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‘Here we go again’: A Singular Life History Study Exploring Adversity

Peer Reviewed Article

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Abstract

This paper explores one individual’s life history to examine how he overcame adversity, his reactions and coping strategies, and the subsequent effects. Data were collected through multiple semi-structured interviews and discussions and analysed using performative and structural narrative analysis. The researchers took the role of storyteller to shape the story into a thematic chronological life history and then switched roles to story analysts to interrogate the story’s meanings and interpretations using social theory. Contrary to previous research on adversity and growth, the participant has learned to accept failure as his pathway for growth. He perceives’ adversity as a natural part of his life; through challenge and distress comes success. The life history presented illustrates this narrative with a particular focus on his sporting and military experiences. More specifically, we identify the presence of two dominant sporting narratives: the performance narrative and the Merry-Go-Round narrative. This account provides an in-depth, disturbing, and heart-breaking insight into one man’s experiences of multiple adversities in two social institutions, sport and the military, and how he subsequently makes sense of life. The participant found the process reflective, enabling him to identify previously inaccessible areas of growth and resilience. It also presented him with the opportunity to make peace with past behaviours and actions, confront weaknesses to move forward and address them to better his present circumstances. We conclude by reflecting on how this story challenges current ideas around adversarial growth, post-traumatic growth and the development of resilience.

Keywords

Growth, life history, military, sport, resilience, trauma

Introduction

I don't believe in any of this cliché bullshit in these motivational speeches, I don't believe any of that shit! Only the strong will survive! It's bullshit! It's all bullshit, half the time, people that post that stuff and say that stuff are sat on their ass doing fuck all. So, what keeps me being alive is being honest with yourself! I am a lazy, useless, uneducated c**t! And there's no fucking end. I just keep doing it, just keep going. I think what keeps me going, I know what it's like to fail, and I know what it's like to quit. It's not trying. I'm not. I'm not quitting. Failure is not a bad thing, not at all. You hear people go, what's your biggest fear? And they go, failing. Well, why is failure your biggest fear? Well, you find out failure is your friend, if you don't fail, how the fuck are you going to learn? If you get down and be raw and you fail and fail and fail and fail. Until one day you succeed.

These words were uttered by Nod (pseudonym), the study participant, an athlete and military serviceman who experienced a cacophony of adversities over his life course. In this outburst, he rejects the common Western cultural narrative that only the strong survive, favouring another long-standing cultural narrative that only through failure can we expect to learn and flourish (Kapur and Toh, 2015). Nod's life history is littered with often contradictory and fragmented narratives (Sclater, 2017), specifically, the performance narrative (Douglas and Carless, 2006) that is dominant in sport and the Merry-Go-Round narrative (Everard, Wadey, and Howells, 2021), a narrative specific to injury. This account provides an in-depth, disturbing, and, at times, heart-breaking insight into one man's experiences of multiple adversities in two social institutions, sport and the military, and how he subsequently makes sense of life.

Over the last two decades, there has been a paradigm shift in the way psychology researchers and practitioners have explored individuals' experiences with adversity. Adversity has been described as a negative life event statistically associated with maladjustments (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013). Jackson, Firtko and Edenborough (2007: 3) adopt a more inclusive explanation, defining it as 'the state of hardship or suffering associated with trauma, distress, misfortune, difficulty, or a tragic event.' This definition conceptualises adversity as a relational state between an individual and their environment. Concomitantly, academic literature has noticeably shifted from focusing on deleterious responses to adversity towards more constructive and positive responses, conceptualised as resilience or adversarial growth (see Brown, Sarkar and Howells, 2020). Narratives of resilience and growth represent the historically embedded cultural scripts of 'being tough in the face of adversity' and 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' that permeate Western collective consciousness and discourse. However, some individuals cannot positively interpret or reframe their adversity or demonstrate resilience and growth. For them, negative outcomes remain prominent, responses are destructive, and motivation declines along with identity and self-belief (Briere and Rickards, 2007).

Consequently, more inductive and exploratory approaches to understanding how individuals' story negative experiences have emerged, which respond to the warnings expressed by researchers who have explored individuals' responses to adversity (specifically sporting injury,

e.g., Wadey et al., 2019). Following Smith and Sparkes' (2008: 18) proposition that narratives 'are a psycho-socio-cultural shared resource', which 'help guide action', and 'constitute our realities and modes of being', contemporary sports performance researchers have begun exploring more diverse narratives. This research identifies a broader, more inclusive range of narrative resources to help athletes who experience hardship or adversity find alternatives to the restitution and chaos narratives prominently in circulation that Frank (2013) identified as potentially limiting. Cavallerio, Wadey and Wagstaff (2017) identified three narrative typologies as alternative resources, the *Entangled Narrative*, *Going Forward Narrative*, and *Making Sense Narrative*, to understand gymnasts' experiences of athletic retirement. More recently, Everard, Wadey and Howells (2021) adopted a social and cultural perspective to identify six dominant narratives structuring the stories of elite track athletes about their sport injury experiences: *Resilience*, *Merry-Go-Round*, *Longevity*, *Pendulum*, *Snowball*, and *More-to-Me*. Their work recommends creating space for alternative storylines that transcend dominant narratives in elite sports. The findings from these studies are important for two reasons; first, they identify novel and informed narratives. Of relevance to this study are the *resilience narrative*, which represents an individual's protective qualities shielding them from the adverse impact of injury, allowing them to focus on recovery and maintenance in wellbeing and athletic trajectory despite injury setbacks, and the *merry-go-round narrative*, which reflects a cyclical plot of highs and lows where chronic and recurring sports injuries continually affect athletes' wellbeing and ultimately their sporting careers. Secondly, they challenge the dominance of commonly accepted narratives in elite sport. A central one of these is the *Performance Narrative*, in which 'performance-related concerns infuse all areas of the storyteller's life' (Douglas and Carless, 2006: 73), is widely identified in the sports performance literature (e.g., Papatthomas and Lavallee, 2014) and has the potential to undermine adversity experiences by assuming that sporting adversities, such as injury, are an expected occurrence in elite participation. In contrast, inductive and exploratory approaches to narrative enquiry enabled researchers to move beyond the performance narrative, identify a particular individual's adversity-related experiences in multiple, and reveal how they develop and shift over time (Smith, 2010). Additionally, such a view understands that individuals do not experience personal adversity events in their lives in a vacuum; rather, they occur and are shaped by the cultural and social environment (see McLeod, 1997). In what follows, we outline our methodological strategy for gathering, contextualising, analysing, and interpreting Nod's life history of adversity.

