Rethinking validity in qualitative sport and exercise psychology research: a realist perspective

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, the relativist approach has significantly shaped debates about the quality and rigour of qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology (SEP). In the absence of any published critiques of relativism in SEP, this paper problematises its central claims with a focus on the most recent contribution offered by Smith and McGannon (2018). Despite making valuable contributions to the advancement and acceptance of qualitative research, we argue that the relativist approach encounters numerous problems when attempting to reject the 'anything goes' problem due to its fundamental ontological commitment to internal, multiple, mind-dependent realities. This paper then makes a constructive contribution to the field by offering an alternative position grounded in a realist understanding of validity. We first suggest that principles such as ontological plausibility, empirical adequacy and practical utility can re-orient both critical thinking and the use of practical techniques which can reduce threats to validity. Second, we suggest that Maxwell's (1992, 2012, 2017) descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity could be welcome concepts for qualitative researchers in SEP. The significance of this realist approach for researchers, reviewers and editors is discussed.

Keywords: research quality; rigour; realism; qualitative research; relativism

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Debates about how researchers should judge their and others' knowledge claims have a long history in qualitative social science research (Hammersley, 2009; Maxwell, 1992; Sparkes, 1998). Such debates are important because judgements about knowledge claims have significant implications for determining what research gets published, where it gets published, what it contributes to the body of evidence in a field and the allocation of research funding. Furthermore, within the applied discipline of sport and exercise psychology (SEP) such judgements have important ethical implications for the provision of evidence-based advice for athletes, coaches and sporting organisations. For these good reasons, the development of qualitative research methodologies continues to be carefully considered within SEP (see Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes 2001; Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Attempts to defend qualitative research from the long-standing charges of being too subjective, anecdotal and not generalizable (Green & Britten, 1998; Silverman, 2013; Smith, 2018) have sometimes led to a focus on methodological procedures such as member-checking (Mays & Pope, 2000), inter-rater reliability (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013) and even utilizing machine-based data-analysis methods (Däubler, Benoit, Mikhaylov, & Laver, 2012).

Although many qualitative studies in SEP have used methodological procedures such as member checking and interrater reliability (Culver et al., 2012; Smith & McGannon, 2018), they have been increasingly critiqued for simplistically and inappropriately adopting conventions from positivistic and quantitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Morse, 1997; Smith & McGannon, 2018). A central aspect of these critiques is that qualitative research should be viewed as operating within a different research paradigm to quantitative research. Sparkes and Smith (2013, p. 10) draw on Denzin and Lincoln (2005) to assert that different

paradigms hold different positions regarding "the nature of knowledge, the goal of inquiry, the role of values, the role of theory, the way in which the voice is represented, the researcher role, and the criteria used to judge the legitimacy of the research". The paradigmatic approach has been widely adopted in sport-related disciplines (see Markula & Silk, 2011; Armour & MacDonald, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2016) and it frames different forms of research as residing in identifiable categories such as positivism, post-positivism and relativism. This framing has provided conceptual armour for qualitative researchers, precluding the imposing of narrowly defined criteria on their work on the grounds that different types of (qualitative) research should be judged differently.

Within these developments, many qualitative researchers have rejected the term 'validity' for its association with what is variously labelled as the 'rationalistic', 'scientistic' or 'positivist' paradigm as it is inappropriate for qualitative inquiry (e.g., Guba, 1981; Wolcott, 1994). Instead, qualitative researchers have often preferred terms such as trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or more broadly rigour (Smith & McGannon, 2018) or quality of qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Tracy, 2010) when discussing the issue of assessing different knowledge claims. Stemming from the extensive work of scholars advocating the relativist paradigm, three conceptual papers in SEP (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Smith; 2009) have outlined the implications of relativism on considerations of what they have variously termed the validity, rigour and quality of qualitative research. These articles have been cited 1061 times (according to Google Scholar, 1.3.2019) and have therefore had a considerable impact on the methodological landscape of the field. On the other hand, the potential problems associated with the relativist stance promoted in this work have not been considered in SEP.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we provide a review and critique of the relativist approach to validity with the main focus on the most recent position paper offered

by Smith and McGannon (2018). To avoid the numerous issues associated with (mis)labelling and caricaturising a body of work, we focus on the relativist approach as it is explicitly described in the published articles (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Smith; 2009), while also acknowledging that relativism has many different variants such as ontological, epistemic, conceptual, cultural and moral relativism (Iosofides, 2012). Smith and McGannon's (2018) paper centres on ontological relativism which Smith and Sparkes (2016) explained in suggesting that "qualitative researchers adopt a relativist or internal ontology (…) Multiple, subjective realities exist in the form of mental constructions" (p. 11). After scrutinising the problems associated with the relativist approach to rigour/quality of qualitative research, this paper makes a constructive contribution by outlining the philosophical assumptions of realism and develops an alternative, realist approach to inform the assessment of qualitative research. In doing so, we align with those suggesting that validity is not easily discarded as a concept for scientific research (e.g., Hammersley, 1992; Maxwell, 1992, 2017; Morse, 2002; Whittemore, Chase, Mandle, 2001), and describe the principles and practical actions that realist researchers might engage with in attempting to reduce threats to validity. We argue that understanding the main concepts and arguments of realism is necessary for researchers, reviewers and editors to make informed assessments of realist research as well as the on-going debates between realism and relativism.

