Qualitative Research in Sport Psychology Journals: The Next Decade 2000-2009 and Beyond

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A follow-up of the 1990s review of qualitative research articles published in three North American sport psychology journals (Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003) was conducted for the years 2000–2009. Of the 1,324 articles published, 631 were data-based and 183 of these used qualitative data collection techniques; an increase from 17.3% for the 1990s to 29.0% for this last decade. Of these, 31.1% employed mixed methods compared with 38.1% in the 1990s. Interviews were used in 143 of the 183 qualitative studies and reliability test reporting increased from 45.2% to 82.2%. Authors using exclusively quotations to present their results doubled from 17.9% to 39.9%. Only 13.7% of the authors took an epistemological stance, while 26.2% stated their methodological approach. We conclude that positivist/postpositivist approaches appear to maintain a predominant position in sport psychology research. Awareness of the importance of being clear about epistemology and methodology should be a goal for all researchers.

A review of qualitative research articles published in the 1990s provided a timely overview of how qualitative methods are employed, and how results are reported, in the field of sport and exercise psychology (Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003). That original review appears to have become a useful resource for sport and exercise psychology researchers, having been cited in at least 65 academic publications in the seven years since it was published (Google Scholar, n.d.). Although the original review has contributed to the continuing dialogue about research methods in sport and exercise psychology, no similar review has been completed for the decade following the 1990s. In the first decade of the 21st century qualitative research in
many domains has seen growing acceptance. In sport, for example, a recent review of data-based publications related to coach education programs found that 64% (18/28) of the studies used qualitative research methods (McCullick et al., 2009).

There has also been some progress in terms of specific publications dedicated to qualitative research methods in sport with at least two books Sport Ethnography (Sands, 2002) and Qualitative Methods in Sport Studies (Andrews, Mason, & Silk, 2005), and at least one new peer-reviewed journal, Qualitative Research in Sport Exercise, and Health (Taylor and Francis Group). Researchers have also explored different methodologies including alternative forms of writing and representation as a process of discovery; for understanding and analyzing sport and physical activity (e.g., Denison & Markula, 2003). Given recent developments in qualitative research methodology and continuing debates on basic issues such as how to evaluate qualitative research (Pratt, 2008), an updated review of the how qualitative research is used in sport and exercise psychology is warranted. Reviewing research published in refereed journals achieves several objectives including informing researchers in a given area of scholarship about the current trends in research (Silverman & Skonie, 1997) as well as serving as a guideline for conducting and publishing research (Freeman, deMarraie, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007; Wolcott, 1994).

The purpose of the current research was to examine the profile of the qualitative research published in three major sport psychology journals for the years 2000 through 2009, and to compare what trends seem to be apparent in the last decade to those of the 1990s. To facilitate direct comparison between 1990–1999 and 2000–2009, the same review methods used by Culver et al. (2003) were employed in the current study A second purpose is to critically examine the degree to which researchers state their epistemological foundations and make links between their epistemology, methodology, and methods thereby providing readers with a base from which they might judge the research. It has been suggested that qualitative researchers in sport should embrace issues of an epistemological nature (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001). Based on the work of Carter and Little (2007), Schwandt (2001), and Silk, Andrews, and Mason (2005) the definition of epistemology that we employed for the current analysis is: The nature of knowledge, both how it is constructed and how it is represented. Methodology is conceived of as “a theory of how inquiry should proceed. It involves analysis of the assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 161). As such it is the justification of methods (Carter & Little, 2007), meaning that it explains the use of methods used in a study such as grounded theory and phenomenology. Finally, methods are defined as the practical activities of research (procedures, tools, and techniques) such as data collection or generation and data analysis (Carter & Little, 2007; Schwandt, 2001).

Methods

Data collection and analysis were completed in three phases: Phase 1 identified the qualitative articles, phase 2 examined certain characteristics of these articles, and phase 3 investigated how researchers addressed issues relating to epistemology and methodology. In phase 1, following Wolcott’s (1994) suggestion this review began with data collection or generation techniques.

All full-length data-based articles in the Journal of Applied Sport Psychology (JASP), the Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology (JSEP), and The Sport Psycholo-
gist (TSP, excluding those related to professional practice following the procedures used in the 2003 review) were classified as either quantitative or qualitative. With data collection technique as the criterion for inclusion, studies were classified as qualitative if they employed one of the following data collection or generation techniques: (a) journaling or writing in log books (documenting); (b) open-ended questions, which were written responses to part of a survey or questionnaire; (c) interviews, structured, semistructured or unstructured; (d) focus groups; and (e) observations, nonparticipant or participant. Mixed methods having used one of the above listed data collection techniques were included in the review of qualitative studies.

In the second phase the qualitative studies identified in phase 1 were coded with the same coding system used to analyze qualitative studies in the original review (Culver et al., 2003). Three categories of qualitative study characteristics were coded: (a) Data collection / generation (documents, open questions, interview, focus group, nonparticipant observation, participant observation); (b) Validity/trustworthiness (data collection, peer review, reliability check, member check); and (c) Presentation of Results (quotations, descriptive statistics, combination of quotations and statistics).

A third phase—unique to the present review—was added to examine if and how authors declared their epistemological and methodological approaches, and if explicit links were made between epistemology and methods. Finally, we also examined the reference lists of the qualitative articles to establish what qualitative methodological and/or methods sources were cited, either general qualitative sources (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or sport psychology specific sources (e.g., Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001; Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Scanlan, Ravizza & Stein, 1989; Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Partington, 2003). Such an analysis helps to delineate the scope of the qualitative research that sport psychology researchers are using to help them design their studies. It was thought that a broader scope that included a range of general qualitative literature, and also different sport psychology sources, might yield studies using a variety of approaches.