Method

Research Design

Sparkes (1992: 119) highlights that 'there is no one single life history method or technique but rather a range of strategies' that enable the uniqueness of an individual's subjective experiences to be told. Adopting Sparkes, Batey and Brown's (2005) strategy, we used a singular intensive life history study to understand the lived experiences of one individual, Nod, who has experienced multiple and cumulative adversities. We also followed Goodson's (1995: 98) view that life history work is about transforming life *stories* into life *histories* and *genealogies* of context. Here, stories are 'located,' seen as their social constructions, fully impregnated by their location within power structures and social milieux. Consequently, the research design was structured around; gathering Nod's life story, locating it in the social context in which it occurred, reconstructing the chronological process of its unfolding, and identifying epiphanies along the way. Once accomplished, we then utilised various tools of narrative inquiry (Lieblich et al., 1998) to interpret the types of narratives of adversity emerging from Nod's story and assess the narrative resources at Nod's disposal. This approach was collaborative, involving in-depth discussion through multiple interviews with the participant, examining key moments in their life.

The researchers and the participant

The first author, Frances, has a background in triathlon as an athlete and, more recently, as a coach. She has experienced overcoming a serious injury which impacted her personal and athletic lives. Frances has supported injured and non-injured athletes through their athletic journeys as a coach. These experiences helped her to empathise with the participant, Nod and his story. Frances and Nod were training partners during Nod's training for his first triathlon and again for an Ironman competition. Only Frances knows Nod's real identity; however, we have changed the details of certain events to ensure his identity cannot be inferred from his story (Sparkes et al., 2005). The second author, Karen, is a Chartered Sport Psychologist and qualitative researcher with expertise in adversity and adversity-related growth. The third author, David, is a sociologist of sport and physical culture with experience in using life history research to explore body-self-society relationships. Karen and David's contributions provide a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding Nod's experiences and how he navigates adversities in two social institutions: sport and the military.

Nod is a white British male in his mid-twenties who identifies as an athlete and a military serviceman. He has competed in various sports, including martial arts, ultra-events, triathlon, cycling, and equestrian events. Nod has experienced many adversities in both his personal and sporting lives; family tragedy, multiple injuries, abandonment, isolation, and mental illness, to name a few. He completed elite armed forces training but following serious injury and the loss of one of his parents, he was medically discharged. At the time of writing, he had re-enlisted in the military and is repeating his elite military training. Early in their relationship Frances and Nod discussed the possibility of Nod taking part in future research; Nod agreed should the opportunity arise.

Data Collection

Following ethical approval from the authors' institution, Frances clarified Nod remained willing to be involved in research as a participant. Over five months, Frances interviewed Nod on five separate occasions. The interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to two hours (seven hours total), were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first interview was conducted face-to-face. The remaining four interviews were conducted remotely online (Lacono et al., 2016) due to Covid-19 restrictions and the participant's military training commitments. The first two interviews were semi-structured and began with developing a timeline of Nod's life. The construction of the timeline is a collaborative method shared by the interviewer and interviewee (Adriansen, 2012) to identify and explore events and experiences and provide a framework for constructing the initial life story and ensuring that critical life events are discussed in subsequent interviews. (e.g., Howells and Fletcher, 2016; Howells and Lucassen, 2018). The use of timelines in tandem with in-depth narrative interviews has enhanced the data collection process and the quality of the data being gathered. This is particularly relevant when researching sensitive topics, such as the death of a family member or serious injury (Kolar et al., 2015). During each interview, Frances adopted the role of an active listener (Sparkes et al., 2005). She presented herself as non-judgmental, neutral, and empathetic, neither interrupting nor offering advice, to foster openness and develop rapport with Nod. Wolcott (1994) explains how adopting this role encourages the participant to feel free to tell and explore their story and speak more effectively, facilitating rich, in-depth accounts (Rossetto, 2014).

Ethics

Confidentiality and protection of identity are key tenets of procedural ethics. In Nod's case, some

of the story details may make him identifiable to his community irrespective of the unlikelihood of any of them accessing this content. Informed by Tolich (2004), we pursued internal confidentiality by changing specific details that did not detract from Nod's account but lowered the likelihood of identification. Procedural ethics also address researcher wellbeing. Frances reflected that while she thought she was prepared to listen to Nod's experiences, the emotion with which Nod recounted his story generated an unexpected emotional response in her. This emotional response was discussed with a critical friend to maintain Frances's wellbeing and the narrative's authenticity. Beyond procedural ethics, As Sikes (2010: 14) highlights, life history research necessitates further nuanced ethical considerations:

How would I feel if I, members of my family or my friends were to be involved and treated and written about in the way the research in question involves or treats or depicts its participants? Any qualms raise alarms and questions for me.

