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Olympians' Attitudes towards Olympic Values: A 'Sporting' Life history Approach

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Abstract

The literature on the Olympics has grown exponentially in the last twenty years. What has not received much, if any, attention, however, are the athletes themselves. Given that Olympians are essential to the existence of the Games and that Governments worldwide increasingly seek international prestige through the funding of elite sport policy, the lack of research in this regard is, therefore, surprising. The current paper seeks in part to redress this imbalance. It does so by focusing on Olympians' attitudes to Olympic values – given that Olympic values are central to the Olympic movement - gathered through a wider project on the 'sporting' life history of 57 British athletes. The study's findings are paradoxical and appear to be at odds with the Olympic values set out in the Olympic Charter. In particular, the study finds British athletes' attitudes towards Olympic values tend to shift dramatically between the period in which they compete and their post-athletic careers.

Key words: Olympism; Olympic values; Olympics; sporting life history

1. Introduction

The literature on and around the Olympic Games has produced a cottage industry in its own right. Yet, we know very little about what Olympians think, how they view the Olympics or their attitudes towards Olympism and the Olympic values that underpin it. Given the interest in the Olympics by the public and governments worldwide, this is perhaps counter-intuitive. There is a burgeoning literature on the use of the Olympics as a political platform for show-casing host nations, as targets for political protest and on the doping of the athletes taking part¹. There is no shortage of literature on both the ancient and modern Olympics, the most high-profile sports event there is². Articles abound on the use of the Olympics as part of a ‘politics of attraction’, as a form of foreign and/or public diplomacy, or an attempt to enhance previously poor international images of host states³. However, despite this avalanche of material on and around major sports events, the literature is largely bereft of studies that focus on the key actors in the Olympics, the *Olympians* themselves, without whom there would be no event. The wider study, of which this paper is part, sets out to offer an understanding of the complex sporting life journeys of Olympians through a ‘bottom-up’ view of the road to the Olympics through athletes’ stories via *narrative* informed research. This paper illustrates how ‘sporting’ life history can be used by sports studies scholars who seek to elicit athletes’ understanding of their sporting journeys.

The focus of this paper, however, is on Olympians’ attitudes towards Olympic values, which are at the very heart of Olympism and the Olympic movement. The Olympic values are inextricably bound up with both the Ancient Games, the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, and live on through the International Olympic Committee (IOC), effectively the governing body of the Olympic Games, and within the Olympic Charter. The IOC define ‘Olympism’ as a:

.....philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles⁴.

De Coubertin hoped the spread of Olympic values – nowadays summarized as ‘Friendship, Respect and Excellence’ – would lead to a better world. The Olympics would serve as a meeting place of the ‘youth of the world’ while Olympism would encourage ‘the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity’.

The French Baron is also attributed with the well-known saying: ‘The important thing in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well’⁵, thereby exalting the virtues of physical activity and participation. Such lofty ideals are admirable and the Olympic Charter contains a number of similar sentiments around the power of sport for social change. Rule no. 40 in the Olympic Charter states unequivocally that in order to participate in the Games, athletes must comply with the Olympic Charter:

To participate in the Olympic Games, a competitor, team official or other team personnel must respect and comply with the Olympic Charter and World Anti-Doping Code, including the conditions of participation established by the IOC...⁶

The current paper picks up the apparent paradox between the propitious and heartening prose of the Olympic Charter, first published in 1908, and the actual reality of Olympians’ attitudes towards the Olympic values. There is, as outlined in the empirical section below, not only a contradiction

in how athletes view the Olympic values *at the time of competing at the Olympics*, but a change of attitude among many once they transition into their post-athletic careers.

The paper unfolds as follows. First, this study is contextualized within the literature on life history and (elite) sport; following this, the ‘sporting’ life history approach is discussed and the study’s methodology. The next section offers an empirical insight into one of the key themes from the wider Olympian study: Olympians’ attitudes towards Olympic values. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key findings and on the pros and cons of ‘sporting’ life history for sports scholars and students.

