Utilising Sporting Autobiographies for Feminist Research:

The Case of Cyclist Nicole Cooke

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Sparkes and Stewart (2015:2) note the 'enthusiasm that has greeted the study of autobiographies' in a variety of disciplines (e.g. literary theory, history, anthropology, sociology) and cross-disciplinary fields (e.g. cultural studies, women's' studies). Not so in sport. On the contrary, scholars have signalled their relative neglect despite potential to offer a rich source of data (Stewart, Sparkes & Smith 2011; Thing & Ronglan 2015). Offering an explanation for this current state of affairs, Sparkes and Stewart (2015) draw attention to negative views and misplaced assumptions that convey surmountable problems for the acceptance of sporting autobiographies as a serious resource for researchers in sport. For example, often lumped together under the heading of 'celebrity autobiographies', sports autobiographies are charged with being commercially driven for profit, formulaic or predictable in nature (often 'ghost-written'), uninteresting and limited in expressive form, superficial in content, banal and cliché ridden. This said, concerning their use for research purposes there is a cultural suspicion around their 'unmediated authenticity' (Smith & Watson 2010) or truth which may position them as rather dubious source material (Taylor 2008). However, presenting a more positive view, autobiographies of athletes could be viewed, and are widely consumed as, a cultural phenomenon in their own right (Sparkes and Stewart 2015; Young 2001). Sparkes and Stewart (2015:7) propose that many are 'well-written, include complex plotlines, and provide illuminating insights into the lives of athletes' over time with the more memorable ones perhaps drawing our attention to the experiences of those which intervene in wider contemporary discussions.

There is however a small but growing body of work which does give analytical attention to sports autobiographies (Overman 2003, 2008; Palmer 2015; Sparkes, Pérez-Samaniego and Smith 2012; Pipkin 2008; Sparkes 2004; Stewart *et al*. 2011). Yet, this research comprises predominantly of autobiographies written by male athletes revealing an 'inattention to women's voices' (Heinecken 2015:2). As a consequence there is a distinct lack of feminist analytical attention given to sports autobiographies. This is something of a peculiar situation where autobiography has long been a topic for feminist theorists and women's life writing in general (e.g. see Smith and Watson 1998) and there has been significant feminist interest in the experiences and lives as told by sportswomen (e.g. see Markula 2005). It is against this backdrop that this chapter seeks to make two contributions. Firstly, it advocates the use of autobiographies as a valuable resource for the purposes of feminist scholarship in sport. Secondly, via an illustrative case study of cyclist Nicole Cooke's 2014 autobiography, *The Breakaway*, it seeks to show one way in which autobiographies allow for a nuanced analysis of contemporary feminist positions, and can be used to bring discussions of feminist theory to the fore.

Autobiographies as a resource for feminist scholarship

Taylor (2008) takes the view that sports autobiographies ought to be viewed as cultural texts beyond facts and verifiable information, and instead read as an interpretation. Such a view is certainly harmonious with the scholarly use of autobiographies in the aforementioned disciplines and fields of study, where works illuminate the complexities of how identity is shaped when we write about who we think we are. Smith and Watson (2010:214) refer to 'performativity' to define autobiographical occasions as 'dynamic sites for the performance of identities that become constitutive of subjectivity'. Similarly, for Eakin (2008:*x*) life stories are 'not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us'. However, from this viewpoint, identities are never final and are enacted through the

available cultural narratives (norms) and discourses in which they are expressed, that is, we cannot make up these on our own (Eakin 1999, 2008; Frank 2010; Smith & Watson 2010). Eakin's (1999:4) approach is in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, '*asking what such texts can teach us about the way in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being "I"*—and in some instructive cases that prove the rule, their sense of not being an "I"'. Such an approach, he argues, requires we 'accept the gambit of autobiography's referential aesthetic' (Eakin 1999:4), leaving open the possibility that they may not be telling the truth. Supporting this, Sparkes and Stewart (2015) state that once this 'problem' of unmediated authenticity and autobiographical 'truth' is rethought—objective truth is an ideal that no qualitative data can truly claim—sporting autobiographies shift from being a problem to a possible resource for scholarly analysis to good effect depending on their interests and purposes.