Given the sensitive nature of what Nod disclosed, we discussed the appropriateness of disseminating his story. Our decision was influenced by Nod's comments in the final interview, specifically that he wished to tell his story hoping that certain individuals may one day read it.

Analytical techniques

Narratives play a key role in constituting meaning and making sense of the individual's lived experiences, enabling people to tell long, in-depth, rich, and contradictory stories about thoughts, emotions and lives (Busanich, McGannon and Schinke, 2014). Within the framework of the life history strategy, Narrative Analysis (NA) formed the basis of the analytic process (Feldman, Sköldbberg and Brown, 2004). This facilitated exploring *how* Nod's story was told, *what* was told, and *why* he told it that way. Throughout the process, Frances adopted the standpoints of *Storyteller* and *Story Analyst*. A Storyteller tells the participant's story (as data) to the reader, enabling the reader to draw their own conclusions (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). A Story Analyst tells the story but also applies theory to explain and understand why the participant said, did or interpreted something in the way they did, thereby seeking theoretical explanations for behaviours and actions within the story (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Initially, Frances was a Storyteller, enabling the story to be told, shaped and captured by both teller and researcher. Key moments and salient experiences were identified in interviews. Frances's transcription retained Nod's sometimes incoherent and grammatically incorrect utterances. The practice of detailing pauses, laughter, and sighs reflects Frances's efforts to retain Nod's voice. It acknowledges that as a storyteller, each new retelling differs from the original event in terms of meanings and contexts (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999). Retaining Nod's account of his lived experiences involved deconstructing and reconstructing Nod's accounts into a thematic chronological life history. To animate this, we retained long sections of Nod's dialogue to highlight his story's openness, emotionality, and impact (see Douglas and Carless, 2017).

In the latter stages of the analysis, working with the second and third authors, Frances became an Analyst, seeking to understand why certain things happened; for example, how and why Nod reacted to a particularly stressful event. This process considers stories fundamental data for systematic, rigorous, and principled narrative analysis (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Rather than just letting stories do evocative work, the authors employed analytical data procedures, strategies, and techniques to abstractly scrutinise, explain, and think about its significant features.

The analysis process began with Frances reading and re-reading each transcript after each interview, annotating the script to develop an empathetic (rather than sympathetic) view of the narrative being told (Sparkes et al., 2008). Structural (Narrative) Analysis and Performance (Narrative) Analysis (Lune and Berg, 2017) were used to understand Nod's story: Structural

Analysis (SA) reveals structural features: the order in which the story is told, the language that is used, what is said and in what order. SA also helps reveal how Nod's identity and morals were socio-culturally shaped and the impact this had on his decision-making, sense of self, moral dilemmas, and what identity was being structured to cope with stressful or challenging events (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Performative Analysis (PA) was used to illustrate how Nod's story is performed and co-constructed by himself and the listener (Frances); how the story is told, the inflexions in the teller's voice and the language that is used. How a story is presented and put together is relevant to understanding the participant's feelings and motives around key events and experiences (McAlpine, 2016). As the analytical process developed, PA became more challenging due to the remote and virtual nature of the interviews and discussions. Additionally, as the role of story analyst became more prominent through the research process, the authenticity of private experience was further explored (Newman, Howells and Fletcher, 2016).

During the transcription of the first interview, Frances noticed the sometime-excessive use of profanity by Nod and asked him about his use of this language in a later interview. He explained that using profanity was the simplest way of being understood. In his words, being 'blunt' and 'straight talking' ensures there is no confusion over personal intent. We acknowledge that profanity depends on the person and the situation, yet profanity is commonly related to the expression of emotions such as anger, frustration, or surprise (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008). Profanity can be positively associated with honesty, often used to express one's unfiltered feelings (e.g., anger, frustration) and sincerity (Whittemore, Chase and Mandle, 2001). Nod uses profanity as a central part of his language to convey his feelings and demonstrate understanding of his environment. While we are aware that some readers may find the language presented in the findings offensive, the retention of profanity promotes an *authentic* representation of Nod and his story.

Judgement criteria

The judgement criteria of a qualitative study are often referred to as *trustworthiness* (Swann, Moran and Piggott, 2015) to facilitate *authenticity*. In a process that may be articulated as 'member reflections' (Smith and McGannon, 2018), Frances asked Nod to read the draft findings and reflect on the impact that the research process has had upon him and allow him to add content that he retrospectively had missed. As part of these member reflections, Nod expressed satisfaction with the narrative that Frances presented to him and imparted his desire that certain family members should read this account at some point in the future.

Life History, Analysis and Interpretation

Family Dysfunction and the Foundations of the Performance Narrative

Nod's childhood was chaotic, disrupted, and characterised by a lack of positive parental relationships. Desiring to belong, Nod developed a yearning for success through any means. This contributed to the later development of adherence to a performance narrative, represented by Nod's story of a single-minded dedication to performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self (see Douglass and Carless, 2009). Winning, outcomes, and results were pre-eminent and were positively associated with Nod's mental wellbeing, identity, and self-worth. As an individual who had internalised this performance narrative with such a narrow focus on achieving optimal performance, 'it [was] impossible for him . . . to be much else' (Douglas and Carless, 2009: 216). The life history approach revealed that dominant sporting performance narratives are dangerous because they are based on competitive meritocratic individualism, isolating individuals as solely responsible for their destiny. The narrative can lead to victim blaming and conditional self-worth and can never be fulfilled due to structural inequalities (see Foucault, 1980) faced by individuals

such as Nod. Nod's stories of childhood contained the performance narrative's social incoherence. Like many young boys, Nod desired the status associated with winning and success but had neither the resources, social support, nor intrinsic motivation, to pursue them successfully. This led to Nod sacrificing moral values and socially accepted behaviours to maintain the performance narrative in the face of adversity.