2. Life history

It is fair to say that there is a lack of academic consensus on what life history research constitutes. This is due in no small part to it being practiced by a wide range of disciplines in the human sciences. Squire rightly suggest that ‘narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points’, echoing Smith’s statement that ‘narrative analysis lacks a prescribed, step-by-step, linear procedure...’. Equally, no consensus exists on the length life history interviews ought to be⁷. Many such studies are made up of two or three interviews and re-interviews; others, like Katia Rubio’s work encompasses hundreds of interviews, ranging in length from one to seven hours⁸. There is a natural tendency to assume that ‘longer is better’, but the experience of this study shows that it depends very much on the interviewee and the rapport between them and the interviewer. Intense, passionate and compelling narratives of just a few hours length can yield rich results too. Another reason for a lack of consensus of what life history research is can be put down to the number of nuanced epistemological positions between and across academic disciplines adopted by researchers. While Kim suggests that narrative inquirers ought to ‘use multiple epistemologies or multiple forms of representations, and become a bricoleur’, there is a need to take care to ensure all components of the research process are at least logically coherent⁹.

Given this lack of general consensus on what a life history approach is, how to conduct it, which precise procedures to use, the participant(s) to focus on and how the resulting data ought to be analysed, it is pertinent to start with some generic features of this approach that most commentators do agree upon. First, the vast majority of scholars using this method do so from a post-positivist perspective, that is, all research that does not belong to the broad research paradigm of positivism¹⁰. Further, life history scholars tend to seek to understand and interpret the broader context in which narrative accounts occur, thus moving beyond ‘life story’ research¹¹. Life history accounts are thought to provide ‘...rich sources because, attentively interpreted, they illuminate both the logic of individual courses of action and the effects of system-level constraints within which those courses evolve’¹². It is the interplay between individual agency and contextual environment that is of interest to the wider Olympian life history project. In particular, the individual (‘Olympian’ in this case) is seen as a ‘window’ into understanding wider social contexts. Indeed, this is how Cole and Knowles characterise ‘life history’:

We think of life history research as taking narrative one step further; that is, life history research goes beyond the individual or the personal and places narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader context. Lives are lived within the influence of contexts as far ranging as cultural, political, familial, educational, and religious spheres just to mention a few¹³.

However, while commentators suggest that the focus on *context* is what differentiates life history research from a ‘life story’ - which is usually a written or oral account of a life told by an individual

– there is a case to be made that both forms of interview can overlap. In seeking to elicit personal, individual experiences and stories from Olympians, such ‘narrative interviews’ can be understood as *part* of a life history, especially one specifically interested in the stage of successful sporting journeys¹⁴. In this study’s sporting life histories the researcher began with general questions on childhood, the individual’s first introduction to sport and so on, but then allowed for any stories or vignettes that arise at any time during the interview. Such a process ‘mixes’ part (sporting) life story with an individual’s (sporting) life history. Interviewees also constantly relate to the context of the time and place the story is set in. As Atkinson rightly suggests ‘Telling our story enables us to be heard....Story makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear’¹⁵.

Life History and Sport

While a good deal of ‘narrative’ research exists on disability and sport, mental health and sport and illness and injury and sport, work on life history and elite athletes remains more limited¹⁶. The market is flooded with useful biographies of individual athletes or their reflections on specific events that can be commercially driven, written by or with a ‘ghost writer’¹⁷. In general, the academic life history work that exists is with elite athletes and tends to be sport-specific, for example, wrestling, track and field or golfers¹⁸. It also tends to be thematic, that is, it looks at the transition from athlete to post-athlete, studying the relationship between sporting performance and educational development or the impact of sports injuries¹⁹.

Very little narrative or life history work exists on the specific cohort of Olympians. Katia Rubio from Brazil has collated the largest dataset of Olympian biographies (n=1300) and has produced a number of works in English²⁰. Work by Phillips relates the stories of some 50 Australian Olympic gold medallists²¹. Utilising a life history approach, the author focuses on the often untold story of the life of the athlete post-Olympics. Cho’s work looks at the transition of South Korean judo Olympic medallists to a post-athletic career and highlights the very important point of how Olympic glory often comes at the price of a lack of formal education²². The latter appears irrelevant while the athlete is at the top of their game; once they no longer compete, however, their career chances are often greatly limited. Burton and colleagues study the talent development of US female Olympic athletes – they do so without explicitly stating that their study uses the life history approach, but their technique is very close to it. They state, for example, that ‘During the interview each participant was encouraged to speak at length on issues they found to be integral to their experiences in sports, and to include *stories* about these experiences’ (p. 128), which sits very well with the ethos of both life history and life story research²³.

