that contains references to the emancipatory-critical axis proposed by Carr and Kemmis (1986). These texts, and texts that emerged later seem to coalesce around a view that critical engagement be it through reference to critical interest, critical social science (both discussed by Carr & Kemmis, 1986), or through various named typologies of action research, relate in some way to the individual reflecting on their and other’s role in the specific context of their day-to-day practice. These discussions also reflect on how this process engages with a wider contextual landscape that might include reference to institutional power and economic and/or political oppression.

*Depictions of critical reflection within the reflective practice literature*

When the process of critical reflection is considered more directly (as opposed to looking at reflection within a critical protocol such as action research) it is striking that many Habermasian themes outlined above, such as emancipation and the exploration of personal and shared distortion, re-surface but are expressed as being derivative of a different but associated literature-base. Morley (2007) offers an excellent and contemporary example of this tendency to share common critical aspirations whilst demonstrating divergence in relation to inspiration via literature, in discussing what critical reflection means to her she writes:

It (that is critical reflection) draws attention not just to values that inform our practice, but also to the process of how we implement critical values in practice. Critical values in this sense are ‘primarily concerned with practicing in ways which further society

without domination, exploitation and oppression’ focusing ‘both on how structures dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations’ (Fook, 2002, p. 18). My understanding of critical reflection is therefore that it allows us to examine our own implicit, previously unexamined assumptions, which might limit or undermine our intended or espoused practice (Fook, 2002). This may include challenging our own self-interests and scrutinizing how our own social positioning and implicit beliefs, values and assumptions may be complicit with inequitable social arrangements. (pp. 62-63)

Morley (2007) goes on to stress that critical thinking opens doors to new possibilities and so can have a liberating potential and again she cites Fook (2002) “This capacity for unsettling or destabilizing commonly held or accepted beliefs is potentially one of the most powerful sets of strategies that arise from...critical understanding” (p. 90).

Morley (2007) also makes direct reference to the literature that has guided and underpinned her conception of reflective practice:

The primary frameworks and perspectives I use to understand and inform critical reflection are critical theories such as feminism (Clift, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Van Den Berh & Cooper, 1986), structural (Moreau, 1979), radical (Fook, 1983), and critical postmodernism (Fook, 1996, 2002).

Within this collection of perspectives Morley (2007) argued that her analysis of language allowed her to understand how social ‘practices produce and construct meaning’, how universal narratives mirror modernist conceptions of power and how a constructivist approach to knowledge allows the possibility of an inductive generation of theory (a bottom-up view/construction of knowledge).

Other contributors to the reflective practice field approach their work through reference to Habermasian thinking, for example, O'Connor, Hyde and Treacy (2003) in their text on reflection in nurse teachers note that:

...emancipatory knowledge developed through self-reflection has become a focus of interest to nurses in empowering them to throw off the shackles of their oppressed history (Harden, 1996). Such knowledge, pursued through the critical social sciences, has been heralded as part of the solution in addressing the restraining conditions evoked by domination, repression and ideological constraints in relation to thought and action (Habermas, 1971). (p. 108)

Their paper concludes with a view that striving for critical reflection would appear to be a positive aspirational goal but also note how challenging this aspiration actually is.

*Summarizing what critical reflection might be*

This brief consideration of how critical reflection might be described and understood hopefully provides those associated with reflective practice in sport psychology with food for thought. From the examples we have presented it is clear that various literature sources might inform or guide policy makers, mentors and practitioners who are interested in the underlying reasoning that supports critical reflective practice. As authors we have found it interesting to note that differential literature sources provide the backdrop for similar end-points that emphasizes a sense of emancipation and encourages personal growth through an awareness and exploration of self that embraces a sense of morality and justice in practice and promotes the possibility of challenge and change.

Such profound challenges suggest that critical reflection is not only complex (partly as a consequence of the assumptions associated with it) but also, we would argue, because a number of historical demographic factors conspire to work against the development of a critical mindset particularly for those who work within the world of applied sport

psychology. Given the nature of the above debate it is ironic that many of these ‘factors’ relate in one way or another to power. For example, the discipline’s dominant positivistic or experimental methodology, though productive and thorough in research terms, does, nevertheless, encourage undergraduate and postgraduate sport psychologists to become familiar with a writing *style* that is author evacuated and devoid of personal nuance. In addition, this way of thinking and writing actively discourages students to consider personal feelings and opinions as they are, by definition, emotive, unscientific and (some would say) of little value.