Autobiographies lend themselves to feminist analysis at the outset because they deliberately offer the first person view, something that all feminist epistemologies take as a starting point (Griffiths 1994). Following this, Smith and Watson (2010:214) refer to subject position or 'positionality' to describe 'how speaking subjects take up, inhabit, and speak through certain discourses of identity that are culturally salient and available to them at a particular historical moment.' Therefore women's autobiographies are important to examine because they draw from discourses and discursive regimes about what a woman is and should be; that is, women as subjects are produced by ideologies of gender (Gilmore 1994). Further, regulatory discourses of identity are related to material bodies in complex ways. Judith Butler's assertion that gender is performative informs much contemporary discussion of life narrative (See Butler 1993) and for Smith (1993 cited in Smith & Watson 2010) autobiographical subjectivity is enacted in cultural spaces between the personal "I" and the body politic. Echoing this Smith and Watson's (2010) toolkit for reading autobiography

poses some useful questions that bring the body and embodiment, experience and identity into focus, including when, where and how does the body become visible? How does the narrator negotiate fictions of identity and resistances to the constraints of a given identity in presenting her – or himself as a gendered or a racialized, or ethnic subject?

As well as constructing their own identities and selves, sports autobiographers play an important role in providing a narrative map or blueprint for the life stories of others negotiating the sporting landscape (Pollner and Stein 1996; Stewart *et al*. 2011). This said for Frank (2010), stories teach people who they are, advocating that people not only think *about* stories, they think *with* stories. He advises that stories are powerful, interpellating listeners to recognize themselves in particular characters, and to act on particular identities as part of a reflexive awareness of who the type of narrative requires him or her to be, and to do. This is important because a coherent and meaningful narrative account of personal experience may become the sole authority to provide romantic but limited options for being (Frank 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Sparkes *et al*. 2012). Importantly, however, Frank (2010) notes that whilst powerful, people can and do refuse intrepellations into particular characters, often through stories in the form of memoirs. In the context of examining the autobiographies of female athletes we are able explore the nuanced ways they respond to, negotiate, challenge and refuse cultural constructions of female athletic identity while simultaneously instructing or providing a map for readers about the significance of sports for all women (Heinecken 2015).

Sporting autobiographies of female athletes: A postfeminist context

The most extensive examination of sports autobiographies by female athletes to date provides an important context for the case study to follow. Heinecken (2015) analyses 30 post 1992 ‘jockographies’ by U.S. female athletes exploring their construction of athletic

identity and sports practice. She notes that female 'jockographies' are notable 'for the ways they seek to appeal to a wide audience by mediating feminist concerns around the social status of women as well as conservative fears around women's intrusion into the male preserve of sport' (Heinecken 2015:3), thus articulating a postfeminist sensibility.

Postfeminism used here[i] is defined as a kind of 'popular feminism' that characterizes contemporary culture where aspects of second-wave feminism are taken for granted (Gill 2007). Importantly, as McDonald (2000) states, postfeminism is not merely antifeminist, rather than combating inequities instead women are reassured that feminism is no longer necessary as women can 'have it all'. In essence women can be both sexy and powerful. In her influential work, Angela McRobbie (2004, 2009) echoes this, arguing that what is distinctive about postfeminist culture is a selectively defined feminism which facilitates a "double entanglement" of the doing and undoing of feminism, young women are offered particular freedoms and choice 'in exchange for' or 'at the expense of' feminist politics and transformation (McRobbie 2004:255). This said for McRobbie (2009) rather than a theoretical orientation, postfeminism is an object of critical analysis in itself. Heinecken's (2015) work on female sporting autobiographies echoes this position, and found that despite variance in background most[ii] female jockographies promote notions of female strength and resistance to gendered limitations, reinforcing the female athlete as liberated and upwardly mobile yet embodying a normative heterosexual femininity. In accordance with Gill (2007) femininity in postfeminist sensibility is increasingly figured as a bodily property. For example, she notes these themes include a shift from objectification to subjectification, a 'resexualisation' of women's bodies and the dominance of a 'makeover' paradigm. Further still, in recent years it has been well noted that postfeminist discourses have been linked to an increase in the visibility of female athletes in sporting media generally, and in turn these discourses have become increasingly prominent in a variety of contemporary culture

representations of women's sports, including advertising and film (Heywood 2007; Hill 2015; Lindner 2013). It would seem the current cultural context for producing an autobiography is decidedly postfeminist.