I think growing up I was very much a quitter . . . if things were too hard, I'd think fuck that! I didn't have that advice when I was younger to keep going, you know; 'one day you'll get it'. I didn't have it, so one day I thought this is just fucking hard! I'm going to quit. It's so much easier to quit than keep going. I was just this rogue skinny kid, had no support. I was very much a liar, lied to my friends, lied all the time, very much a liar back then. I would lie like you wouldn't believe to try and look cool, to try and make friends. I'd be watching my best friend get picked and be the star player for the school. You know it wasn't because he is trying hard or any good, it was because he had the support to get the new football boots, rugby boots, he had parents who used to take him to after school training. His parents were all friends with the teachers. All I wanted was for my dad to (short pause), you know, actually have a bit of a bond, actually teach me something, you know.

Nod's early memories of being let down and not receiving support from the people around him at school and home were Frances's first indication that Nod was an outsider; He wanted to be included but eventually responded by withdrawing and giving up on his goals.

Growing up, Nod's mother was involved with horses and encouraged him to ride and take up equestrian sports. He competed in show jumping, cross country, and pony club events. On the surface, Frances observed his young equestrian success as an ideal opportunity for a young boy seeking recognition, interest and support from a family member. However, Nod's turbulent relationship with his mother, and her vicarious adherence to the performance narrative, created a toxic environment:

I kept horse riding until I was like 14 and I hated it! Because, I was this little gay kid, who wanted to go out and do Motor-cross and do guy things. But I wasn't. I was little skinny Nod, in his jodhpurs . . . Like a sex pest, do you know what I mean? But I was fucking good at it! You know, I remember that's how I would get all the girlfriends because, I was better than them at riding horses. But mum couldn't afford to do it, she would steal money so I could do it, steal horses and never pay the rent for the horses, steal money and things, make me steal money out of my dad's wallet, for it all. So, it wasn't a healthy (short pause), ooh you'd think, you should be very grateful for giving me all that, but in fact it was fucking shit! She just wanted me to do it.

As he grew up, the relationship between his parents deteriorated, reinforcing the alienation he felt from his friends and family. He realised the traditional family life and relationships of his school friends were unattainable for him:

I wouldn't come home until late because my parents would be at home fighting, I'd remember I'd be out with my friends on the bike and then they'd come home for tea and that be them. I never had that, never had 'right come home it's teatime'. I'd never had that. I just came home when I wanted, most of the time it would be when they were in bed, so it be a nice and quiet house, no fighting, didn't want to be there when they were fighting.

Amidst this neglect, Nod began learning to look after himself and building the independence and singular mindset present in his later life. He internalised a distrust of others and a belief that you

are responsible for your own wellbeing and future. However, while recounting his early childhood experiences, Nod's voice changed, revealing the longing for a 'normal' childhood and jealousy at witnessing his friends having the care, guidance, and attention that he lacked:

My mum would come in my room in the morning before school, and go, I need a hand doing this today. Then take me out for breakfast and not go to school. Yeah, and then hide it from my dad. Obviously, my dad didn't give a shit about school, but he knew that you had to be in school, because your parents get in trouble don't they? Mum used to (short pause) she didn't want to be on her own I don't think. So, I think she liked having me around to, to go to the horses or (pause). Just be at home so she wasn't on her own. She had enough of her own problems. You know (short pause). Cry for help really. She always worked, they were both working class, or both worked, but she had severe mental health issues (short pause). She had bipolar, and obviously bipolar is a mental thing, not a visual thing. You never know, you never knew where you are, you could go off have a lovely day yesterday and blah blah and you know spend time with your mum. You expect the same kind of relationship the next day. (Harshly impersonating mother) 'No you're fucking going to school! Whether you like it or not!' (short pause). You know, so, because of her having bipolar it almost made you feel like you had bipolar as well.

The military and personal loss: A merry-go-round

In the following years, his mother's mental health declined. Her behaviour became more erratic and unpredictable, and an increasing number of animals lived inside and outside the house, adding to the unstable, chaotic environment. Nod became focused on a career in the military. Unfortunately, Nod's learning difficulties were not identified due to his childhood situation. This created barriers to his future progression in(to) the military in the years to come. From age 15 until the present, Nod's story contains a merry-go-round narrative (Everard, Wadey and Howells, 2021), a cyclical plot of repeated failure and personal loss, affecting his wellbeing and career progression:

Me joining the military, was something I've wanted to do since I was young . . . You hear these stories; he joined the Army, he had no qualifications. Well, I thought, ok if they can do it, I can do it! So, I tried to join [an elite infantry unit] at 15 and failed. I thought oh yeah, I be alright I know my Maths and English, and I failed (small laugh). [My uncle] was a teacher as well, I remember him being quite shocked at how far behind I was for my age. I was the age where I should have been going to college and thinking about what I was going to do, and I couldn't even read at all. So, when I sat for this test the second time, I failed it. I failed it again. And you know what? I went back the following year tried it again. And guess what fucking happened? I failed it again! And that really knocked me, I thought, 'what the fuck am I going to do now?' 'What am I going to do now?' Because on paper I was too stupid to go to college and learn a trade. I thought that anyway. I was too fucking stupid! I thought I can't do this, I can't do that, I'm a quitter.