In the USA, the Stark Centre, an IOC recognised Olympic Studies Centre based at the University of Texas, launched an oral history project of the 1968 US Olympic team, conducting interviews to contribute to a permanent archive. One of the aims of the project was to give ‘voice’ to the athletes who took part in this era defining Games. To date over 100 life histories have been recorded and are publically available. While this is a narrative study of the 1968 team, it is less a ‘life’ history per se, but more an oral record of those who competed in Mexico. The interviewer’s first question, for example, jumps straight to sport, asking ‘well, (athlete), how did you get into athletics?’ This approach clearly misses out on the contextual nature of the participant’s upbringing, their parents’ occupation, a sense of their childhood and so on; information that provides the deeper context of athletes’ sporting journeys²⁴.

Part of the legacy of the 1984 Games in Los Angeles was the setting up of the LA84 Foundation²⁵ through an endowment with surplus funds from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Part of the foundation's mission is an oral history project that, together with the Southern Californian Olympian group, includes the interviews of over 60 Olympians from the 1924 to 1976 Games, with the majority participating in the period 1924 to 1956. There would not appear to be any systematic attempt to analyse the interviews, but rather they are simply offered up as a record of a bygone era and the narratives and stories within them certainly act as a window into the (athletic) past.

3. Methodology

The study entailed in-depth life history-type interviews with 57 Olympians who have represented Great Britain at the Olympics between 1952 and 2016 (25 athletes in the pre-2000 era and 32 post-2000)¹. The age range of participants was between 23 and 84 at the time of interview ($M = 48$); 28 are female and 29 male and they represents 15 sporting disciplines across 17 Summer Games and 1 Winter Games. The athletes were purposefully sampled to gain an insight into their sporting journeys from their childhood until Olympic participation and beyond. Participants were contacted in person usually via email to determine whether they would like to participate and to arrange a time for the interview at a place of their convenience. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the host institution (Manchester Metropolitan University) and informed consent was obtained from all athletes. The main interviewer was an elite middle-distance runner at junior level, which helped him to be easily accepted and trusted by interviewees.

Interview structure and data analysis

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over the period 2014 to 2019. These interviews were based on a protocol aimed at prompting interviewees into reflecting on their sporting journeys, the key actors involved in this, milestones en route to the Olympics and their post-athletic careers. This interview protocol comprised only open-ended questions, for example, "What was your childhood like?" or "What was your first contact with sport of any kind?"

One particular question regarding Olympic values was asked to all interviewees: "Were you aware of the Olympic values and the importance of them whilst you were training and competing?"

The average length of transcripts was between 10, 000 and 35, 000 words long; the length of interviews ranged from 1 to just over 4 hours; all were taped, professionally transcribed and then sent back to the interviewee to be checked and agreed. Given that few studies and no guiding theories exist on Olympian's sporting journeys, the inductive approach used set out to derive broad, initial themes from the data through thematic analysis with the purpose of identifying interpretations that would assist in leading to a detailed account and understanding of the phenomena under study²⁶. Such a 'data-driven' approach is not guided by any specific pre-existing frames or preconceptions, but rather seeks to uncover 'constellations of meanings present in the dataset'²⁷. A distinction is usually made between 'deductive' analysis which approaches the dataset with a specific theoretical approach in mind and an 'inductive' analysis which seeks to find patterns in the 'raw data'²⁸. In reality, there is no such clear bifurcation and it is impossible for a researcher

¹ The current study's sample was drawn from able bodied Olympians only; a next stage of the project is to compare findings with a sample of Paralympians to tease out similarities and differences between the two cohorts.

to jettison their previous life experiences prior to data analysis to work purely inductively²⁹. What the research team did was attempt to allow specific topics to arise from the data and to begin to code these. Coding was then cross-checked across the research team (of three).

The methodological approach adopted in the current work reflects a variant of a post-positivist position. Whilst maintaining a worldview closely aligned with interpretivism, the researchers posit an epistemological position that resides ‘on the border’ of interpretivism and critical realism (termed ‘hard’ interpretivism) and, as such, seeks to allow room for both actors’ beliefs and structures in explanations of social phenomena³⁰.

The following section now turns to a case study of Olympians’ attitudes towards the Olympic values.

Olympic Values

The Olympic values are at the heart of the Olympic movement, underpinning the philosophy of Olympism and they provide a rationale for the hosting of the Olympic Games, the largest sporting spectacle globally. The literature on Olympism and Olympic values is generally very positive in nature and focusses overwhelmingly on how the latter can be applied to, and used in, education. Indeed, the founder of the modern games, Pierre de Coubertin (1836–1937) was inspired in part due to his belief that competitive sport could be a vehicle for inculcating educational values³¹. De Coubertin termed this *la pedagogie sportive*. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), formed in 1894, adopted Olympic values that are still inherently humanistic to this day, and influenced other international organisations to adopt similar values (e.g. League of Nations). A number of scholars concur with Parry, who states that the Olympic values are reflective of human values, leading to scholars using the phrase “Olympism is Humanism”³².