In contrast, second wave liberal feminism is often defined against, or used to juxtapose the characteristics of postfeminism (Hargreaves 2004; McDonald 2000; McRobbie 2004, 2009). Whilst well-rehearsed (see Birrell 2000; Hargreaves 1994, 2004), in brief liberal feminism, based upon a humanist ontological position that men and women are more alike than different in sport, is concerned with equality in terms of women having the same opportunities and resources as men. From this perspective artificially constructed barriers restrict equal participation and so the solution then is to remove the barriers. Hargreaves (2004:188) explains, this approach 'using gender as a distributive category, is based on liberal-democratic ideologies and is linked to equal rights and policy making through government initiatives and the work of sports organisations'. Crucially, in contrast to a non-politicized postfeminist discourse, liberal feminists pursue a politicized agenda and advocate equal access, opportunity, rewards structures, pay, worth and rights for women (Birrell 2000).

The case of cyclist Nicole Cooke's *The Breakaway*

If asked, who was the first British cyclist to win the Tour de France? The answer would be, not Bradley Wiggins[iii]. Welsh cyclist Nicole Cooke MBE[iv] won the Tour de France six years before Bradley Wiggins, and twice over, in 2006 and 2007. She is undoubtedly one of Great Britain's highest achieving athletes with a long list of accolades to include being Olympic, Commonwealth and World champion, and the first British road rider to have been ranked number 1 in the world. In 2013 she retired from cycling and published her autobiography *The Breakaway*[v] the following year. *The Breakaway* documents her life in

cycling and examines cycling culture and gender relations.[vi] A critical acclamation inside the book gives a sense of its main purpose:

> But what truly sets this book apart from other sporting biographies is seeing from behind the scenes, the sharp differences that exist in sport in the treatment of men and women and a very different perspective on the highly successful British Cycling World Class Performance Plan that has produced so many Olympic champions over recent years. The contents will unsettle the most partisan of male cycling fans (Elliot in Cooke 2014)

It has been praised in the media for its outspoken and upfront behind the scenes look at cycling (Williams, 2014). Cooke's autobiography, I argue, presents a stand-out counter narrative to postfeminist sensibility found elsewhere in contemporary sporting culture, where confronting inequality for Cooke *is* the story and represents a return to liberal, second wave forms of feminism that postfeminism is charged with overlooking (Hargreaves 1994, 2004).

The doing of feminism: A liberal feminist position

Whilst not overtly claiming authority as a feminist, Cooke adopts the intellectual and political position akin to second wave liberal feminism. I suggest that she achieves this in three ways. Firstly, she highlights encounters of inequality at every opportunity, drawing attention to how she negotiates everyday gender hierarchies making the personal political. Secondly she marks a series of active feminisms whereby she is an advocate for gender justice and makes considerable efforts to disrupt and challenge male hegemony through institutional change. Lastly, she maintains a focus on gender inequalities and feminist activism and does not represent an image conscious, sexualised postfeminist body politic.

Unmasking inequality in cycling

Cooke's story catalogues a series of incidents which show cycling culture to maintain control and power over women as governed by male organisations. Importantly, whilst there is a narrative of change in terms of funding, support and the professionalism of British cycling (BC), it consistently benefits men at the expense of women, even late into Cooke's career. In 2008 having become the first person to achieve World and Olympic titles in the same year, Cooke explains, 'From where I was at that moment in time, it was obvious that British cycling was organised by men for men' (Cooke 2104:376). She alludes to a hierarchy that privileges gender above success, where male cyclists are more important than female cyclists who are often achieving more, giving them privileged access to resources, funding and opportunities. An early experience of the inequity to follow occurs during her time as a junior cyclist in the 1990's. National Lottery funding is systematically not accessible despite her credible run of results:

> Shane advised the funding gatekeepers that I didn't have any results to justify a grant. It seemed an astonishing thing to say, given that by this time I had won Welsh and British Championships across several disciplines available and a whole host of ESCA[vii] titles, in addition to racing well in Holland. My application was rejected because I hadn't won a BCF[viii] track or road championship, even though the BCF provided no such titles for girls. How could I get results if the competitions didn't exist? The Welsh boys had won some of these and so were eligible. They received the support, but I got nothing (…) so we tried to get some BCF track and road championships for girls, but were told by the BCF there was 'no demand, not enough interest. [..] And so it went on. (Cooke 2014: 39)