Following repeated rejection by an elite regiment, Nod joined a regular Army infantry regiment at the age of 17, enlisting independently, without the support or encouragement from his family. Leaving home and starting training was the escape he had been waiting for. Going out on training runs and being laughed at and ridiculed only fuelled his ambition to be more than was expected of him. However, as the following interview extract documents, during his recruit training, at the age of 19, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and he suffered a career-changing injury:

Nod: I got turned down three times for my regiment medically because I was too stupid to fill the forms out right. I remember the recruitment test . . . It was, uh, a BARB [British Army Recruit Battery] test. Bog standard you know 'Biff taller than Chip so who's shorter?' I did so bad I didn't actually get a grade. The regiment was the lowest score, the lowest one, I only qualified but only just, they tried to turn me away, he tried to tell me to go away and come back. But I managed to persuade them and managed to get in because I was fit to a degree, just, wasn't you know excellent. Yeah, I was going through training, always back of the pack, never excelled at anything, never the best, never anything at all, always told I was shit (short pause) . . . I didn't keep going did I? I quit. I didn't keep going at anything. Never kept going at anything. I think because I got injured (short pause). What happened I broke [three bones] during training. This elite training is deemed as the hardest test within the British Army. It's what qualifies you to do the parachute course. If I remember rightly, it's a 10-miler with 40lbs of kit to be done in 1 hour and 40 min. Then . . . an aerial assault course, the next day is the log race, then a two-miler, the steeples chase, then the 20-miler with weight. I think I was injured before, but now; I know I could've done it, but I was too weak, I was too shit! Mentally I was too weak, my mum was diagnosed with cancer during training, so you like to tell people that, that was on your mind. But it wasn't, I think it was just an excuse just to quit. I just wasn't very good to be honest with you, quite embarrassing (long pause).

Frances: But you must have been doing something right to get through 28 weeks?

Nod: Yeah, must have been. You know I wasn't very good and because I was home for so long, I think when I went back, I was scared of (pause), of (pause), just scared of being there. Because of my injury they went 'well what we are going to do now your injury is healed, we are going to put you back into training at week X'. That week was like I'd have to do everything I had done again, and I was 'like I can't fucking do that, I can't fucking do that!' So yeah, I said to the medical officer, 'this hip is really scaring me, I don't think I can do this', but I could, I could of. Yeah, I just wanted a get out of jail free card really, and uh cause then I could come home and say, 'oh no I didn't quit, I was medically discharged', but yes, I was medically discharged, but you know, I quit. I quit. That's taken a long time for me to admit that, that I put my hand up and said no, this is enough. I quit.

Frances: So, your mum being diagnosed with cancer you didn't see as being a valid excuse?

Nod: No, not really (short pause). Although I think I'd like to tell people that it was a good enough reason to quit or leave or get discharged, because it made a good cover story because, I knew I didn't have the [unclear] to, to tell people it was too hard. It wasn't too hard. I just didn't want to be there at the time. Anyway, I left (short pause). When I was home, I found stacks of letters addressed to me that my mum had hidden, and I was like, what the fuck!?! Opened them up and it was bank bankruptcy papers, county court judgments, I was blacklisted! I had the bailiffs after me! All while I was in the Army, she'd taken out numerous credit cards, thousands of pounds, don't know how she done it! And basically, spent all the credit cards, maxed them out. Hasn't paid any of it back. So, of course, I got all these people after me and I didn't even know about it. So, of course, I hit the roof! Absolutely hit the roof! I called her

every name you could think of. I smashed the house up. You know I didn't speak to her after that (short pause). And she was really ill at this point. You know she was dying and stuff. You know really ill. But I did not care! All I saw was she fucking robbed me! My mum's partner at the time was trying to justify it (mocking tone), 'oh she's ill she's ill' But I didn't fucking listen to that shit! So yeah, I didn't speak to her. I didn't go and visit her in hospital when she was dying (short pause) Uh yeah, just real nasty, nasty person at the time (short pause). People go, 'oh no you couldn't help it'. But no, I was a nasty person. I was nasty, real nasty like (short pause). So, she had cancer. She had operations to have her breasts removed. She broke her hips. She couldn't walk. No one knows this (short pause) just be me and her in the house and by this point, she could have dropped dead, and I didn't care. At the time, I just didn't care. And, then one night she was at home, she was sleeping in the living room because she couldn't get upstairs because she just broken her hip . . . she had to take medication and it sent her fucking loopy! Like really loopy! Yeah, she would be in bed downstairs screaming! Screaming my name. Asking me to come and help her move. Just roll her over, or just get her a drink or help her. I would just roll over and pretend I couldn't hear her (long pause). Again, I told myself that I was scared to see her that way (short pause). Bullshit! I was a nasty person! I wanted her to (short pause) have pain. . . . She robbed me! I was a nasty person, a real nasty person. I still think I've got a bit of nastiness in me. You know that's your mum (long pause). There's this one time at home alone with me, she knew she was dying, she was supposed to be in hospital. She kept refusing so one day they just came and got her. Talked her into going into hospital until she died. We weren't speaking at all at this point (short pause). And she caught me as the ambulance was coming to take her away (short pause). She was in a right state, you know, no hair, she was skin and bone, she was horrendous. Um yeah, she said, 'I'm going to get better now in hospital' and I turned round and said, 'I fucking well hope not!' She died two days later. Yeah, I remember that.