The IOC is faced with the paradox of upholding such values while the Games themselves become increasing commercialised, as the modern Olympics can be viewed as the most ‘neo-liberalised’ sports event globally³³. A recent example of this tension – and the interlinking of commerce and values - is the IOC President’s suggestion that the sponsorship deal with Airbnb (estimated at \$500 million) ‘...will also develop new opportunities for athletes around the world to develop their own direct revenue streams *through the promotion of physical activity and the Olympic values.*’ (authors’ emphasis).³⁴ The IOC upholds a ‘discourse’ of positive values that views sport as an inherently good force. Such a discourse remains - generally - uncritically accepted because, as Shaw suggests, being critical and protesting against the Olympics is ‘like hating Santa Claus’³⁵. A recently IOC-funded report on Olympic Values, however, saw academics voice concern and request “good governance”, aimed at transparency, democracy and anti-corruption within the organisation³⁶.

Currently, the IOC advocates the Olympic Values under three dimensions: ‘excellence, friendship and respect’. Ironically, very few works have examined the Olympians themselves who represent the core authenticity of the event, yet are understood to embody the values through their Olympic achievements. Their centrality is further reflected in the publication of ‘The Philosophic Foundations of Olympism’ in 1935 which discloses that the athletes are central to Pierre de Coubertin’s Olympic idea, highlighting the key focal point for the majority of his educational thinking³⁷.

Preuß and colleagues conducted a detailed analysis of the Olympic values; their study considered outsider views of the Olympic values, including scholars and athletes, and draws a number of conclusions³⁸. In relation to athletes’ perceptions one Olympian participant stated: ‘When I was

an athlete, I had no idea about the Olympic values because I was practicing all the time’³⁹. However, there were some participant responses within the report that aligned more with Perez and Rubio’s standpoint (see below), for example: ‘My take on Olympic values is also a bit complex because I participated in the Olympics a long time ago and always, in a certain way, thought that these values are quite important. Or at least when I was an athlete, I always wanted to believe that there is more than just sports’⁴⁰. Unfortunately, participant demographics are not reported in Preuss et. al. study, so it is difficult to compare the athlete behind the quote with the participants of the current study.

One of the only other studies to interview Olympians and ask about their attitudes towards Olympic values is the work led by Katia Rubio, who has interviewed over 1000 Brazilian Olympians. In a 2014 paper, Perez and Rubio report on 19 athletes and their views on this topic⁴¹. Interestingly, they come to a conclusion that is different to this study’s findings. For example, in their study of Brazilian athletes, Perez and Rubio state that Olympic values are prevalent and central to the Games and the athletes, and go on to argue that through the athletes we observe the Olympic values in action; indeed the athletes feel they are our representatives and display the values through their attitudes and conduct⁴². The athletes seek to promulgate the values either through their performance or philanthropic work thus disseminating the values to wider society (Ibid., 42). In their concluding section these authors suggest that it:

...is possible to observe the understanding of the importance of values in their [Olympians] lives. They express the values are closely interconnected. In addition, they assume they are your representatives to others and to society through their attitudes and especially for their thoughts. And they want to help in some way, so, for example, whether their participation in the media or in philanthropic events, becomes an occasion for spreading their knowledge and the dissemination of Olympic values⁴³.

While the current study’s sample also consists of ‘Olympians’, they are of course from contrasting cultural, political and economic backgrounds to those in the Perez and Rubio study above. The data on GB athletes tends to reveal a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Olympians and Olympism. There is a clear discrepancy between the official International Olympic Committee (IOC) sanctioned ‘Olympic values’ and the understanding of, and interpretation by, the key players at the Games. Further, the data reveals the disparity between the athletes’ understanding and awareness of these values *during* and *after* their Olympic competition(s).

GB Olympians and Olympic Values

One of the key findings of the current study is that Olympians tend to learn about, embrace or become more aware of Olympic values after competing and usually much later in their post-athletic careers. Many who stay on in sport are actively involved in propagating values that they themselves never actually held when at the Games and when competing. Indicative of this attitude is Respondent 1 (female sprinter, 1996, age 52), for example, who replied to the question of whether she was aware of the Olympic values while competing thus:

Respondent: No. No, I wasn’t. No. No. No. ... No, I wasn’t really. I wasn’t.....