Coding across phases 2 and 3 was conducted by the lead researcher and two graduate research assistants who were both conducting qualitative research projects of their own. Once the definitions were developed for each category, the three coders coded four studies together before each separately coding a different subset of 15 and 20 studies. At this point the coders met again and thoroughly went through the independently coded studies to discuss any questions and to arrive at consensus while fine tuning the definitions. As the coding proceeded the three coders continued to meet regularly to go over any further issues. Finally, the lead author reviewed all the coding on numerous occasions when the various secondary rounds of analysis were conducted, for example when links were sought between methods, methodologies, and epistemologies.

### Results

**Phase 1: Distribution of Qualitative Research Articles**

Of the 1,324 articles published in the three journals during 2000–2009, 631 were classified as data-based. The distribution of the quantitative and qualitative articles published in the three journals is presented in Table 1. The data show a nearly 68% increase in the percentage of qualitative studies published since the 1990s (from
17.3% to 29.0%). When examining individual journals, JASP more than doubled the percentage of qualitative articles published (16.7–35.0%), TSP increased 68% (30.3–50.9%), and JSEP increased 37% (7.5–10.3%).

In line with 1990s review, we compared the number of qualitative and quantitative articles published early in the decade (between 2001 and 2003) to the number published late in the decade (between 2007 and 2009). Overall there was an increase in the number of qualitative articles published in the three journals by 31.7% (from an average of 16.7 qualitative articles in 2001–2003–24.0 articles in 2007–2009). JASP showed an increase, having published 22 qualitative articles in the earlier time period and 32 in the last three years of the decade. JSEP increased from 8 to 11; and TSP from 20 to 27. The average number of quantitative articles published per year for the same two 3-year periods increased 44.7%. Finally, compared with the previous decade, there is much greater variety in the authors who are publishing qualitative research in these three journals. Whereas in the original review 3 researchers were named as authors in 31 of the 84 articles, there is no such dominance in the years 2000–2009. Indeed, in TSP where the most qualitative articles were published, only 9 researchers published more than one article as the first author, another 21 researchers published more than one article not as the first author, and 75 different researchers are first authors of the 85 qualitative articles published.

**Phase 2: Characteristics of Published Qualitative Articles**

In the second phase, for the purpose of direct comparison with the 1990s review the same matrix was used to show certain characteristics of the qualitative papers (see Table 2). The first section of the matrix in Table 2 pertains to data collection techniques, including those quantitative techniques used in the mixed methods studies such as systematic observation tools and surveys or psychometric tests. Interviewing was by far the most frequently used data collection technique, used in 78.1% of the studies. In 29 studies (20.1% of those which used interviews to collect data) participants were interviewed more than once. Based on the researchers’ own designations or descriptions semistructured interviews were used in 81.1% of the studies, structured interviews in 15.4%, and unstructured interviews in 3.5%. Other than verbal recall protocols, only one study with more than 12 participants conducted more than one interview per participant (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007). Again leaving out the verbal recall protocols, most of the interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min, with a few lasting up to three hours. The number of participants involved in the studies using interviews ranged from 1 to 180. The study with 180 participants (Park, 2000) used 180 “trained” students to conduct a
structured interview with 180 athletes. The mean number of participants per interview study was 15.5. Due to the fact that only a few studies had unusually large numbers of participants, including two studies by the same author that had 144 participants (Fry, 2000a, 2000b)¹, and the one that had 180, the median number of interview participants per study was also calculated. Overall the median was 16.3, but the JASP median of 27.9 was much higher than the medians for JSEP (14.5) and TSP (9.0). When focus groups were used (n = 12) the average number of participants per focus group study was 21. Most of the studies employing qualitative observation methods used nonparticipant observation techniques (15/21). Of the six studies that involved participant observation three were phenomenological, two ethnographic, and one was without a declared methodology. These studies combined participant observation with interviews (n = 2), with interviews and documents (n = 2), with focus groups (n = 1), and with documents (n = 1).

A total of 57 articles used mixed methods, which accounts for 31.1% of the articles classified as qualitative, as compared with 38.1% of the 1990–1999 articles. Of these 57 mixed methods articles, 25 employed open-ended questions within a survey or test; 23 used tests and interviews; and 10 used systematic observation

Table 2 Characteristics of the Published Qualitative Articles 200–2009 (1990–1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>JASP 71 (14)</th>
<th>JSEP 27 (17)</th>
<th>TSP 85 (53)</th>
<th>Total 183 (84)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Data collection/generation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>3 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0)</td>
<td>12 (2)</td>
<td>16 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open questions</td>
<td>15 (3)</td>
<td>7 (6)</td>
<td>11 (14)</td>
<td>33 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>55 (11)</td>
<td>20 (14)</td>
<td>68 (42)</td>
<td>143 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>5 (n/a)</td>
<td>1 (n/a)</td>
<td>6 (n/a)</td>
<td>12 (n/a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpart. observer</td>
<td>4 (n/a)</td>
<td>5 (n/a)</td>
<td>6 (n/a)</td>
<td>15 (n/a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part. observer</td>
<td>2 (n/a)</td>
<td>0 (n/a)</td>
<td>4 (n/a)</td>
<td>6 (n/a)³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic observation</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>14 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test/Survey</td>
<td>22 (7)</td>
<td>17 (8)</td>
<td>18 (21)</td>
<td>57 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N =)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Validity/Trustworthiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>46 (7)</td>
<td>14 (10)</td>
<td>50 (34)</td>
<td>110 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review</td>
<td>60 (8)</td>
<td>22 (13)</td>
<td>64 (41)</td>
<td>146 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability check</td>
<td>47 (6)</td>
<td>17 (8)</td>
<td>56 (14)</td>
<td>120 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member check</td>
<td>36 (2)</td>
<td>9 (1)</td>
<td>47 (15)</td>
<td>92 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Presentation of results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>28 (2)</td>
<td>7 (3)</td>
<td>38 (10)</td>
<td>73 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive statistics</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>9 (3)</td>
<td>4 (14)</td>
<td>18 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination: Quotations and statistics</td>
<td>38 (8)</td>
<td>15 (11)</td>
<td>42 (29)</td>
<td>95 (48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in conjunction with interviews. These findings are similar to percentages found in the 1990s review.