There is structural subordination of girls and women. Limited access and funding meant that 'road races for girls in the UK were in short supply' (Cooke 2014:43). Cooke further explains that a change in UK Sport funding directives 'was to have a fundamental impact on the rest

of my career' (Cooke 2014:52) making British Cycling (BC) the singular centralised organising body.[ix] BC formed the World Class Performance Plan (WCPP) that would focus on track cycling medals which Cooke attributes to a more compounding underlying gender issue 'reflecting the sport's imbalance of events, supporting the men far more than the women (Cooke 2014:52). Essentially, BC controlled equipment, access to facilities and coaching, and salaries to allow 'plan' riders to become full-time cyclists. Crucially she could only compete for Great Britain if she was selected by BC. Cooke's story unfolds around a narrative that sees her not having access to 'the plan' as a junior, and developing as an individual outside of the BC 'system', her results exposing it as failing. For Cooke, this ongoing struggle is clearly linked to a gender issue. She, refers to 'a different and bigger threat' (Cooke 2104: 87) acknowledging deeper more serious structures of patriarchal power between herself and the men of BC which include episodes of rule bending and inconsistency (see 70-71), deliberate attempts to block (see 45-46), sabotage (see 84-87) and stop her outstanding performances (see 78-80) through underhand tactics.

There are limitations in access to support staff for female cyclists. Cooke explains 'the most able would be directed to the most attractive roles, working with the senior men. At the bottom of this priority list, in this male-dominated sport, was the support for junior women' (Cooke 2014:58). Female cyclists are taught they are not as important as their male counter parts from a young age. For example Cooke recalls the special treatment junior boys received at a World Championship race, the chef cooking their breakfast at a time to order whilst the girls received no such service Further, the male dominated make-up of BC is clear. Only one female is mentioned in an official position, Canadian coach, Peg Hill. This is welcomed with enthusiasm by Cooke, but it is short lived and she recalls how she is soon replaced by 'a novice male coach, with no experience of riding on the continent, no experience as a

professional and no experience of the female scene or coaching female riders' (Cooke 2014:138). She later alludes to unfair dismissal and treatment based upon gender.

Lastly, the marginalization of women in cycling and struggles around sponsorship and media representation remain a barrier to the development and viability of women's cycling. There is disparity in wages and sponsorship:

> (…) all the talk was of the massive Sky sponsorship that was coming into the sport and plans for what they were going to do with the money. I didn't need a crystal ball back in 2008 to predict that, by the time of writing six years later, while millions have been poured into a system to convert the male non-finishers at Beijjing and Varese into world beaters, virtually nothing has come the way of the female road riders (Cooke 2104:377).

Cooke is aware of her media profile being controlled, and at times exploited, by cycling journalists, British cycling and the BBC. She cites their 'sexism in reporting' (Cooke 2104: 240). In contrast to postfeminist discourse where media and marketing celebrates female sports and sports stars for providing role models in a quest for sporting and social equality (McDonald, 2000), Cooke brings media coverage under scrutiny where women in cycling are underrepresented and trivialised in comparison to men. In one media event Cooke describes press coverage as 'laughable', 'David got blanket coverage, while just eight words in a part sentence were left for me' (Cooke, 2104:231). Attending the BBC sports personality of the year and Cooke recalls the significant amount of time given to Lance Armstrong and David Millar (later to be revealed as drugs cheats):

> 'To rub salt in the wound, for the ten seconds they decided to speak about my performances for the year, which included being the youngest-ever and first British winner of the season- long World Cup – in fact no home-developed rider, male or

> female, had ever won a single round – they showed a picture not of me, but of Jeannie Longo, the rather generous clue being the word 'FRANCE' on the side of the kit. (Cooke 2014:221)

Exploitation is also acknowledged in branding and a display of a capitalist culture that supports men's cycling; 'despite the fact I would ride in a jersey emblazoned with the Sky, I would receive nothing for this. Sky were also now sponsoring a men's road team and all the riders received a salary' (Cooke 2014:390). Further still, was the damage that doping in men's cycling[x] was doing to women's cycling where Cooke advocates that 'the ongoing doping scandals of the men's scene were bringing women's cycling close to collapse' (Cooke 2014:390).