Interviewer: Are you aware of them [Olympic values] now?

Respondent: Very much so.

Interviewer: And in what context?

Respondent: Interestingly, because my sporting career ended quite abruptly, I put everything in the loft and forgot about it and didn't really tell anybody about it particularly. My husband, who I met after I'd finished competing, he was very, very sporty. He was obviously very interested. He and my dad used to talk about it quite a lot. But my children were relatively unaware until 2012 [the year of the London Olympics – authors].

By that point, I was a governor in a school and they were quite keen on doing a mini-Olympics in my town and they, sort of, said to me, "Oh, you used to run, didn't you?" And I said to them, "Yeah, I did, actually." And they said, "Right, will you organise it?" And actually, at that point, I suddenly became, I was going into schools and talking to kids about what it means to be an Olympian and I was suddenly realising, looking at the values and I had actually applied them all through my life. And actually, *probably at the very most when I had to stop* [authors' emphasis].

When I'd had to stop and I had to regroup and work out what the hell I was going to do now: how I was going to get over the fact that I was not ever going to make a semi or a medal and I was not going to go to Barcelona or Sydney. So what was I going to do instead? And now I talk to kids all the time about the values.

In the school where I am a governor, I'm the governor for behaviour and sport, and, my goodness, do those two cross over. I mean, we've chosen those two deliberately to connect together because they really do. But those are our school values: the Olympic values are our school values. And the children get postcards home for demonstrating any behaviour or skill or effort against those values. You know, we talk about them all the time (Respondent 1: 47-49:00; 26.04.16).

A similar pattern was found throughout this study with 92% of those explicitly elaborating on their attitudes towards the Olympic values (25 from 57) stating that while they were competing at the Games, the Olympic values did not mean a great deal to them. One interviewee, a double Olympian (1988/1992), highlights a sentiment many athletes relayed, noting that while at the greatest sporting event on earth they were simply 'there to do a job'. The Olympic values were the last thing on their minds at the time, yet, during their post-athletic careers, usually years after competing, the values become an increasingly useful tool with which to inculcate children in general life lessons. This participant, a male marathon runner, states [on being asked whether they were aware of the Olympic values at the time of competing]:

No, there's nothing. No, because, I mean, because I do various talks at schools and stuff like that. And they always ask the question about the Olympics. And it was just like, no actually... I mean I learnt more from the Olympics and Olympism from 2012 than I did from back then. Because literally, when I went to Seoul [1988 Olympics] and when I went to Barcelona [1992 Olympics] it was kind of the five metres of track, of road in front of you. That's all you were bothered about. It was totally focused. And you knew it wasn't just another race, but basically that was all you were looking at. That was all I was looking at. Where's the drink stations, where's the start, where's the hills? (Respondent 2: 0:57; 25.01.16; age 59).

In a similar vein Respondent 3 clearly outlines the pre- and post-Olympian awareness of the Olympic values stating 'No. I can't even remember the Olympic values before I became an Olympian. I don't think they were a thing, really. I think it's only recently where they've suddenly made a big deal about them...'. Interestingly, this respondent believes that the values have become important in the last decade or so. He suggests:

It's never been one of those educational tools, I think, that's been used or promoted through any of my development as a member of the Great Britain athletics team. I think going into London 2012, Beijing in particular [2008 – authors], I think when we knew the Games were coming, I think maybe that's when the education started coming through in these things. It's only subsequently from retiring and working with corporates, doing inspirational speeches, working with children [that I have become aware of the Olympic values – authors]. You can draw on those common threads which people understand are connected with the Games...[Respondent 3, male sprinter, 07.12.15; age 44].

In what would appear to be a similar trajectory for many Olympians – unaware or uninterested in the Olympic values while competing and subsequently drawing on those same values to offer life lessons to the wider public – another of the Olympians, Respondent 4 (female hammer thrower, 2004, age 38) looked upon the Olympic values pragmatically:

Interviewer: Were you aware of the Olympic values and the importance of them whilst you were training and competing?

Respondent: No. I only found out about them when doing some work for the Youth Sport Trust, doing the Young Ambassadors Programme and you talk about the values and the power that they've had. But I had no idea of what they were whilst I was competing.