The second part of Table 2 reports on variables related to the concept of validity/trustworthiness. In keeping with the original 1990s review, Maxwell’s (2005) interpretation of validity/trustworthiness in qualitative research was used for the analysis. Maxwell defines validity/trustworthiness in qualitative research as the “correctness or credibility” (p. 106) of the research account. The three previously used indicators were (a) data collection instrument, (b) peer review, and (c) member checking. Given that the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research (Richardson, 1994; i.e., she or he decides what to ask participant and or what to observe), a strategy for establishing trustworthiness involves researchers disclosing information about themselves that can help readers decide if they have the competencies required. Such information may also aid readers in judging what biases or assumptions might have an impact on the inquiry (Biddle et al., 2001). In 60.1% (n = 110) of the published qualitative articles, there was some information provided about the researcher as the data collection instrument. This is very similar to the 1990s figure of 60.7%. The information provided was once again very brief and related to the qualitative research experience of the researcher. In 53 studies researchers also offered details concerning their experience with the research context, for example, as an ex-athlete, a coach, or a sport psychology consultant; and/or they included the fact that they kept a reflective journal. These studies were unevenly distributed with only 3 occurring in the 27 qualitative articles in JSEP, 21 of 71 in JASP, and 29 of the 85 in TSP. In 5 of these 53 studies, all in TSP, readers were informed that the researcher participated in a bracketing interview. Peer review, or peer debriefing (Schwandt, 2001) has become even more popular as an indicator of validity/trustworthiness increasing from 73.8% (62/84) in the 1990s to 79.8% (146/183) for the present review. Once again, this process involved mostly using colleagues as sounding boards. Finally, studies in which a reliability test was clearly reported increased from 45.2% (28/62) to 82.2% (120/146).

While both Creswell (2007) and Schwandt (2001) define member checking as the seeking of respondents’ feedback on research findings, member checking in the sport and exercise psychology research has typically been confined to researchers seeking verification that the participants’ interview transcripts were accurate. Member checking, which was reported in 21.4% (18/84) of the 1990 studies, was employed 50.3% of the time (92/183) in the years 2000–2009. While it was found that participant review of anything more than raw transcripts was very rare in the 1990s, this was not the case in the last decade. Fifty-six of the 92 studies using member checking sought participant feedback on interview transcripts and such elements as summary findings, interpretations, and theme categorizations, leaving only 36 studies which had participants check only their transcripts.

The third section of the matrix in Table 2 reports on which of the following three ways the research results were presented: (a) quotations from participants, (b) descriptive statistics, and (c) a combination of quotations and statistics. Most authors continue to use a combination of descriptive statistics and quotations: 51.9% (95/183) now compared with 57.1% in the 1990s. In most of these studies (54.7%; 52/95) authors reported results predominantly using quotations as opposed to descriptive statistics; an increase from 20.8% (10/48) in the 1990s. Twenty-two of these 95 studies using a combination of the two modes of presentation reported mostly descriptive statistics, and 21 presented findings with a balance of statistics and quotations.
Phase 3: Epistemology and Methodology

All qualitative research articles were content analyzed for author references to epistemological and methodological approaches. For all three journals, 25 studies (13.7%) addressed epistemology. Interestingly, the journal with the smallest percentage of qualitative articles published, JSEP has the highest percentage of articles that attended to epistemology (6 out of 27). In fact, since 14 of the 27 JSEP qualitative studies are mixed method studies and only one mixed method study in the review addressed this concept, nearly half of the purely qualitative studies in JSEP made reference to an epistemological approach.

As pertains to methodology, 47 (27.3%) of the 183 qualitative articles included a statement about the methodological approach (see Table 3). This percentage was highest for the articles published in TSP where 35.3% of the authors declared

Table 3 Declared Methodologies with Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology + Method(s)</th>
<th>Combined 3 journals</th>
<th>Average # participants per study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pheno + int</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheno + int + PO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheno + survey—open-ended questions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheno + FG + PO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheno + int + N-PO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheno + doc + PO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethno + int</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethno + int+ PO</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int + FG</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int + doc</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int + SO</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int+ N-PO</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int+ survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case + int+ survey + SO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GrdTheory + int</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GrdTheory + int + N-PO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography +int</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography + doc + int</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action + int</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action + int + survey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Methodologies: Pheno = phenomenology; Ethno = ethnography; Case = case study; GrdTheory = grounded theory; Biography = narrative, life history; Action = collaborative, participatory

Methods: int = interview; PO = participant observation; survey = test, open-ended questions; SO = systematic observation; N-PO = nonparticipant observation; FG = focus group; doc = document

1 These two articles discussed the same sample.
2 n/a: Designates that these analyses were not conducted in the 1990s review.
3 Observation 1990–1999: 2 studies per journal for a total of 6 used observation (participant and nonparticipant combined).
their methodological approach. Six codes were used for declared methodological approaches: case study, ethnography, narrative (biography, or life history) research, grounded theory, phenomenology, and action research, including collaborative and participatory research (Carter & Little, 2007; Creswell, 2007). Case study ($n = 16$) and phenomenology ($n = 14$) were the most popular approaches, and participatory action research the least popular. $TSP$ was the only journal in which all approaches appeared; at least two studies using each of the six approaches were published. Of the 57 studies reporting mixed methods, five mentioned a methodology including four case studies, and one participatory action research. Several studies referred to grounded theory methods having been employed during the analysis without stating grounded theory as a methodology (e.g., Concepcion & Ebbeck, 2005), or while proclaiming to use another methodology, such as ethnography (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009). Three of the mixed methods studies referred to a pragmatic use of various methods.