Challenging gender inequality and active feminisms

Liberal feminism is marked by a struggle 'to get more of what men have already had' (Hargreaves 1994:26) and involves activism. Cooke makes clear efforts to equalize opportunities, resources and funding for competing on equal terms with men through institutional change. For example, in response to absence of BCF events for girls Cooke, aged 14, and her Father write to the BCF who continued to block her pathway. Having won an event in conditions not designed for her to win, she writes, 'the BCF may have been embarrassed at that moment, but they literally rolled the red carpet out at the first-ever set of British Youth Track championships for girls the following year, in 1998' (Cooke 2104:41). In many more examples Cooke illustrates implementing governance reforms. Following 'the bungling, petty, political and indiscreet nature of the incompetence of so many' (Cooke 2014:52) men during her first time away with GB, positioning herself as 'a victim of their incompetence' (Cooke 2014:94), she writes a 29 page document to BC with recommendations. Cooke reports that changes are achieved with the CEO assuring her that

‘lessons had been learned and things would change. And they did’ (Cooke 2014:99). Following this the BC WCPP hired an experienced female coach and some other excellent people to work with the women’s squad (albeit short lived). Cooke also takes issue with the ‘system’-athlete relationship more generally, recognising the gendered power dynamics at play. She refuses to sign an unreasonable Great Britain (GB) team agreement, excluding herself from the WCPP system its resources and opportunities (including GB representation). Active challenges put forth by Cooke and her Father included achieving legal reforms to remove BC (and governing bodies from other sports) from the position of gatekeepers responsible for distributing Lottery funds to athletes in general ‘changing the whole relationship between the athlete and the governing body of their sport’ (Cooke 2104:137). Crucially echoing aspects of liberal feminist critique, she summarises not only a personal but a political position, attributing power struggles to a pervasive gender issue affective beyond herself:

> ‘Fundamentally, I felt all of this was a collection of insecure men who wanted a sport for men. Peg was the only female coach and undoubtedly she suffered from the same prejudice as Wendy and me. The ridiculous wording of the Team Agreement – that you had to obey every instruction of whoever the WCPP decided might be available to ‘coach’ you – reflected this’ (Cooke 2014:139)

Amidst the successes however, Cooke notes draws attention back to the inequality at the heart of the matter, that ‘in all the posturing and hubris, a golden opportunity has been lost…what could we have achieved had we both been riding together on the same team, working every day, sharing tactics and practising them together in race after race?’’ (Cooke 2014: 219).

Cooke is also active in her condemnation of unequal media coverage women's sport in general suffered from. In an attempt to challenge the hegemony in the gendered media system, she documents meeting with the BBC sports department to discuss how they might follow the road scene, though 'the result was a polite refusal' (Cooke 2014: 380). Similarly, she tried to work with various specialists in sports marketing and sponsorship, 'to be told time and time again of the corrosive effect [of the drugs scandal on the men's scene] on potential sponsors not familiar with cycling' (Cooke 2014:382).

Finally, the autobiography in and of itself is a form of activism, a political instrument that breaks the culture of silence in relation to gender inequality and cycling. The feminist narrative enacts an alternative subjectivity to claim the possibility of a female body as distinct from representations of women in sport as passive and compliant. There is power inherent in acts of autobiographical inscription beyond the printed life story where the articulation of authorial agency, which relies upon the capacity of action, enables marginal identities experiences and histories to be seen, heard and recognised (Smith and Watson, 2010). Importantly, we ought to take seriously the stakes of producing counter narratives, including personal and professional risks.

Resisting (and revealing) postfeminist tensions

I have sought to illustrate that Cooke's subjectivity does not articulate a postfeminist sensibility. Fears around the intrusion of women into a male sporting preserve are not conservative in line with postfeminism but brought forth into a public story. She does not celebrate female achievement in male spaces but instead her achievements are used to speak out which is, as McRobbie (2009: 57) notes 'what women ought not to do.' Far from maintaining the status quo Cooke is aware of a deviant or 'troublesome' (Cooke 2014:269) characterisation imparted to her, suggestive of a strategic attempt by the system to

disempower or disparage feminism. However, despite what appears to be a relatively organized liberal feminist framework, we might read other feminist positions in her story.