The sense of irony is heightened further as others would doubtless argue that the emergence of qualitative research would surely act to counterbalance the above restrictions on authorial voice but the suggestion here is that this is not really the case, well not in the realm of sport psychology at any rate. A number of commentators (e.g., Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisanrantis, & Sparkes, 2001; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Knowles et al., 2007) have identified that qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology leans heavily towards a post-positivist doctrine in which prior theory, often established via quantitative means, drives and shapes the nature of any qualitative inquiry. Qualitative texts therefore tend to be theory-led and reinforce an author evacuated style of presentation (Brown, Gilbourne, & Claydon, 2009). Sparkes (2002) refers to such texts as “realist tales”.

This tendency to foreground established theory is counter to elements of critical reflective practice which promotes an engagement with self both in-context and self amidst the complexities of culture and society. Consequently, we would argue, that the distal nature of the authorial voice, in both quantitative and qualitative texts offers little literary encouragement or indeed illustration for the reflective practitioners of the future. Against the backdrop of these underlying methodological challenges it is not so surprising that most contemporary reflective practice texts in sport psychology provide examples of technical and



practical reflection (e.g., Clarke, 2004; McCann, 2000). Examples of reflection derived from critical interests are more difficult to find, at least within texts that are housed within the sport-based reflective practice literature.

#### A brief critical interlude

Before considering the possibility that auto-ethnographic texts might act as a platform, guide or point of illustration for critical reflection, it is helpful to give space to those who might be less convinced by this particular view. As an example, Bleakley (2000), contests a number of suppositions that might be utilized to promote the benefits of reflective writing. In his critical essay '*Writing with Invisible Ink*' he challenges the earlier views expressed by Bolton (1999) who associated reflectively derived creative writing with dynamic learning, self-assertion, self and professional development and positive therapeutic effects. Bleakley (2000) was particularly scathing of those who supported a form of reflective writing that veered towards the confessional. Rather than support the notion, as suggested by Holly (1989), that (reflective-confessional writing) allows us to come to know ourselves, he wondered whether such writing might just imprison the writer into a form of subjection in which reflective texts meander in and around a particular (accepted) set of parameters. Bleakley (2000) indicated that such writing might become morose and narcissistic rather than enlightening and attacked (what he termed) the postmodern world for producing amongst other things:

educators hooked on reflective practices that secure confessional narratives from their trainees as an initiatory rite embodies as institutional portfolios of evidence of learning...Where the wealthy have 'personal trainers' for their narcissistic fitness needs, mass education (or in our case applied training) has the training of the personal as an explicit goal. (parentheses added p. 18)

It is fair to say Bleakley (2000) was not terribly impressed with the drift towards confessional writing and though he maintained a degree of hope for the reflective writing project he was inclined to suggest that such stories might under-achieve, be subsumed under a culture of narcissism and so diminish in expectation over time.

These are harsh criticisms yet given the heady assumptions associated earlier with critical social science and critical reflection it is not difficult to see how these assumptions might first, establish parameters that ‘confine’ writing and secondly how critical aspirations might be neat enough in academic terms but maybe problematical in terms of experience and the writing of it. Self indulgence is, of course, something that resides in the eyes of the beholder. Some readers might find a segment of text or a whole manuscript indulgent, others might find the same passage of writing and/or manuscript more fascinating and insightful. This dilemma aside, writers of reflective texts are best guided by published works of a similar vein, for these will have been peer reviewed and so, to some the least, will not have fallen victim to the cries of indulgence. On a more personal and straightforward note, writers need to be vigilant and guard against text that might house a sense of self promotion or self congratulation. Asking those one trusts to read and feedback in an open and critical manner is another tried and tested technique. These cautious sentiments are worthy of attention and form part of the wider debate on the future of reflective practice and particularly the boundaries and practices that might define it.

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

Notwithstanding the above critique, having considered various definitions of critical reflection and also highlighted associated literature sources, we now consider the more immediate challenges of writing-reflectively from a more up-beat perspective. Rutter (2006), when discussing reflective writing from the domain of social work, asserts that reflective

practitioners may have a range of complex cognitive and affective issues to convey but struggle to express these in written form. One conclusion to emerge from her thinking relates to a need for others to show reflective practitioners what reflective writing might *look like*.