Interviewer: What about now? Do they mean anything to you now?

Respondent: The only time that I use them is in schools when delivering this Young Ambassadors Programme and talking about the Olympics to other people. Maybe they sit in the background. Not really...Is it just a, sort of, subliminal message that's up on a wall?...I'd struggle to even name them. What? Honesty, integrity....(Respondent 4: 42:00; 14.3.16).

Another example of attitudes toward the Olympic values comes from Respondent 5, a male cyclist, who had no time whatsoever for such ideals. This is not a widespread response, but is indicative of many professional athletes whose focus is on performance and not philosophy. On being asked whether the values as set out in the Olympic Charter had impacted him, his behaviour or attitude to sport, he replied: “Not in the slightest”. When pressed whether such values had become apparent or important post-career, this respondent replied “I just like sport and like watching it.... I couldn't give a monkey's about any of that...Not interested in that at all”. (Respondent 5; 25:00; 14.03.17, age 47).

Interestingly, both the IOC and the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) can be viewed as attempting to shape the behaviour of athletes at the Games. The most obvious and striking example is the controversial article 40 of the Olympic Charter, which is often used by NOCs to stipulate what athletes can and cannot do with respect to sponsors prior to, during and after an Olympic Games (see Team GB, 2019, for an example). In addition, article 50 sets the parameters of what athletes can and cannot say and even what they have to wear in relation to sponsors' logos. Prospective Olympians must sign up and agree with the mission statements of the Olympic Charter and their respective NOCs or elite funding bodies. Respondent 6 (male volleyball player, 2012, age 36) below touches on this attempt to guide behaviour:

Interviewer: Were you aware of the Olympic values when you were competing?

Respondent: I don't think so, to be honest. I don't... I mean, I would have been.....I mean, I-I-I think we were all of course made to sign Team GB things like mission statements and probably

guidance on “Don’t post this, you can’t do that” you know, all that sort of jazz. I couldn’t tell you what was in that. I think the Olympic ideals is an interesting one. I don’t think, because we completed year round, outside of that stage and that group, I don’t think it’s very much drilled into us. Umm... I don’t certainly remember saying, “Oh, I’m at the Olympics now, I should act any differently”...(Respondent 6; 04.05.17; 1:10:00).

A core element of the Olympic values is the ‘taking part’ in an event that brings the world’s best athletes together on a regular basis. In what appears a direct response to de Courbetin’s well-cited phrase (about taking part, and not winning), one Olympian, Respondent 7 (male, distance athlete, 1972/1976, age 69) suggested:

.....so all the Olympic value stuff to me, no we’re only here for one thing right, we’re here to win this, that’s what we’re here for. All that taking part nonsense, I don’t get it, we’re here to win. And if we’re not, you know I mean I have to accept that not everybody’s capable of winning these races, but if we’re going to go to the Olympics, we want the best you can do don’t you? The next best thing is, you’ve got to come out with a personal best and run the best race of your life. And it’s not easy to run personal bests in major championship finals because of the nature of the beast, it can be whatever, whatever. But it’s got to be your best effort hasn’t it? I think it has (Respondent 7, 1:06:00; 02.10.15).

This athlete touches on another important sub-theme to come out of the research: the fact that to reach the heights of an Olympic athlete, you need to be incredibly *selfish*, which would appear to be in direct contrast to what Olympism stands for. In fact, de Coubertin suggested that Olympism embodies ‘moral purity as well as...physical energy...’ however, a prerequisite is that ‘...honesty and sportsman-like **unselfishness** [authors’ emphasis] are as highly developed as the strength of muscles’⁴⁴. In contrast Respondent 8 (female pentathlete, 2000, age 47) offers a different view in answer to a question on Olympic values:

Interviewer: What about Olympic values, [name removed]? Were you aware of them while you were competing at the Games?

Respondent: That's a hard question. While I was actually competing, I probably wasn't thinking a lot about that.

Interviewer: And what about after the Games?

Respondent: Being at the Olympics, I think the sense of what the Olympics is, how big it is, what it means and the unification that sport brings to the world and all of that, I think yes that is very evident when you're there at the Games. I mean, yeah, I suppose Olympic values, yes, as I say, when you're competing, you're in such a bubble you're just going through your whole process. You're completely in the zone. But, yes.

Interviewer: And is it something you thought about afterwards?