Other subjectivities

Physicality, sexuality and the body as a site for defining gender relations is an important theme in postmodern feminist theory and of a feminist cultural studies agenda (Birrell 2000). Further, as noted at the outset, re-sexualisation of the female body is a key feature of postfeminism (Gill 2007). In terms of Cooke's sexual subjectivity there is no female apologetic or reconciliation of athleticism with heterosexual femininity in Cooke's written narrative. Unlike the postfeminist female subject, she does not represent herself or other women as sexualised subjects up for discussion. This is further illuminated in her representation via photographs. Of 51 photographs in total, including the front and back covers, only 2 are in a non-cycling context. The front cover shows Cooke as an active cyclist, its composition subtle and not similar to postfeminist notions of the strong, sexy head and shoulders power shot[xi]. However, this said one photo *is* a 'make-over' shot[xii], indicating a momentary claiming of postfeminist subjectivity indicative of postfeminist culture. As Weber (2009:128) notes, demonstrating suitable femininity, female bodies 'must look and behave according to the terms of conventional femininity', the makeover 'doesn't create but brings out one's inner woman'. This subject position is fleeting, not claimed elsewhere. Further there is a clear rejection of the postfeminist sporting female:

> On the track, a single female to pose with the men and whose star could not in any way be a threat to their collective machismo, a star whose glow could only enhance the aura around the men, was fine. But if they gave oxygen to me, it only served to bring attention to the woeful performance of the men on the road, and the primacy of

> the road scene over the track was probably not something either British Cycling or the BBC was keen to promote in public (Cooke 2014:376).

Her relative exercising of silence on the sexualised female body *might* be interpreted as a radical practice of postfeminist resistance, rejecting discourse and a particular narrative about herself as a sexualised female body in sport (Keating 2013). In refusing the postfeminist narrative it is worth considering the likely pressures from publishing houses and other interested parties Cooke might have felt[xiii].

In terms of Cooke's 'racial' and class subjectivity, she might, as McRobbie (2004) puts it, be described as a 'subject of capacity' or a 'top girl' in relation to her white, middle-class, educated and supportive family background, enabling her to adopt an active feminist position. For example, describing an 'idyllic' upbringing and having 'wanted for nothing' (Cooke 2104:10), a 'team Cooke' work ethic enables her to challenge the system from a privileged position. She constructs herself as a hard working well educated, intelligent and resourceful character. Liberal feminism as a 'pure' category of feminist theory, is criticized for considering gender as a primary category of oppression that does not consider other categories of 'race', class, disability, nation and religion' (Birrell 2000: 65). This said her subjectivity is congruent with a tendency of white athletes to overlook how 'racial' or class privilege enable success in white-dominated and often expensive sports. Read another way, her subjectivity *might* show partial accordance with postfeminist ideals of an individual upwardly mobile female subject, albeit one who *is* encumbered by social barriers.

Individualism vs cooperation

Within the social ideology of individualism, female participation is fragmented (Thorpe 2005). Cooke attempts to reject individualism and re-establish co-operative elements of team cycling on numerous occasions. Importantly, road cycling *is* a team sport and she

would often have little team support based upon structural inequalities. One outstanding example is at the 2006 Commonwealth Games where as defending Commonwealth Champion and World No. 1 Cooke explains how 'the Welsh Cycling Union decided it was in my best interests to face a full team of six Aussies alone' (Cooke 2014:77) and 'gifted Australia, Canada, England and New Zealand my head on a plate' (Cooke 2014:273). Referring to a decision *not* to fund supporting riders Cooke recalls, 'British women's cycling has just lost another three talented riders to add to the many others over the year. What a terrible and avoidable waste of time, effort ambition and talent!' (Cooke 2014:273). She continues, 'What had they decided to do for the men? That had a full quota of six riders. Why did I waste my breath asking?' (Cooke 2014:272).

However, individualism in a postfeminist neo-liberal sense is, for Harris (2004), the 'can-do girl' where good choices, effort and ambition alone are all it takes to succeed. For McRobbie (2004), young women are offered particular freedoms and choice *in exchange for* or *at the expense of* feminist politics and transformation. Cooke's subjectivity oscillates between rejecting individualism imposed upon her through structural gender inequality (destruction of a team development approach to women's cycling) and the claiming of it (challenging the system) to advance feminist politics. In the following example, she does not claim to seek individual glory and financial gain but maintains a clear position on single-handedly developing women's cycling more widely:

> The most obvious thing to do would have been to use my status as World and Olympic Champion to negotiate for the best year's pay of my life and join an established team…my dream was to create a team that would act as a development opportunity for young female British riders. I wanted others to have an easier route than I have. So much talent has been lost, ground down by the attitudes of British Cycling. I knew I would only ever have this chance once to do something this big in

> my life, and I wanted to take it, regardless of the men in the sport around me, and regardless of the risk to me (Cooke 2014:378).