In terms of linking methods to methodology and epistemology, only 12 (6.6%) of the 183 qualitative studies specified both an epistemological and a methodological approach; seven in $TSP$, four in $JASP$, and one in $JSEP$, indicating few clear links. For example, one-shot semistructured interviews lasting between 45 and 90 min were used in studies with such varied approaches as postpositivist mixed methods (D’Urso, Petrozzo, & Robazza, 2002), pragmatic mixed methods (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), ethnography (Holt et al.2009), and feminist standpoint theory (Roper, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2005). The same type of interview was used in studies with as few as six participants (Jackson, Knapp, & Beauchamp, 2008) and as many as 90 participants (Holt et al.2009). Those studies reporting the use of unstructured interviews tended to declare life history or narrative/biography as a methodology (e.g., Rees, Smith, & Sparkes, 2003; Sparkes & Partington, 2003). However unstructured interviews were also reported when using phenomenology (e.g., Dale, 2000) and grounded theory (e.g., Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2006). The bracketing interview was linked in three instances to three distinct methodologies: phenomenology (Dale, 2000), action research (Roper et al., 2005), and grounded theory (Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2006); while two studies reporting the use of a bracketing interview declared no methodology (Frey, 2007; Woods & Thatcher, 2009).

Finally, the last decade has seen the qualitative researchers who published in the three journals broaden their methodological and methods references. In particular, there are more sport psychology references versus general qualitative research references, and there is more variety in the sport psychology references now cited compared with the 1990s. Eighteen authors had no qualitative references in their methods section; these were all mixed methods studies in which the qualitative component usually consisted of five or less open-ended questions with no qualitative analysis reported. Often these were practical assessment or social validation questions following an intervention.

**Critical Reflections on Qualitative Research in Sport Psychology**

Up to this point we have provided a summary of the results with a direct comparison, where applicable, to the analysis of qualitative sport psychology research in the 1990s. Combined, these two reviews shed considerable light on the status, and
design, of qualitative sport psychology research conducted over the past 20 years. This presents a unique opportunity for critical reflection both on the state of, and future directions for, qualitative research in sport psychology. While the review in itself provides a valuable service for the sport psychology community in that it illuminates developmental trends over time, the review alone would be incomplete and remain ‘descriptive’ if the trends identified were not theorized in some way to generate thought about where sport psychology researchers might wish to go in the next 10 years. Hence, the reflections section that follows uses the descriptive trends as a foundation for a critical discussion on qualitative research in sport psychology. Given the absence of discussion around methodology and/or epistemology, our reflections will focus on why it is important to link methods to methodology and epistemology. In particular, one objective of this section is to raise awareness of these concepts such that readers of this paper leave with the understanding that just because certain methods are the predominant ones used in the published articles, they may not always be the most appropriate ones.

**Problematizing Interviews**

With regard to data collection, interviews remain the dominant form in North American sport psychology journals but with one variation. It is interesting to see the wide variance in the number of participants interviewed in qualitative studies in sport psychology, ranging from 1 to 180. This raises a most fundamental question: How many interviews is enough? This question relates directly to the issue of data, or in some cases theoretical, saturation. Several authors in the health science field recently conducted a formal analysis to determine if there might be an ‘optimal’ number of interviews for qualitative studies (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). They found that almost all of the variance in the data (codes and themes) was identified by the 12th interview. Due to the complexity of research objectives and questions, Guest and colleagues did not suggest that 12 interviews be used as general ‘rule’ for qualitative interview studies. For example, to answer research questions that target homogeneous groups to investigate common perspectives 12 participants might suffice. But when the goal is to seek perceptions of participants who are heterogeneous in relation to the research objective, more participants will be needed to achieve saturation (Guest et al.). When compared against the high number of interviews used in sport psychology studies found in our review, the analysis of these authors does raise concerns about how interviews are used in sport psychology research.

In our last review (Culver et al. 2003) we also noted issues with the high number of researchers who used the one-shot interview to answer their research questions. The increase in the number of researchers in the last decade who returned to participants to gather more data over two or more interviews is, therefore, a step forward. Multiple interviews with the same participant allow the researcher to follow up on issues and themes raised in previous interviews while also allowing participants to elaborate on their views. As such, the chances of achieving depth and comprehensiveness in the data collection are enhanced as are the possibilities of developing trust and rapport within the interview context (Kvale, 1996).

Developing rapport and trust, which is related to a study’s validity/trustworthiness, is a complex and changing entity, but its significance to the research process depends on the researcher’s epistemology. A postpositivist will be less concerned...
with rapport and trust since the critical community is believed to serve as “external ‘guardians’ of objectivity” (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 205). A constructivist who recognizes the importance of each of these elements in shaping the interactive process during interviews, and the nature of the data produced for analysis, would need to adopt a more reflexive stance as to how rapport and trust are developed between themselves and participants during interviews. For example, reflections could be provided on not only how trust and rapport were developed in the interviews but some evidence should also be provided that these actually were established and details given of how they might have changed in amount and kind over time. To date within sport psychology, issues of rapport and trust have remained implicit.