Nod's raw depiction of this relationship distressed Frances, and the interview was paused. She reflected Nod's story was challenging for her, as it represented a relationship that she found alien, and how she had wanted to comfort Nod but was unable to due to the Covid19 social guidelines. This strengthened her emotional reaction to his story and further emphasised Nod's aloneness during this time and how he was unable to have support, guidance and direction to deal with the grief, loss and confusion caused by the situation he found himself in, before and after his mother's death. Nod was confused as to why Frances was upset and said, 'what have you got to be sad about? It hasn't got anything to do with you'. He was unable to understand her reaction and need to comfort him. Nod's eyes filled with tears, his body language alluded to embarrassment, and a distant look suggested someone lost in the memory. Looking away from Frances, unable to meet her eyes, talking to the wall, his voice becoming quieter, with a small shake of his head and a disbelieving smile as he concluded. His disassociated, distant, and blunt recital of his mother's illness and subsequent death and the brusque dismissal of Frances's emotional reaction represented an interpersonal emotional detachment, despite being able to experience extreme emotion at the memory of the events. We interpreted that this detachment may have protected Nod from additional anxiety or stress (see Scholte and Van der Ploeg, 2007) and represented a learned behaviour, internalised as a consequence of traumatic childhood experiences (i.e., dysfunctional relationships with family, death of a friend, and deceitful childhood environment). Detachment became a defence mechanism that allowed him (seemingly) to cope with unwanted emotional reactions and situations. During his military service, he recalled thinking: 'I don't fucking want friendships, I don't want that bullshit, I don't need that shit, you can't trust anyone, I just want to stay out of it.' However, distancing himself from others as a form of protection from the possibility of further harmful relationships, whether familial or friendly, provided him with a

(detrimental) template for how to engage with others later in life.

Nod spoke candidly, demonstrating accountability for how his actions of hiding from his mother's pleas for help were wrong and revealed a very 'nasty' side of his personality. Reflecting on his more recent years, Nod considers he has developed emotional maturity, fostered through a desire for self-development and improvement (Brown, Sarkar and Howells, 2020). His honest disclosure and rejection of deception suggest a higher functioning and awareness not found in his 19-year-old self. This may indicate Post-traumatic Growth (PTG; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995) which involves, amongst other things, finding a new perspective to better understand and cope with previous behaviours or actions and enhanced social relationships.

Although Nod's Army service was a formative period of his life, he describes himself negatively during this time: 'I was so shit, I was a quitter, scared, unfit always at the back.' His self-perception is degrading and reveals the performance narrative. Despite completing one of the hardest military tests in the world, his inability to meet the required standard and negative comparison with other recruits reinforced his embarrassment that he was unable to meet not only his own expectations but also those of the establishment. Nod was determined to try again and endeavoured to re-join as he believed he was classified as temporarily medically unfit (TMU) on discharge. He assumed that he could return to training once he had completed his rehabilitation. However, he had been ill-informed: 'I thought I could leave and come back you know, that was the agreement you know, you can come back.' In a further instance of betrayal, he discovered his mother had hidden all his military paperwork and personal mail, which explained that he had been classed as *permanently* medically unfit (PMU) and therefore ineligible to return:

I wasn't just rejected from them, I was rejected from the police, the fire service, all uniform public service, the Army, Navy, and the Air Force. Here I was, this [manual worker], doing you know, nothing. But I wanted more (long pause). Yeah so, I kept writing appeals. They kept saying I needed more medical evidence, but you know I had nothing. I had nothing more to give. I spent my entire life savings. I sold very personal things, very expensive personal things, to fund my appeal procedure. All the way through this procedure, I wasn't eating, or sleeping, or doing anything because I couldn't afford to. People went, 'ooh, why don't you get another job?' but I couldn't, I was too uneducated and too stupid to get a reasonably paid job. I had no skills. I had nothing. It was horrendous. Anyway, I kept writing these appeals . . . and I was rejected on every single one in two years. I was basically given a final straw and it said I have one more attempt. So, I went to my doctor and basically cried my eyes out and said, 'You have to help me! You have no idea what this means to me', and she said, 'look, there's nothing more I can do. I have given you everything, you've spent so much money on MRI scans, private therapy, physio, everything'. I begged her to help me, and she said that she might know a guy who can help me, and I said that be great. With that a few weeks later, I had a phone call, from a certain individual, I won't say who, but somebody very high up, doesn't matter who. He basically pointed me in the right direction as to what I needed to do. He helped me write a new appeal and we still failed. Failed and failed and failed and failed.

This represents the darkest period of Nod's life, and he was struggling to function with everyday life. Although undiagnosed, Nod may have experienced a depressive episode. He was barely surviving, scraping enough money together to put fuel in his car to get to work to pay rent, and when there was money left, he bought food. After his mother died, his sole ambition was to re-join the military, as it represented security and safety: an income and a community providing structure, order, and direction to a life that currently had none. Moreover, the image of becoming

an elite military serviceman, of being something greater than himself, and is deemed by society as strong, independent, and capable provided motivation to keep fighting his permanently unfit classification, despite seemingly never-ending rejections. This single-minded determination suggests a form of robust resilience (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2016), influenced by the environment and developed through interactions and experiences. Resilience provides a protective quality helping an individual to maintain functioning despite adversarial situations (Brown et al., 2020). Being resilient and able to cope with stressful or traumatic events became the norm for Nod, enabling him to work towards his goal despite the challenges he continually faces.

I've always gave up, I've always failed. I wanted to feel something else other than failure (short pause). All I've ever done is fail. It's all I know, is failure. I don't know what it feels like to succeed. I've never finished anything. I've always gave up. I think that's probably one of the only things I've never given up on, and basically to win over these appeals I started doing other sports. But other sports on a whole new level! (smiling).

'I wanted to feel something else other than failure' identifies a key turning point in Nod's narrative. At this defining moment, he is determined to end the disappointment, failures, and quitting cycle. He was determined to overturn his classification. In recounting his efforts, Nod laughed and shook his head in disbelief about how he had persevered through such a bleak time. Here it was evident that he used humour as a buffer to mediate his traumatic experiences and manage stress. In articulating his betrayal by family, injury, and being classed as permanently unfit, he stated, *'here we go again'*, accompanied by an eye roll and a small smile. This demonstrates his internalisation of the merry-go-round narrative and his ability to face every obstacle with the attitude of: 'here we go again, let's go, it's just another obstacle to overcome'.

