



Centralizing culture in cultural sport psychology research: The potential of narrative inquiry and discursive psychology



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To understand cultural issues within cultural sport psychology (CSP) research, methodological variation has been advocated. Those interested in carrying out CSP research with a ‘critical sensibility’ are presented with the challenge of deciding what methodology may capture a socially constructed and nuanced analysis of culture, self-identity and experience. In this paper we focus on two qualitative methodologies grounded in social constructionism and their potential for advancing understandings of culture within CSP research: narrative inquiry and discursive psychology.

Results: Focusing on what is at the “core” of critical CSP research – cultural praxis – we briefly outline narrative inquiry and discursive psychology, articulate three key convergences between them and discuss how these link with, and build upon, cultural praxis tenets. To further demonstrate the potential of these methodologies for centralizing and expanding understandings of culture in CSP, we next offer distinct methodological contributions of each: autoethnography, conversation analysis, and critical discourse analysis.

Conclusion: We close by suggesting that to move beyond theoretical discussions of cultural praxis in CSP, sport psychology researchers might use narrative inquiry and discursive psychology. Doing so allows for more informed and principled methodological choices in CSP research that align with social constructionism, and provides a critical and nuanced analysis of culture, moving forward.

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Before there was a genre of cultural sport psychology (CSP) research, the lack of inclusion of culture and/or cultural identities within sport psychology was challenged for many years (e.g., Butryn, 2002; Duda & Allison, 1990; Fisher, Butryn, & Roper, 2003). A further push for a more culturally inclusive and socially just sport psychology has continued beyond these early writings, with scholars advocating for culture's rightful place within sport psychology within the CSP genre (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke, Michel, Danielson, Gauthier, & Pickard, 2005). Scholars within CSP seek to facilitate contextualized understandings of marginalized topics and cultural identities (Ryba, Schinke, & Tennenbaum, 2010; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke & McGannon, in press; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). A central reason for the advocacy of culture is because culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave; we cannot step outside culture, thus to ignore it would be to miss a key matter that shapes people's self-identities and lives (Smith, 2010). The consequences of denying or

ignoring culture in physical activity and sport contexts can result in decreased physical activity participation (McGannon & Schinke, 2013), alienation and distress (Smith, 2013a, 2013b), cultural identity exclusion leading to reduced physical performance (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011), and views of exercise as medicine (Caddick & Smith, 2014). CSP is creating dialogue among physical activity participants and social scientists to open up new and additional understandings concerning solutions to sociocultural challenges limiting physical activity participation and sport performance.

In the quest for understanding cultural issues, an openness to methodological variation grounded in various epistemologies (e.g., social constructionism, post-positivism) has been advocated within CSP research (Ryba & Schinke, 2009). In the present paper we focus on two qualitative methodologies that hold potential for advancing understandings of culture within CSP research: narrative inquiry (see Smith & Sparkes, 2009a) and discursive psychology (see McGannon & Mauws, 2000). These methodologies have this potential in light of their alignment with what is at the “heart” of CSP: cultural praxis (Ryba & Wright, 2010; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). In drawing attention to these two methodologies, we

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acknowledge that they are not the only ones that hold potential for advancing and centralizing culture within CSP. Examples of additional methodologies that also align with cultural praxis will be outlined shortly. For now it can be noted that within CSP, cultural praxis is grounded in cultural studies (see [Ryba & Wright, 2005](#)), with the central tenet being to blend theory, lived culture, and social action to understand cultural identities as fluid and socially constructed within social interaction and discourse ([Ryba & Wright, 2010](#)). Cultural identities from this perspective also include those of the researcher and/or practitioner, particularly in terms of how one's own values, social position and self-identities impact participants within the context of power issues ([McGannon & Johnson, 2009](#); [Ryba & Wright, 2005, 2010](#); [Schinke et al., 2012](#)). CSP research grounded in the foregoing cultural praxis tenets is anchored by an agenda of social change and social justice which aims to transform sociocultural issues within the everyday lives of marginalized participants via reflexive processes of the researcher. Such a focus encourages deeper consideration for the implications of the research process, the knowledge produced and how these connect with lived experiences and identities of participants ([Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, in press](#)). Thus, CSP research grounded in cultural praxis seeks to be emancipative, with the goal to open up multiple forms of knowledge and understanding and to create opportunities for individuals as cultural beings in sport and physical activity contexts ([McGannon & Schinke, in press](#)).