Linked to issues of rapport and trust, the dominance of semistructured interviews within sport psychology research warrants discussion. Our review found these kinds of interviews are useful in exploring certain issues, for example, when events follow a stage-by-stage temporal sequence and researchers wish to gain participants’ views of each of these. They are less useful, however, when the temporal dimensions of the phenomenon are fluid and the researcher is seeking to explore the narrative dynamics of participants’ understanding of a phenomenon in relation to their life history (Plummer, 2001). In these circumstances more unstructured and open-ended interviews initiated by the grand tour question: ‘tell me about your life,’ are more suited to the task (Wolcott, 1994). Such an approach is evident in the work of Carless and Douglas (2010) who focus on the meaning that involvement in sport and physical activity holds in the lives of people who experience mental health problems.

However, for the most part in our review the use of semistructured interviews differed in kind and purpose compared with unstructured interviews, and offered different environments for the development of trust and rapport. As portrayed in most of the studies using semistructured interviews, this type of data collection was subjected to content analysis and hierarchical content analysis in particular, focusing primarily on the ‘whats’ of the interview. The strength of this form of analysis, according to Sparkes and Partington (2003), lies in its capacity to develop general knowledge about the core themes that make up the content of the stories collected in the interview context. They note, however, that the use of content analysis in isolation can lead to an over-determination of the themes identified in the data. Here, core themes are often underscored at the expense of variation and difference and so lead the researcher to under-appreciate the heterogeneity of experience and the storied quality of the data. The reader needs to be cautioned here that while not seen in our review of three sport psychology journals, semistructured interviews are used by researchers working in different paradigms whose analytical strategies seek to go well beyond the ‘what’ of participants’ experiences (see Waldron, Lynn, & Krane, 2011, for an example where semistructured interviews were employed with a postmodern strategy to create composite monologues).

This said, it needs to be recognized that an over-reliance on semistructured interviews does place limitations on the kinds of questions that can be asked of the data generated. This is because, by definition, semistructured interviews impose a structure on the interview both before it begins and during the process of interaction which, for the most part, is shaped by the interests of the researcher. Such an approach reduces the scope and freedom of the interviewee to generate their own story structures in ways that are relevant and meaningful to their specific interests.
at the time. Accordingly, questions about how the data generated in the interview is shaped by the interviewee are difficult to ask. To counterbalance the tendency to focus on the ‘whats’ of interview data, Smith and Sparkes (2009a, 2009b, 2012) suggest drawing upon more unstructured and open-ended interviews so that the ‘hows’ of storytelling as well as the ‘whats’ within the interview situation can be considered. Here, the analysis focuses on the formal structures of the story being told and how this frames or provides a scaffold for the content of what is said, and how this shapes the meanings given to an experience. A useful example of this approach in action is provided by Sparkes and Partington (2003) who, having reviewed the findings in the sport psychology literature on the whats of the flow phenomenon, go on to use data generated from an interview based study of a white water canoeing club to focus on the hows of this phenomenon. They illustrate how flow is coconstructed as a relational performance which is shaped by a number of narrative resources that operate differently within the club according to gender to influence what can be said about this phenomenon and how it comes to be experienced. Another example of using unstructured interviews is Dale’s (2000) study describing the experience of elite decathletes during their most memorable performance. Dale clearly links his methods to his methodology and epistemology. Taking a phenomenological approach Dale identifies the methods, beginning by stating that the building of rapport between the researcher and the participant is “the initial, and perhaps most crucial stage” (p. 22) of the phenomenological interview. He then provides a detailed description of the data analysis. And finally, Dale declares that “in phenomenological research, a study lacks validity/trustworthiness if it lacks a first-person description of a phenomenon” (p. 24).

Sparkes and Partington (2003) suggest that future research in sport psychology on experiences like flow would do well to incorporate Holstein and Gubrium’s (2000) notion of narrative practice when engaging in the analysis of interview-based data. A focus on narrative practice allows researchers to analyze the relationship between the whats and the hows of what is said in interviews with each being given equal importance in understanding how meaningful interaction takes place in sports settings. Thus, qualitative researchers in sport psychology who subject interview data to a content analysis have an important role to play in exploring the hows of storytelling. Likewise, qualitative researchers interested in narrative forms of analyses have an equally important role to play in exploring the hows of interaction and meaning making in sport. The two approaches complement each other and can be developed in tandem. For the moment, as our decade review indicates, the emphasis within sport psychology has been on the whats of interviews, and in particular the use of semistructured interviews followed by content analyses. In the coming years, as part of expanding the analytical diversity in the field it is hoped that equal attention will be given to the hows of storytelling in interviews so that sport psychologists might better understand the complexity of sporting experiences.

According to Smith and Sparkes (2009b, 2012), giving equal attention to the hows of storytelling in the future would also raise awareness within the field of sport psychology regarding the performative nature of the interview process as an artful event that is coproduced and composed between the participant and the researcher in specific interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive contexts (see Krane & Whaley, 2010 for an example of collaborative representation). As Gubrium and Holstein (2009) remind us, stories are actively composed and storytelling is staged.
For them, it is an animated process that transpires somewhere, “in relation to some audience, for some purpose … Performances have casts of characters and separate scenes, which relate to accounts in different ways. Narrators present their stories for particular effect” (p. 81). Here, the focus shifts toward what is being done by the storyteller and the work that the story is being put to in constructing certain aspects of self and offering selected interpretations of event and experiences. Such a shift invites a different form of analysis than the content and structural analyses mentioned earlier. In this regard, Riessman (2008) talks of a dialogic/performance analysis that interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative. For her, this kind of analysis requires a close reading of contexts, including the influence of the researcher, setting, and social circumstances on the production and interpretation of the narrative.