Respondent: I suppose more so, yes. I mean, I think for a sport like pentathlon, the fact that the women were competing for the first time. I think what put things a bit in perspective for me was coming from a medical background it was like, in terms of medicine and what I was doing, you say you're going to make a big difference to people's lives, you're going to help people, you're going to make people better, you're going to change their lives.

Having taken that time out to do sport, I think winning a gold medal has probably had more impact on more people than working as a doctor will ever have for me. And I think that's quite a weird thing because you have to be quite **selfish** [authors' emphasis] to be an athlete in some ways and it's completely opposite to the values that I guess I was bringing into my life by being a doctor. Does that make sense? (Respondent 8, 48:00, 31.05.16)

This notion of selfishness comes out of many of the interviews and is explored by a number of the athletes from the study's sample, predominantly from the post-2000 cohort of full-time athletes. The journey to becoming an Olympian in the post-2000 era is one of toil, hard work and sacrifice. By this time – and more so in recent years – performance sport is a full-time profession and is practiced by a high number of countries globally (206 took part at the Rio Olympics), meaning to make it to the Olympics is much harder in many events than previous years. To qualify for the Olympics thus requires a degree of self-discipline and ultimately selfishness on the part of the athlete. Indeed, Hardy and colleagues in their study of Super-Elite and Elite British Olympic medallists found one of the key discriminators between the two groups to *be* that of ruthlessness and selfishness⁴⁵. Super-Elite medallists within their study were seemingly more ruthless and selfish in the pursuit of their sporting careers. It is fair to assume that selfishness plays a part in also distinguishing between elite athletes and Olympians, given numerically there are far more of the former than there are of the latter. Further, with personality traits such as narcissism, which is more widely considered to be maladaptive as a trait, performance is often seen as high in environments where there exists an opportunity for personal glory⁴⁶. The following athlete, Respondent 9 (female 1500m runner, 2012, age 30), elucidates this further:

Respondent: I was aware of them (the Olympic values), because there are all these cool posters up, and there was one in Loughborough where we were staying. I guess the only one I'm familiar with... I wouldn't be able to reel them off, but there's stuff about sportsmanship, which I think... I remember thinking, "That's cool." I always think that's more relevant in the team sports and stuff like that, but it isn't. I don't know, you just... But for me, it really ties in with the idea of not cheating, not taking drugs. That... Yeah. I kind of feel like that's the important thing I would interpret from the Olympic values. Unfortunately, other people don't. (Laughs)

Interviewer: Do you feel you have a responsibility as an Olympian to live by those values, if you like, whether as an athlete or as an individual?

Respondent: I guess not personally, like individually, but if it was in a... If, say, I was to become a PE teacher or an ambassador to do something with kids, I would feel that anything that could be in the public eye would have to honour that. If I was trying to be a role model, I'd have to live like that. I think it's also one of the things you can learn being an athlete is actually **to be very selfish**, which is obviously the opposite of that. I think **I'm very good at being very selfish**....[authors' emphasis]. (Respondent 9, 39:00, 16.12.15).

A final, positive example from the study's cohort is one of the most recent Olympians (male, Rugby player, Rio, 2016, age 27), who describes how a few ex-Olympians had visited his team once the final squad had been announced. The ex-Olympians suggested how the players ought to conduct themselves at the Games and they were encouraged to talk to others about their own experiences. Further, one of the ex-Olympians even '...went and spoke on, like how it meant more when you actually get home than it does when you are there...'. (45:00; 15.03.19). Part of the change from pre- to post-Olympic experience is the reaction of others to the athletes themselves.

Being an 'Olympian' is seen as a global brand, recognisable the world over, irrespective of culture or ideology and inducts athletes into an elite, easily recognisable club. It is also one of the reasons so many athletes are subsequently invited to give talks in schools, organisations and so on and is clearly the start of the process of re-thinking or thinking about the Olympic values post-Olympics.