She simultaneously adopts individualism defined against the behaviours of women who appear to passively accept and support male hegemony, whilst employing feminist politics to account for their struggle:

> Undoubtedly, the girls were riding to the instructions of the coaches, who were unsuited to their roles. They were the problem; massive egos without the ability to match and be supported by a Team Agreement that gave them absolute power. The girls should have had the sense to stand up to them, but perhaps they just weren't as 'difficult' as me to work with (Cooke 2014:117)

Read another way, this kind of 'socially responsible rhetoric' is consistent with the ways that female athletes are expected to uphold not only the standards of ethical behaviour but fortifies notions of women as 'inherently giving, cooperative and altruistic' (McDonald 2000:43). Values promoted by Cooke are often self-sacrificing and other-directed. On this, Heinecken (2015:4) writes, 'while this perspective may seem better than more individualistic sports models, it is a rhetorical strategy designed to render female [athletes] gender-acceptable'.

Concluding comments and future directions

This chapter endeavours to shine a light on sporting autobiographies as a useful resource for the purpose of feminist analysis, highlighting some of the nuanced feminist positions Nicole Cooke constructs in telling her experience of being a woman in elite cycling. Explicitly, Cooke claims the position of liberal feminist and active agent in bringing this agenda to the fore amidst a dominant postfeminist cultural context found in the autobiographies of female athletes elsewhere (Heinecken 2015). More implicitly, she rejects

the ‘sexy and powerful’ postfeminist subjectivity and body politic, resisting dominant identity discourses available to her. Drawing further upon this case study, attention is turned briefly to some ways we can think with this method for a feminist agenda and research in the future.

Published autobiographies are distinguishable as a specific form in a full range of storytelling options available to us in making decisions about research. They are, as Eakin (2008:*x*) suggests ‘only the most visible, tangible evidence of the construction of identity’ as performed when talking about lives in the world. Unlike narrative data obtained from interviews, authors have more time to compose, edit and polish lives offering a more complete, neat and persuasive life story. Frank’s (2010) socio-narratology approach to storytelling is useful to think about what an autobiography might *do* as a social actor, working for and on people. According to Frank (2010:28) ‘stories have the capacity to deal with human troubles, but also the capacity to make TROUBLE for humans’. *The Breakaway* presents ‘double Trouble’. There is Trouble[xiv] *in* the story: the gender trouble in which Cooke experiences inequity in elite cycling throughout her entire career. But also the story *cause’s* trouble, both for men in cycling and sport more widely, and for Cooke living with the outcomes or consequences of having chosen to tell it. This said a story which has gender trouble at its core aligns well with a feminist agenda. In this case, liberal feminism is put forth as a model for dealing with the trouble. Scholars have noted the potential of liberalism to impact women, utilize personal empowerment and to bring about more radical changes in the organization, practices and value systems of sport (Thorpe 2005). Importantly, the effect of telling the story may be to interpellate those who hear it to take Cooke as a model for how to be a woman negotiating sport. It may provide a narrative map, shaping their experiences and encouraging them to engage with a political agenda. This is particularly important where scholars remain concerned about the cultural space of postfeminism and postfeminist ideas of success (Brown, 1997; Brunsdon, 1997; McRobbie, 1999, 2004). If, as may be, Cooke is

rejected as a model for identity then at least engagement with Cooke's autobiography could encourage lively debate about feminism.

Further, we might ask what the consequences are for sportswomen who chose to tell a troublesome story of sport. It is feasible to assume that post sports career opportunities are likely to be based upon a story and public identity (or character) which plays by the rules (Eakin 1999) and doesn't make Trouble (Frank, 2010), appealing to dominant culture. The work Cooke's story does in her own life and the impact upon her personal and professional career following cycling ought to be considered. Though Cooke does not expose this uneasiness in her story, alienation from fractions of the cycling world and wider sporting community are a real possibility where identity is relational and the ethics of writing about others in self-narratives are well-rehearsed (Eakin, 1999).