Those interested in carrying out research in a manner aligning with cultural praxis are presented with a challenge: which methodologies might be used to “capture” a socially constructed, intricate and nuanced analysis of culture, self-identity and personal experience – of researcher and participants(s)? Lest it be unclear, this central question emphasizes the importance of considering the alignment of methodological choices with underlying epistemological assumptions – in this case, those of cultural studies and social constructionism. With this point in mind, the question of which methodologies align with cultural praxis tenets becomes a complex one. Yet, it is a question with which the CSP literature has minimally engaged, as discussions concerning cultural praxis have remained primarily at the theoretical level. There are a few exceptions within the CSP research genre to this latter statement. In 2009 a special issue of the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* featured empirical articles under the umbrella of decolonizing methodologies to broadly address issues of power and sociocultural difference in research ([Ryba & Schinke, 2009](#)). While a cultural praxis agenda was discussed in the opening article, the various forms of empirical research included within the special issue did not explicitly link particular methodologies to the tenets of cultural praxis. Nevertheless, the various methodologies employed (e.g., auto-narrative to examine whiteness in sport psychology ([Butryn, 2009](#))), participatory action research to examine relations between a research team and Aboriginal sport participants ([Schinke et al., 2009](#)) stand as examples of critical forms of CSP research implicitly positioned within cultural praxis. [Blodgett](#) and colleagues have explicitly positioned their research as cultural praxis, particularly in relation to researcher reflexivity, inclusion of marginalized identities and social justice. Their research used a co-participatory methodological approach to conceptualize youth sport programming on an Aboriginal reserve in Canada through local cultural practices ([Blodgett, Schinke, Fisher, et al., 2010](#)), and developed Indigenous research recommendations, applied practice and self-governance from experiences of Aboriginal community members ([Blodgett, Schinke, Peltier, et al., 2010](#); [Blodgett et al., 2011](#)). Finally, [Schinke et al. \(2012\)](#) engaged with cultural praxis through a confessional tale from a sport psychology consulting experience. This self-reflexive tale grounded in cultural praxis

served as a culturally sensitive method to highlight interactions of power and socio-cultural difference encountered in a multi-cultural sport context.

Purpose, contributions and goals

Beyond the above examples, few writings in CSP have explicitly engaged with cultural praxis in conjunction with what specific methodologies might be utilized to carry out CSP research. Such articulation is necessary in order to provide researchers with additional resources to make informed, reflexive and strategic methodological choices that align with certain epistemologies (e.g., social constructionism) when carrying out critical forms of CSP research. The purpose of outlining narrative inquiry and discursive psychology as they align with cultural praxis is to expand dialogues advocating for critical forms of CSP research that conceptualize and analyse culture and cultural identities as socially constructed and nuanced (i.e., align with the underlying assumptions of cultural praxis tenets) ([McGannon & Schinke, in press](#)). Additionally, while the use of narrative inquiry (e.g., [Smith, 2013a](#)) and discursive psychology (e.g., [McGannon & Schinke, 2013](#)) is growing in sport psychology, no published work within the discipline has yet put them into dialogue to explore what they afford the CSP research genre. Our further intent with the present submission is to expand narrative inquiry and discursive psychology literature, with the hope of prompting further empirical investigations using these methodologies within sport psychology to explore cultural topics and cultural issues. Our ultimate goal is to add to the wider dialogue within sport psychology that encourages researchers to ask new questions and think differently, and in so doing, create new knowledge that leads to creative solutions to socio-cultural challenges in sport and physical activity contexts ([Smith & Sparkes, 2009a](#)). In this regard, because narrative inquiry and discursive psychology are methodologies which take a novel and creative approach to conceptualizing and studying self-identity, experiences and behaviour, new and different research questions are opened up within the socio-cultural realm of sport psychology.

To accomplish the above goals, we first provide an overview of narrative inquiry and discursive psychology, delineate some key convergences between them and how these link with, and build upon, a cultural praxis agenda. Next, to further demonstrate the potential of these methodologies for centralizing culture in CSP research, we offer some distinct methodological contributions of each. Where possible, we draw on research examples within the wider field of sport and exercise psychology that has used narrative inquiry and discursive psychology explore what critical CSP research might be. We conclude with some aspirations for critical forms of CSP research positioned in cultural praxis. In the spirit of cultural praxis being “an attempt to broaden the epistemological spectrum of theory and practice in the field” ([Ryba & Wright, 2010](#), p. 3), these ideas are offered as considerations amongst a range of methodological possibilities that might centralize culture in CSP.

Narrative inquiry and discursive psychology: convergences, links and expansions

Although there are various approaches to narrative within the social sciences ([Brockmeier, 2012](#); [Frank, 2010](#)), narrative inquiry can be described as a psycho-social approach distinguished from other qualitative approaches (e.g., ethnography or phenomenology) by its focus on stories ([Smith & Sparkes, 2009a, 2009b](#)). While more will be said about the specifics of this methodology in the next section, it can be noted that the basic tenet of narrative inquiry is that people are regarded as storytelling creatures. Elicitation and analysis of stories are traditionally the focus in narrative inquiry

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