4. Concluding Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to introduce a ‘sporting’ life history approach to students of sports studies scholars and students via a unique study of GB Olympians. The study adopted a sporting life history approach as a counterpoint to the ‘top-down’ nature of research on the Olympics. While this study has only been able to scratch the surface of the rich data derived via a ‘sporting’ life history approach, such data-led research can reveal unexpected avenues and themes to research. The current paper has offered an insight into one of these main themes - Olympic values - that lie at the heart of the Olympic movement. Three key points are worth re-iterating: first, there is a clear juxtaposition between the Olympic Charter, the values it sets out and the attitudes of the Olympians interviewed for this study. While the Olympic Charter attempts to set out the guidelines for athletes’ behaviour, including what they can and cannot say and what they can and cannot wear, the majority of Olympians in this study stated very clearly that they had little knowledge of, or interest in, the wider Olympic values while they were competing. Paradoxically, perhaps, most of those who reported a lack of knowledge or interest in the values subsequently went on to champion them in their post-athletic careers, usually in speeches or talks with school children and organisations. This suggests that the Games themselves are not seen as upholding the values espoused in the Olympic Charter; rather, the values inherent in becoming a world-class athlete (determination, dedication, sacrifice and so on) would appear to be the aspects celebrated in after-dinner speeches and motivational talks. One could argue that the Games themselves have become hyper-commercialized and articles 40 and 50 of the Olympic Charter do not exist to serve the interests of the athletes, but of those wishing to make a financial profit from the Games.

Second, Olympians in this study exhibited traits in complete contrast to the Olympic values: most understood their task while competing as simply to ‘get the job done’ and had either never heard of, or had taken little interest in, the Olympic values as stated in the Olympic Charter. Finally, the third point, closely linked to the second, highlights the high levels of ‘selfishness’ exhibited by Olympians, a trait diametrically opposed to those expounded in the Olympic values.

Taken together, the three key points arising from this study suggest a paradox: the Olympic values, which at heart are really human values, are useful to teach and inspire children and motivate adults from all walks of life, whether they are sporty or not. Using the Games and its protagonists, Olympians, to convey this message would appear on the surface sensible because of the exalted heights they have reached in their individual sports. The paradox arises when one studies the Games themselves, run as a monopolistic business that benefits financially mostly the IOC, not the host country nor the athletes. Further, when one studies the methods employed in order to become an Olympian, athletes do not embody lofty values; it is not ‘the joy of effort’ that spurs them on nor is it ‘social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles’ that drives them to becoming world-class athletes. Rather it is ruthlessness, selfishness, single-minded dedication and self-belief, traits that are difficult to square with the Olympic Charter; traits, interestingly, which are more akin to the business world in advanced capitalist economies, than to Olympism. The example of using ex-Olympians to highlight Olympic values to fledgling Olympians prior to them competing makes sense and could go some way to closing the disconnect between the IOC’s values and those of the Olympians identified in this study.

The ‘sporting’ life history interview, capturing individual athlete’s personal sporting stories and history, can offer sports scholars a unique ‘window’ into complex issues experienced by athletes and others in the area of sport. Across the cohort of 57 Olympians there have been stories of heroic comebacks from career-threatening injuries; high performance in the cauldron of the Olympic arena; disappointment and downhill careers following Olympic selection; banality and boredom in the face of another 4-year cycle of training; brushes with sports politics (e.g. the 1972

terrorist attack) and joy in spreading Olympic values to children post-career, values that the athletes themselves did not share while competing. The life history method offers a privileged vantage point from the inside and an excellent, complementary source of data to the more standard information gathered on the Olympics. 'Sporting' life history can provide a first-hand, ring-side seat to events that are usually mediated or reported on second-hand. In the case of the Olympian research discussed in this paper, life history interviews have helped to highlight crucial differences between the attitudes of Olympians toward Olympic values and those espoused by the Olympic Charter.

Using this method does have its drawbacks too, however. Life history interviews may appear an easy option (who would not like to 'have a chat' with an Olympian?), but they require a great deal of patience for the time they take to organize, carry out and analyse. The latter can take a very long time, as there are no pre-conceived categories to align the data going into the interviews, but rather the attempt to make sense of the data follows the interviews. This period can leave experienced researchers floundering and faltering in a wealth of data, let alone first-timers. Finally, life history interviewing is different from standard, semi-structured interviews. The key difference and the hardest skill is to elicit the most information with the least interference in the flow of conversation, allowing interviewees scope to re-tell their own stories.

This paper has used the 'sporting' life history method to provide new empirical data on one particular aspect of Olympism: the Olympic values and British Olympians' attitudes towards them, which is a first step in theory building. Presenting new empirical data is one thing, conceptualizing the findings is another. What this study achieves, however, is to provoke a series of important questions that future research needs to tackle: does it matter if there is a disconnect between the IOC discourse of Olympic values and Olympians' attitudes towards them? How do Olympian attitudes differ across countries? Why is it that Olympians 'buy into' the Olympic values in their post-athletic careers. It is hoped that the study presented here can serve as a basis for future research in this area that will go some way to answering these questions.

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