Having noted the dominance of interviews as a means of generating data in qualitative sport psychology research, questions need to be raised regarding the limits this places on knowledge generation in the field. In this regard, Rapley (2004) comments, “an interview study that only uses interviews to understand peoples lived, situated, practices seems highly problematic” (p. 29). Sparkes and Smith (2008) support this view and point out that relying on and privileging interviews does not serve the narrative study of lives well. They point out that while interviews are useful, they are only one among a number of viable techniques, rather than the one and only source of inviting and gathering stories. In terms of comparison with other domains, a recent study that reviewed qualitative research methods used in articles published in nine health services and management journals between 1998 and 2008 (Weiner, Amick, Lund, Lee, & Hoff, 2011) found that interviews were employed to collect data in 47% of the qualitative studies. This is well below the 78.1% of studies in the present review that used interviews. Unfortunately, the number of studies using observation in the published articles remains low. There are only six studies that used participant observation in conjunction with interviews, focus groups, and or documents. Given the imbalance noted above it is hoped that greater attention will be given to the use of field observations to explore the possible differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. Triangulating field observations with interviews, for example, can help to identify such differences, and could act as a resource to generate a more complex understanding of lived experience in sport settings and also how this is constructed and performed in interview contexts. In the future, sport psychology researchers might consider participant observation, which is central to ethnographic studies characterized by prolonged contact with the field, as well as the use of multiple data sources as evidenced in the work of Holt and Sparkes (2001) and Burke, Sparkes, and Allen-Collinson (2008). When using these multiple techniques for data collection it will be important to have both types of data used in the interpretation. Coleman and Dabbs (2007) found in their review of qualitative methods in gifted education that even though researchers combined these interviews and observation for data collection, “interviewing was generally more influential than observations in the final interpretation of the data” (p. 58). The benefits of the ethnographic approach have been articulated by Krane and Baird (2005) and evidenced in the few ethnographic studies that have been conducted in sport psychology. For an example from this review, readers are encouraged to refer to Burke, Sparkes, and Allen-Collinson’s (2008) ethnographic study of high altitude climbers on Mt. Everest in which the primary investigator,
in her role as a participant observer, was involved in multiple activities with the participants that ranged from climbing the mountain with them to sharing meals at various camps. She was also able to spend time with them in informal and formal settings, observing their behaviors and interactions as well as taking part in unique situations specific to the climbing group. Such shared experience brought the primary investigator closer to the participants and their experiences of scaling the mountain and helped to foster trust and rapport.

Issues of Validity/Trustworthiness

Issues of validity/trustworthiness relate to judging the ‘quality’ of different kinds of research. Given that the field of qualitative research is a broad church, as Pratt (2008) recognizes, it is unlikely that any one set of criteria could be agreed upon that can be applied to all studies. It is interesting to note how in the last decade qualitative researchers in sport psychology have addressed the validity/trustworthiness issue and the problem of criteria, while keeping in mind that researchers working within the different epistemological approaches do mostly seem to agree on appropriate strategies for establishing validity/trustworthiness.

Our decade review suggests that, for the most part, qualitative researchers in sport psychology have opted for what Sparkes (1998, 2002) describes as the parallel perspective in relation to validity/trustworthiness. The set of criteria drawn upon by sport psychologists have been heavily influenced by the early work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who framed the parallel perspective by developing their notion of trustworthiness in relation to the empiricist concepts of internal and external validity/trustworthiness, reliability, and objectivity. Thus, the parallel of internal validity/trustworthiness becomes credibility, external validity/trustworthiness becomes transferability, reliability becomes dependability and objectivity becomes confirmability, and a set of techniques is prescribed for achieving each of these.

Against this backdrop it is worth considering how the parallel perspective has been actualized by qualitative sport psychologists and some of the issues this raises. According to Krane and Baird (2005), “Most qualitative research in sport psychology relies upon commonly described techniques of trustworthiness to authenticate the findings (e.g., triangulation, member checks, category audit)” (p. 101). This view is supported by the current review and similar to the situation pointed out by Sparkes (1998), in which an explicit rationale is rarely provided to explain why certain techniques were chosen over others to establish trustworthiness in a specific study. Besides highlighting some philosophical contradictions within this perspective, Sparkes also suggests a number of dilemmas associated with the various techniques chosen. For example, with regard to member checking, as a form of respondent corroboration, questions are raised regarding the participants’ ability to follow and challenge a research report written from a specialized psychological perspective or specific conceptual framework with an expert audience in mind. Furthermore, few details are ever provided regarding cases where participants challenge the interpretations made about them by the researcher, how such situations are dealt with so that agreement is reached (or not), and how this process influences the researcher’s analysis of the data. The same might be said of the increasingly popular technique of peer debriefing or peer review, used in 79.8% of the qualitative studies reviewed. Sport psychology researchers seeking to illustrate
greater awareness of how methods are linked to methodology and epistemology might discuss how disagreements about interpretations or categorizations are dealt with, and how the power differentials between the peers might operate to shape the process of negotiation around disagreements.