Accordingly, future directions for the use of sports autobiographies in feminist research might include the following. Firstly by virtue of their distinguishable form (Eakin, 2008) they can be used in an additive or complementary way to existing bodies of feminist research on various phenomena, illuminating or shedding further light on various issues or personal experiences in a variety of sports. They can add a further dimension to our theoretical understandings, allowing us to layer sources of narrative data in the reading of different feminist positions. In their complexity, autobiographies can also provide insights into significant relationships that enhance or supress athletes' experiences and identities in the context of their lives. Sparkes and Stewart (2015) advocate that various forms of narrative analysis are a fruitful way to advance when researching autobiographies. Thematic and structural analyses are particularly useful to these ends; the former focusing on content or the 'whats' at the exclusion of the latter, where structure or 'how' something is said is the focus (see Smith and Sparkes 2009). Given that autobiographies are widely available and easily

accessible we look more widely across intersectional categories of subject positions and other cultures with relative ease (language accessibility permitting).

Finally, the cultural phenomena of sports autobiographies in and of themselves, and the sheer disparity in the numbers of female versus male autobiographies that are produced and published requires attention (Stewart 2011), as well as closer scrutiny of publishing house demands and processes of ghost writing to account for these differences. Which female athletes are able to publish their lives, in which sports or for what achievements and under what conditions? We can look at the interconnections across these institutions more closely and examine them as gendered. Utilising Frank's (2010) dialogical analysis, where the performance of the story for the teller and listener is the focus, we can move beyond hinting at the power of sports autobiographies to exploring the impact they have in shaping the experiences of individuals who consume them (see Sparkes 2012). Given the relatively few female sports autobiographies available this may be especially insightful. In closing, whilst narrative inquiry in sport and its potential for feminist research is not new, the use of sporting autobiographies as a distinct form of narrative data is. This chapter hopes to have placed sporting autobiographies on the agenda to become one of the possibilities from which feminist researchers make their choices.

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[i] Gill and Scharf (2011) note that post-feminism as a key term in feminist cultural critique in recent years has a taken-for-granted status, and is a term used with a distinct lack of specificity indicating a wide range of meanings. They outline four broad ways to think about its use: 1) To signal an analytical perspective; an epistemological break within academic feminism 2) A historical shift after the height of second wave feminism, a set of assumptions often widely disseminated within popular media forms 3) To refer to a backlash against feminism 4) As a sensibility characterizing large parts of contemporary culture.

[ii] With the exception of two notable examples in the tennis player Serena Williams' (Williams and Paisner 2009) and soccer player, Hope Solo (Solo and Killion 2012).

[iii] Bradley Wiggins CBE is a British male cyclist often credited with the accolade of being the first British rider to win the Tour de France

[iv] In 2009 Nicole Cooke was appointed Member of the order of the British Empire (MBE) for services to cycling (Cooke 2014)

[v] *The Breakaway* is a cycling term used to refer to a successful and well executed attack to create a gap from the main peloton of riders, and metaphorically here from an unfair and unequal gendered 'system' in cycling culture.

[vi] Cooke also notably examines doping culture in cycling and reports systematic challenges and development, but this is secondary to and often intertwined with an examination of gender throughout. There is a chapter, *Exposing the Drugs Cheats*, towards the end of the book which deals largely with this topic in one place.

[vii] English Schools Cycling Association (ESCA)

[viii] British Cycling Federation (BCF)

[ix] Senior competitive cycling in the UK at this time was run by three separate governing bodies. For junior categories, there were four (See Cooke 2015:51)

[x] Doping on the women's scene is also reported and condemned by Cooke, however this is less prevalent.

[xi] We might contrast this to front covers that feature front facing head shots of female athletes staring into the camera, e.g. see Victoria Pendleton's 2012 autobiography *Between the Lines* with Donald McRae or Lizzie Armistead's forthcoming 2016 autobiography *Steadfast*.

[xii] Cooke is pictured lying on her side with head in hand, in a vest top with her Olympic gold medal. The caption reads 'a shot of me not actually riding a bike!'.

[xiii] *The Breakaway* is one of the few sporting autobiographies that is not ghost authored. Cooke actively resisted a ghost author based upon interpellation into a character she did not recognise (personal communication)

[xiv] Frank draws upon the works of Aristotle, Bruner and Burke who write Trouble with a capital *T*. See Frank (2010:28).