This issue of illustration is a challenge and in an attempt to move towards some kind of solution we have considered how auto-ethnographic texts might assist those who are engaged in reflective processes from whatever station (administrative, mentor/supervisor or practitioner). Risner (2002) in his consideration of reflective practice as writing suggests that an ‘auto’ approach to writing reflectively offers the potential for participants:

To understand self and others, to recognize our own place within oppressive structures we seek to eliminate and to inform our potential for individual and collective action for making a better world. (p. 8)

Risner (2002) also argues that the process of reflective writing and the ‘storying’ of reflective experiences can be undertaken around three steps:

1. retrieving the story in words, illustration and movement, looking again at one’s life journey, re-searching biographical particulars
2. zooming-in (Watson, 1998) for particularly looking underneath and between the lines of narrative, reading one’s words, shapes, qualities, preferences, energy and imagery
3. zooming-out (Watson, 1998) or reading the larger concerns revealed from the uniqueness of the personal narrative. Zooming-out for the reflective practitioner allows each narrative reflection to speak again, not merely on a purely personal level, but more broadly in dialogue with critical theories for emancipatory change.

We suggest that these suggestions are helpful not least as they partly return the focus to earlier philosophical assumptions associated with critical reflection. The above ideas for structuring the reflective writing process may also resonate with those authors who have engaged with auto-ethnographic writing, a highly personalized account which by definition is

contextually located around the authors own life with a focus on significant, often challenging issues. Auto-ethnographic texts are often infused with emotive content, promote the notion that someone's own story has implications for others and also might offer insights that include a sense of journey, of change and might also embrace a societal dimension.

In a stylistic sense auto-ethnographic texts also offer a clear point of illustration to those who seek to write in the first person. As noted earlier "I" is not a term that sport and exercise scientists are encouraged to use, indeed most research methods programs will discourage any tendency to personalize a text be it an essay or research account. The author evacuated, theory-laden approach to writing is the common nomenclature of science generally and of the sport and exercise sciences more specifically. Yet a reflective text is bound in the experiences of the individual and as such must reach out towards a different authorial voice, one that embraces self and emphasizes self alongside others. Such assumptions encourage reflective practitioners to move across the keyboard to type "I" and for many that is likely to feel quite strange.

It is of course possible to argue that spending time on the issue of writing in the first person (in the "I") is a wasted exercise as technical and practical reflective texts already offer examples of that way of writing of that 'style' and they do. The use of "I" in a critical reflective account moves beyond "I did this", "I felt uncomfortable", "I felt sad". These statements are fine (of course) but they do tend to lack any sense of evocative, emotional and/or disconcerting connection between self, experience and society more generally. Auto-ethnography and the use of "I" in such texts reflect observations that embrace wider dynamics. For example, an auto-ethnographic text might explore self as a part of a system (such as accreditation training), without any direct connection to critical social science and auto-ethnographic text may begin to challenge the way a system works, query a systems power, ponder a systems sense of truth and certainty. Getting to grips with the sense of

writing reflective practice texts in the first person is important as the reflective process is primarily an internal dialogue. So writing in the 'I' brings a greater sense of ownership and even authenticity to the text, it brings permission to experience and to write as experienced rather than experience and write about the experience from a distance. Consider this short (auto-ethnographic-reflective) segment offered by Gilbourne (in Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006):

Less expectation then for the psychologist to 'turn things around', less hype, fewer fireworks just indispensable support. In the world I have portrayed I am mindful that the support-performance axis remains elusive. Furthermore, I see that the intuitive (appealing) logic that links covert caring support to performance is largely beyond the measurement of science. To be candid I am untroubled by that. More generally (and in my most weary of moments) I wonder whether overplaying the performance accountability agenda risks leading the profession into troubled waters....when psychologists in a laudable desire to begin working with athletes, overstate the association between PST and performance, then (to my mind) they forge the very sword upon which their applied work might fall. (p. 335)

This brief extract queries the dominance of science, challenges the wisdom of a truism that accompanies science-based practice (namely that applied sport psychology practice leads to improved performance in athletes) and suggests a new way forward one based on caring and the intuitive skills that accompany such an aspiration. These conclusions were arrived at via a long term engagement with reflective practice undertaken as part of an embedded methodology (ethnography in this case) and the stylistic pitch was influenced by the intra-personal tones of auto-ethnography.