Thus according to our review, and as Krane and Baird (2005) note, the parallel perspective on validity/trustworthiness may be the current orthodoxy in qualitative sport psychology research but it is important to acknowledge that other perspectives are possible. For example, Sparkes (1998, 2002) describes the diversification of meanings perspective that, rather than develop parallel criteria with positivist and postpositivist research, seeks to extend the frame of reference for asking questions about the meanings and purposes ascribed to this term in particular contexts. Accordingly multiple versions of validity/trustworthiness are offered that include the following: negotiated, ecological, catalytic, communicative, pragmatic, reflexive, rhizomic, voluptuous, ironic, transgressive, successor, consensual, situated and interrogated validity/trustworthiness.

Another perspective identified by Sparkes (1998, 2002) is the letting go perspective. Here, qualitative researchers recognize that while certain notions of validity/trustworthiness might be appropriate for judging the work of other researchers these are not appropriate for judging their own endeavors. As such, proponents of this perspective abandon the concept of validity/trustworthiness and seek alternative criteria to judge their work more from the arts than the sciences. This is particularly so for those qualitative researchers in sport psychology who, being generally grounded in a postmodern, and/or critical theories and cultural studies epistemology, have chosen to use genres of representation such as, confessional tales, autoethnography, poetic representations, ethnodrama, and fictional representations to convey their findings. These differ from the standard realist tale with its characteristic conventions of the absent author, the use of extensive but closely edited quotes from the participants, and the construction of interpretive omnipotence (Sparkes, 2002). For example, with regard to their poetic representations of what motivated one elite female golfer to perform and then retire prematurely from her sport, Sparkes and Douglas (2007) suggest a number of criteria that might be relevant for judging their research reports in terms of aesthetic merit, impact, ontological and educative authenticity, and ethics. These include the following: Are they recognizable as being poetic in form? Do they call for an aesthetic transaction and encounter between the writer and the reader? Do they affect the reader emotionally and intellectually? Do they generate new questions about motivation? Have they raised the awareness of the participants in the study and those who surround them, shaping their experiences in sport organizations? Have they been useful in stimulating reflection? Did the participant have the chance to contribute and share her views as part of the research process? Did she find the representation of her fair and respectful? While no examples exist in our reviewed articles, other researchers in sport have used creative nonfictional stories to represent their findings (Carless & Sparkes, 2008; Denison, 1996; Lemyre & Trudel, 2004). As suggested by Carless and Sparkes alternative criteria need to be used to pass judgment on such work.

Given the diversity of forms of inquiry now available to qualitative researchers in sport psychology, and given the recent developments in the field as evidenced in our decade review, a greater recognition of difference is likely to be required in the future (Sparkes, 2002). Of course, as Holt (2003), and Krane and Baird (2005)
recognize, this acknowledgment is no easy matter. It requires a complex shift in the way that one approaches issues of difference in judging research. Such a shift requires that sport psychology researchers strive for greater awareness of paradigms and how these affect judgments about research. Without such a shift, it is likely that paradigmatic debates within sport psychology will remain cast in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Weed, 2009).

In this regard, Sparkes and Smith (2009), suggest that sport psychologists should aspire to become connoisseurs of research which involves developing the art of appreciation. As Eisner (1991) stresses, the term *appreciation* should not be conflated with ‘a liking for’. He notes, “Nothing in connoisseurship as a form of appreciation requires that our judgments be positive. What is required (or desired) is that our experience be subtle, complex and informed” (p. 69). The outcomes of judgment will always remain uncertain as the researchers-as-connoisseurs risk their prejudices in the knowledge that if one wishes to inform others, then one must be equally open to be informed and broaden one’s idea of what is and is not ‘good’ inquiry, depending on the perspective.

**Using Mixed-Methods**

The use of multiple qualitative data collection techniques aimed at gaining access to the ‘insider’ perspective is an acceptable practice within ethnographic research. However, questions remain regarding the use of mixed-methods that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques in sport psychology research. These are echoed in the heated debates across a number of disciplines regarding the issue of mixed-methods. For some, mixed-methods constitutes a ‘third paradigm’ alongside the quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Burke Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). This third, and according to Morgan (2007), new and guiding paradigm in the social sciences advocates a pragmatic approach to combining quantitative and qualitative methods in ways that redirect our attention to methodological rather than metaphysical concerns to do with ontology and epistemology. Pragmatism has it historical roots in the ideas of John Dewey and others, and it is considered one ‘best’ worldview for mixed methods research, allowing as it does for the use of “diverse approaches, and the valuing of both objective and subjective knowledge” (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011, p. 43). For proponents of this approach, the research question should be of the utmost significance, coming before questions of worldviews. Methodological choices are guided by the practicalities of the research. Indeed, Creswell and Plano Clarke (2007) who are leading advocates of mixed methods research maintain that a reliance on foundational metaphysical models that argue for paradigmatic incommensurability is a ‘purist’ approach that should be replaced by the ‘pragmatic’ ‘what-works’ approach that they favor. An example of this pragmatic approach was employed by Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung (2007) in a study about high school coaches teaching life skills through football.