Obsession: A resurgence of the performance narrative

Nod looks back with incredulity at the next part of his story, where his sporting performance and achieving the highest fitness level became an obsession. He refused to experience further failure, replacing it with a desire to achieve success.

When people were better than me I just couldn't fucking deal! Yeah, it used to send me insane! So, I wouldn't just do triathlons, I'd do ultra-triathlons. I wouldn't just do running; I'd do ultra-running. I couldn't swim. I couldn't swim at all. I was completely scared of the water. Yeah, I'd go to the pool and I have no goggles. I'd just go in there try and swim, all I was doing was burning energy when I was trying to swim. I couldn't do it, any of it. I couldn't, I was scared. I'd go in the pool after work, and I get there at six and wouldn't leave till half past nine. I thought this will help my medical appeal, because triathletes are fit, they are the fittest you know. I didn't know anything about training. I didn't know anything about fitness, nothing at all. I didn't know how to train. I just know how I work, through graft and suffering. So instead of having a scheduled ride, I'd just go and ride until I couldn't ride anymore. It was the same with running, same with cycling, same with anything. Go to the gym doing my strength and conditioning, and I'd be in there for four hours. I felt like everything in my life everything, everything, so much hatred and aggression, I hated everything, hated everyone . . . Yeah everything, the only reason I was training was for my appeal, I fucking hated it, I hated all of it, I hated training but (short pause) I was training like, like I was possessed, I didn't know what I was doing, what was sensible what was not (short pause). I'd get out the pool and go for a ride and not get of the bike till midnight (short pause). Was that right? I don't know (short pause). Then go to work the next day absolutely ruined, bear in mind I haven't eaten and haven't slept and haven't (short pause) done anything (short

pause). So basically, this thing happened, this thing and I don't know what it is but. Since losing my mum and leaving the Army, I kept lying to people and myself and trying to make myself feel better, but training was the only thing where I was like; Ok no fucking lying here! You know people would see, you know, and I wasn't fit at all! People used to see me and think 'ahh he's so fit' and see 'ahh he's cycling hundreds of miles a week'. I didn't even have a pair of running shoes I'd just go out and do it. People don't see, don't realise what's behind the closed doors. They don't realise I'm not eating. They don't realise I'm not sleeping. Don't realise I'm sitting on the end of my bed crying my eyes out. Was a horrendous time in my life. Yeah, I was doing these races but it's, so much more than just doing a race. I hated it all! I hated everyone and everything! Because I had been beaten all my life. All my fucking life! I've been beaten and lost and failed at everything! That when it came to it, I wanted to change, so I came and got fucking down and got obsessed with beating people on a whole new level!! This thing happens! It is completely unhealthy; I will kill myself on every single fitness session that I do, and I chat shit about others to make myself feel better. . . . I put others down to make myself feel better, I'm a nasty person, I hate myself. Anyway, I put all this in the medical appeal, all the crazy training and events and I won. For the [military] training, I got a chance, even though I failed the test eight years before, they given me another chance. They took me as a gamble, they said if my hip problem comes back then that's a straight medical discharge and you can't come back.

Obsession with not failing and a dogmatic focus on the outcome, specifically not being beaten by anyone, reveals a strong internalisation of Douglas and Carless' (2009) performance narrative. Nod believed the final goal is only achieved through a singular focus and determination; when he received the notification that he could re-enlist in the military, he perceived this made all the suffering and hard work worth it. Despite training 'blind' for ultra-events, Nod had provided the military with the evidence required to give him the opportunity he had been waiting for. All that was required was to pass the written exam he had failed three times previously.

That's when it all changed. They gave me a week to do this Maths and English test. I said no that's not enough time I need seven. I phoned up booked the test in seven weeks. There was no way I was failing that test. Everything I've learnt in my entire life, from training to (short pause) everything! This test has been on my mind for eight to nine years, failed it three times! I was 23 this time, I booked this test, and I started revising like an absolute mad person! I didn't know how to revise. I done it all wrong last time, for me anyway. I didn't know how to learn; I was copying from dictionaries. I got pages from home, books at home of the same question written over and over again. All I needed was to get a pen and paper and just write. It was simple questions you know, what's 24 x 25? Simple questions but for me it was horrendous. I'd probably write the question down six or seven times. Six or seven pages of the same question, working it out over and over again. That was the same for every single question. There were . . . 120 questions. I think you had to get an 80% to pass. I couldn't read, I couldn't write ok I couldn't (short pause). That thing happened . . . an obsession. An absolute obsession! I will do this! I don't know what it is?! I need to come up with a name for it because I didn't leave that chair for seven fucking weeks! No exaggeration that test is the most laser-focused I've ever been in my entire life. Seven weeks! Again, I didn't eat, I didn't sleep, I didn't move from that chair! This test has had a bag over my head for nine years, this was my opportunity . . . there was no way I was failing that test. No way! For the hours I put into that test . . . hardest thing I've ever done. The only way I learn is by repetition . . . just writing it down and eventually, ah fucking hell I

got it! It held me back for nine years, it was on my mind every day. I went in for this test, seven weeks later (short pause), shaking like a leaf (short pause) and I absolutely smashed this test out the water, absolutely smashed it! As soon as I passed that test, I knew that I was going to be an [elite infantry soldier].