As another example, Stone (2009), a UK based Professor of language and linguistics, uses auto-ethnography writing as a research tool through which he explores his own past

experience and present consequences of anorexia, excessive exercising and psychosis linking starvation of the body to the repression of traumatic memory. The style of writing is purposely hesitant and uncertain reflecting the way people might typically think about feel about and construct events particularly when the constructions are seen through the lens of mental illness and memory suppression. The following vignette is offered as an illustration of a text which captures not only his own behavior that of his mother:

His memory, so cloudy now, was of cars arriving, of doctors, of his mother. Of a bed, of sedation. And, the next day, of the drive to the hospital. On the way they stopped and he bought chocolate. This was significant; even then he realised it. It was a kind of giving in. Finally, he had surrendered to his need. He remembered, or thought he remembered, his mother's pleasure at this purchase. So perhaps she had noticed his physical deterioration after all. (p. 69)

Brendon's mother appears seemingly pleased at his purchase of chocolate is a major point of departure from one view (she doesn't even know I'm ill) to another (she may have known this all along). This is a profound shift and one that had come to the fore through reflection and contemplation on that one incident. Auto-ethnographic influences, therefore, are not just a matter of style or pitch, auto-ethnography also crosses hitherto secure academic lines in which activity or experience is not *simply* described (as a technical or practical reflective text might describe) but is used as a pivotal moment for suggesting change. To produce such texts writers need to submerge into their own experiences to juxtaposition social, economic or political constraints and position self through raised awareness and possibly liberation (Gilbourne, 1999). Readers are subsequently encouraged to walk in the shoes of the author to see what he saw, to appreciate his dilemmas, and feel something of what he felt. Reflective writing that attempts to achieve such high levels of engagement usually carries with it the aspiration that readers will be moved to reflect further on their own lives (Gilbourne, 2002).

As the act of reflecting on-self is thought to encourage further reflection in-others then the processes of writing and (eventually) reading aspires to move ideas and accounts from the intra to the inter-personal and so seeks to gather a sense of momentum and influence. More generally, and as noted in the citations from Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) and Stone (2009), the angst and sense of ‘journey’ in most auto-ethnographic texts introduces practitioners to the notion through their own reflective practices, they might develop different points of view, challenge the status quo, query established truths, and be comfortable to lay bare experiences that might evoke sentiments such as uncertainty and unease. In other words such texts might offer a source of and so illustrate critical engagement in terms of reflection and writing.

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

As this paper has been submitted to the professional practice section of TSP it is clear that many readers might, at some point, expect some kind of applied comment. Indeed, reviewers of the present manuscript have themselves requested a section that provided guidelines for how “to do” critical reflection. In response, it is important to for us to reiterate that we compiled this paper to encourage professional practice debate for this, seemed to us, to be a valuable exercise in and of itself. However, and as we have been requested to revise with some comment on the doing of critical reflective practice we offer a number of observations. First, it might be better to maybe recalibrate the question. Rather than asking how one might do critical reflective practice? It might be more productive to consider what are the necessary conditions that might encourage critical reflection more generally? The messages contained in the present manuscript have suggested that engaging with the nuances of critical social science are essential to critical reflection, the two, we suggest, go hand-in-hand. Consequently, doing critical reflection would appear to be dependent on a series of 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



respect, and at this moment in time, it is better to think about how the applied sport psychology profession might permit this way of thinking and so encourage a critical social science agenda to flourish and grow. In asking ourselves this question we returned constantly to the issue of gatekeepers and power a process that led us to wonder who owns the keys to such permission?

### Conclusion.

If those who administer the domain of applied sport psychology wish reflective practice as a process, reflective writing as a product and evaluation as an associated procedure to be associated with critical levels of engagement, then a number of challenges will need to be met. These include a readiness to engage with a diverse and unfamiliar literature base and, through the auspices of critical social science, display a willingness to allow the foundations of contemporary practice to be regularly contested and challenged. Consequently a critical journey needs to be shared by administrative/strategic thinkers as well as mentors and practitioners. A practitioner “going it alone” may find the journey uncomfortable. Historical/traditional and/or methodological barriers to a ready appreciation of critical levels of reflection have also been suggested and the auto-ethnographic literature (though challenging and unusual for many) has been signposted here as a potential source of illustration in terms of content and style. Finally, we began the present paper by calling for a new phase of debate on the future direction of reflective practice and hope that issues raised here will help to begin that process.

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