Needless to say, for others, talk of a new paradigm is questionable, and the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods grounded in different epistemological foundations makes little sense at all given paradigmatic incommensurability. There is a wariness of ill-informed attempts to do so lest the methods tail ends up wagging the dog. Denzin (2010), for example, argues that with few exceptions, the mixed
methods discourse has been shaped by a community of postpositivistic scholars who have moved back and forth between quantitative and qualitative research frameworks. Along the way, he suggests, they have found utility in qualitative methods and have sought to bring them into studies that are most often framed by the use of quantitative, experimental, or survey methods. In a similar vein, Lincoln (2010) states that although she is not against utilizing a variety of methods when appropriate to accomplish some purpose, she does have concerns about mixing paradigms or metaphysical models. For Lincoln, the espoused pragmatism of the mixed-methods approach conceals an inbuilt positivism and those who defend this view by arguing that philosophies, paradigms, and metaphysics do not matter. Her argument with the mixed-methods theorists is not that they mix methods but that the pragmatism claimed by some of them rests at the enacted level only. As such, “The mixed methods pragmatists tell us nothing about their ontology or epistemology or axiological position” (p. 7). Yet as Lincoln emphasizes, paradigms and metaphysical models do matter and issues relating to the notions of incommensurability need to be addressed directly rather than simply glossed over.

Given that the use of mixed methods remains a contested issue and its actual practice may be problematic it would seem appropriate for those who adopt such an approach within sport psychology research to engage with the debates in other disciplines to situate their own work. In so doing, a number of central concerns would need to be addressed and opened up for discussion. For example, do sport psychology researchers actually confirm or challenge the ‘methodological orthodoxy’ noted by Hesse-Biber (2010) in how mixed methods is practiced? This orthodoxy currently favors, “quantitative methodologies, with a mixed methods praxis that positions qualitative methods second and quantitative methods as primary with an overall mixed methods design that is in the service of testing out quantitatively generated theories about the social world” (p. 455). As Coleman and Dabbs (2007) pointed out in their review of qualitative research in gifted education as published in American journals, when qualitative and quantitative methods were mixed in this database, the result was rarely qualitative research. For them, if a researcher is “seeking to establish generalizations and make predictions about future behavior, their orientation is not qualitative. In other words, there can be no truly mixed method when one method is used in the service of the other” (p. 54). Opening up a dialogue around the use of mixed-methods would seem vital to the goal of raising researcher self-awareness as well as to the future development of mixed methods research in sport psychology.

**Researcher as Instrument**

The performatve approach and its notion of the interview as a coproduction raises further issues regarding the role of the researcher in this process in terms of their personal characteristics and experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Here, it is interesting to note the kind of information that qualitative researchers in sport psychology have provided about themselves in their articles. Whereas reflexivity is what is needed, our review indicates this information tends to be very brief and related to either their qualitative research experience or to their personal characteristics; for example, being an ex-athlete, a coach, or a sport psychology consultant. Beyond the brevity of the information provided, its nature and purpose remain problematic.
For example, stating that one has undertaken a qualitative research course tells us nothing about the nature of the course, its content, the practical activities included within it, and the level of expertise of those giving and attending the course. Furthermore, it tells the reader nothing about what the researcher learned from the course, how this influenced them in gathering and analyzing the data, or indeed how ‘good’ or competent they are at these tasks. The same holds for the inclusion of the characteristics of the researcher such as, gender, age, sporting background, and occupational status. Thus, in an interview based study on the injury experience of athletes the researcher ought to go beyond informing the reader that he or she was formerly an injured athlete to suggesting the ways in which the researcher’s experiences of injury operate to assist the development of trust and rapport, and how this influences the nature of the data collection and analysis. That is, a level of reflexivity regarding the ways in which the embodied features of the researcher influence the process of inquiry is required and made available to the reader (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Sparkes & Smith, 2012).

One way to meet this challenge of explicitly acknowledging the ways in which the researcher’s embodiment shapes the process of inquiry is through the use of a reflexive research journal or field diary. Etherington (2004) proposes that keeping such a journal can help researchers focus on their internal responses to being a researcher and enables them to capture their changing and developing understanding of their roles and relationships within the study as well as on method and content. In addition, she suggests that keeping a reflexive research journal can “help us attend to our senses – what we see, hear, and sense in our bodies – all of which are needed for reflexive monitoring” (p. 128). Therefore, besides notes being made in this journal about how and why strategic methodological decisions were made, journal contents could also include the emotional feelings and reactions of the researcher’s body in the process of the fieldwork and how this shapes aspects of the inquiry that include the analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2012). In this regard it is interesting to note that in our decade review a number of researchers indicated that they kept reflexive journals. Dale (2000), for example, kept a ‘methodological log’ in which he tracked his “thought processes, reasoning, and actions throughout the project…. [enabling him] to reflect on personal experiences of the study” (p. 24). Unfortunately, very little of what is in these journals actually makes its way into the final articles and so, the use to which they are being put and their value within the study is difficult to assess. In the future, it is hoped that, where appropriate, more details from the reflexive journals will be included by qualitative researchers in sport psychology regarding the ways in which their personal characteristics have influenced the process of inquiry throughout their study, be it interview based or otherwise.

**Conclusion**

Readers must bear in mind that only three North American journals were reviewed for the current study and future reviews should consider adding recently created outlets for qualitative sport psychology research such as *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, as well as multidisciplinary journals such as *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, Physical Education and Pedagogy*, and the *International Journal of Sport Psychology*. Notwithstanding
this limitation, the current review provides a useful map of the terrain in qualitative sport psychology research that not only gives a view of what has happened in the last decade but which might also raise sport psychology researchers’ awareness of the links between their epistemology, methodology, and methods. Our data suggest that positivists/postpositivists have a privileged stance in sport psychology, which may lead them to disregard the need to identify their epistemology, it being assumed. As qualitative researchers in sport psychology we would do well to heed the words of Guba and Lincoln: “Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system of worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (1998, p. 195). Our reflections on selected issues arising from our review are intended to stimulate dialogue between researchers of all persuasions so that the field of sport psychology is better able to meet the demands it will face in the future in terms of understanding the complex experiences of those involved in sport, physical activity, and other performance domains.

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