This success was a significant moment for Nod, yet rather than celebrate, he moved on to the next challenge. Mentally tough individuals approach, react to and appraise pressure, challenge, and adversity, as opportunities for self-development (Mutz et al., 2017). Consequentially, they persist in reaching goals. For example, Nod appears to be ticking off a list, an appeal - tick, a recruitment test - tick. Yet the pursuit of his goal is never ending; each accomplishment, no matter how small, is one more step on the ladder to achieve his overall ambition. 'Time crept on, and I stopped doing triathlon training and was doing military training. [This] training is completely different. I had military physical fitness test and that was [at] the end of September . . . it was a week after [the] Ironman'. At this point, Nod digressed and reminisced about his Ironman race. His narrative again was representative of a single-minded obsession, a performance narrative that became all-encompassing:

I did it probably like it's never been done before. You know, this is a race, that is like a lot of people's lifetime and you know. I did it with no watch, and no data, no nothing, I just wanted to test and see how far I could go. I wanted to see how far I could push myself for me. To me it didn't matter what bike you had, or what run shoes you had, or didn't matter what training you done, and how much blah blah, it doesn't fucking matter! What mattered to me was how far you could push yourself, how far you could really go. The only thing I did know, was how to fucking suffer, and that's what I did all day for 15 hours. I just fucking started and just grinded until, until it ended. I was max chat, I was flat out, all the way, for me anyway. I just kept going, and going, and going, and going, until it finished. But I know how to suffer. I know how to suffer.

Nod succeeded despite his suffering but was surprised that he did not recognise a change in himself. This revelation is reminiscent of the Olympians' narratives, who, having competed in the Olympic Games, experience the blues (Bradshaw, Howells and Lucassen, 2021; Howells and Lucassen, 2018). This occurs when Olympians return from the Olympic Games to a mundane reality, which does not differ significantly from their lives before qualification. The time following the Games is often characterised by a period of uncertainty, where the athlete experiences feelings of loss, a lack of purpose, and negative emotions that are representative of a range of depressive symptoms (see Howells and Lucassen, 2018); Nod reflects:

You hear about how 'this race is going to change your life, it's amazing' and all that bullshit but (short pause). I finished it and I got to the aftercare tent and thought, 'what the fuck? I'm exactly the same person I was before I haven't changed' (short pause). It's not until time went by and I understood what they meant. I now know I can push myself like you wouldn't believe, that's why I say, 'here we go again', because my life is like 'ahh here we go again'. There is no plan, no structure, no nothing, you know, I know I can push on, and keep going. From passing that test, forget Ironman, but to living in a hellhole, having no money (short pause), from suffering, that's where growth is from, suffering (short pause). Now I'm not scared of failure because I've done it so many times in my life. I laugh when I fail because it's like fuck's sake, here we go again.

Conclusions

Throughout Nod's life, solitary suffering and failure had become the norm. Nod's approach to dealing with adversity had become ingrained; Isolation, dedication, and an all-consuming focus

on the task at hand became the only approach he adopted. No one could help; obsession with his personal development became the only approach he knew. Through a second chance in the military, taking part in as much sport as possible, passing the recruitment test, and completing an Ironman, Nod experienced a revelation. Upon reflection, he recognised that he can now identify his struggles; he understands he is dyslexic and has ADHD. Nod is no stranger to challenge, working to combat habits developed as a child. However, now in elite military training, with increased self-awareness, he could disclose his limitations and ask for additional support with some of the more academic aspects of training. Over time, Nod has developed characteristics that may represent mental toughness (Clough, Earle and Sewell, 2002); he can engage with challenging situations and use them to his advantage. He acknowledges he is physically stronger and that failing is a part of learning and personal development. He has internalised the military ethos of courage, determination, unselfishness, and cheerfulness in facing adversity. Nod has grown from a young boy who turned away from challenges and adversity to someone who takes it in his stride and uses negative events to fuel his ambitions. Mentally tough individuals are not only able to remain committed when confronted with stress, but they are also confident about completing their tasks, attributes Nod now possesses.

During the analysis phase of this research, we discussed the fragmented and sometimes incoherent adherence to certain contemporary narratives, exploring Nod's resilience (see Sarkar and Fletcher, 2014) and his experiences of adversarial growth (see Howells, Sarkar and Fletcher, 2017). Yet, we had to bracket our expectations of our participant, articulating that he had developed resilience or had experienced growth. Nod, we interpreted, was profoundly affected by his environment; he learned to be alone from a young age to cope with death, injury, betrayal, and disappointment. Although we could argue this represents the development of an individual high in resilience, we acknowledge his successes (e.g., the completion of an Ironman, ultimate success in the military) were achieved through an obsessively focused work ethic, which enabled him to navigate each adversarial event. He did this without social support and rejected any opportunity to foster a supportive environment. He survived each adversity and challenge alone. This, despite the empirical evidence (e.g., Galli and Vealey, 2008) suggesting that an integral part of recovering from adversarial situations is developing a social support network and environment that provides guidance and support for the reintegration process. Additionally, Nod may have grown from his experiences through Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995) involving, amongst other things, finding a new perspective to better understand and cope with previous behaviours or actions. However, his outlook on life did not change, he did not develop stronger relationships, and he did not appreciate life more. Yet, Nod's statement at the start of this story is supported by his narrative: 'you fail and fail and fail and fail. Until one day you succeed'. Nod's success is articulated through his own words and through, as story analysts, our identification of two dominant narratives, the performance narrative (Douglas and Carless, 2006) and the Merry-Go-Round narrative (Everard et al., 2021).

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Karen Howells is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University and a Chartered Sport Psychologist working with athletes from individual sports at all levels. As a researcher her interests lie in the exploring the experiences of adversity in sport and high-performance environments, and more specifically in adversarial growth and post-Olympic blues.

David Brown is a Professor in the Sociology of Sport and Physical Culture at Cardiff Metropolitan University. His research addresses changing body-self-society relationships in sporting and physical cultures. Areas of current focus include Eastern movement forms as body-self transforming practice in the West and changing relationships between physical cultures and sustainability.