We consider this contribution important because the extensive critiques of the relativist position from realist scholars in other fields over several decades have not been acknowledged in SEP (Hammersley, 1992, 2008, 2009; Hunt, 1990; Maxwell, 1992; Porter, 2007; Sayer, 1992, 2000; Siegel, 1986), nor has the development of a (critical) realist alternative in the related field of sport coaching (North, 2013, 2017). Although the debates about realism and relativism are by no means new (see the exchange between Hammersley,

2009 and Smith & Hodkinson, 2009), a realist response is necessary within SEP because it appears that SEP scholars are not aware of the wider dialogues and developments that are taking place and, as we will show, realism has been misunderstood in previous SEP literature on validity. Given Sparkes and Smith's (2009) and Smith and McGannon's (2018) invitations to further dialogue and critical reflection in their concluding remarks, our contribution should be a welcomed addition to the literature. It should also be noted from the outset that our engagement with this debate here should not be confused with a lack of respect and admiration for scholars taking a relativist approach whose work has undoubtedly played a leading role in the advancement and acceptance of qualitative research in sports-related fields.

The Relativist Approach to Validity

Although our focus is on the most recent development of relativism in relation to rigour in qualitative research (Smith & McGannon, 2018), a brief review of previous developments in SEP is necessary. Sparkes (1998) was the first to problematise how validity had been understood and addressed in qualitative SEP research. He reviewed a range of qualitative studies and found that most of them had employed 'the parallel perspective' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) where qualitative researchers seek to develop their own criteria mirroring quantitative notions of validity and reliability. Sparkes critiqued researchers using this approach for their lack of explicit rationale for selecting specific techniques (e.g., member checking or triangulation) as the main methods to establish validity. Furthermore, he questioned the utility of member checking, arguing that there were no grounds to assume that participants possessed 'the truth' of the phenomenon either. More profoundly, however, in his view the parallel perspective as a whole was philosophically incongruent. He argued that trying to establish foundational criteria was incompatible with the relativist ontological

position that was taken to underpin qualitative research in general. Therefore, the choice of procedures to work towards the validity of a study

> depends on what seems important at the time. In this view, methods or procedures cannot be used to establish contact with some external reality beyond ourselves. They are just the practical activities of those who engage in the practical tradition of qualitative inquiry (Sparkes, 1998, p. 375).

A decade later, Sparkes and Smith (2009) noted that qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology had started to embrace alternative paradigms, but the question of how to evaluate different studies' goodness remained unanswered. They contrasted the different ways in which "a criteriologist" (a person holding the parallel perspective described by Sparkes, 1998) and a relativist would try to differentiate 'good' and 'bad' quality qualitative research. From the relativist standpoint they advocated, they suggested that each paradigm was seen to have their own lists of goodness criteria that "derive from the standpoint we adopt on any given issue" (p. 495). They further argued that qualitative researchers operating within different paradigms needed different lists of criteria that others should use to evaluate these different pieces of work. For example, aesthetic merit or evocation might have been included in the list of criteria for autoethnographic research, whereas a study employing hierarchical content analysis and informed by the 'parallel' perspective could have relied on prolonged engagement or member checking (Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Smith and McGannon's (2018) recent, extensively cited[1] paper rearticulated the problems associated with traditional procedural criteria discussed by Sparkes (1998) and Sparkes and Smith (2009) and suggested that these procedures were based on philosophically problematic assumptions about theory-free knowledge. After arguing that epistemological

[1] 277 citations in Google Scholar, 1.3.2019.

foundationalism should be rejected based on its philosophical problems, they also suggested that the second option, the combination of ontological realism and epistemological constructionism, was "incompatible and, in turn, untenable in terms of holding both together simultaneously" (p. 105). If researchers "accepted" the problems associated with these perspectives, they could turn to relativism and "use criteria from lists that are not fixed, rigid, or predetermined before the study, but rather are open-ended; they can add to or subtract characteristics from the lists" (p. 116). They recommended that researchers might, for example, use member reflections and critical friends as ways to work towards research rigour. For them, member reflections offer "a *practical opportunity* to acknowledge and/or explore *with* participants the existence of contradictions and differences in knowing" (p. 108). Similarly, they suggested that working with critical friends could lead to similar outcomes: to explore different perspectives and interpretations of the studied phenomenon and "the reflexive acknowledgement of multiple truths" (p. 117). From a relativist perspective, these procedures were not aimed at finding consensus or ruling out any interpretations, but acknowledging that many explanations could exist but not all of them would be pursued in a given study.

Paradoxically, the relativist scholarship has seemingly promoted a paradigmatic approach where different perspectives should be allowed to develop their own criteria consistent with their assumptions and methodological practices but simultaneously championed relativism as the only 'right' and coherent perspective for qualitative research. In the spirit of respecting different paradigms' internal logic, Sparkes (1998) suggested that "given that different epistemological and ontological assumptions inform qualitative and postpositivistic inquiry, it makes little sense to impose the criteria for judging one onto the other" (p. 382). Similarly, Sparkes and Smith (2009) warned about adopting an approach that "simply imposes its own preordained criteria on all forms of inquiry" (p. 496). In the same

paper, however, the authors also argued that "the criteriologist" approach is based on "shaky philosophical 'foundations'", "produces ontological stagnation" and, in "at best misguided and, at worst, arrogant and nonsensical, a form of intellectual imperialism that builds failure in from the start" (p. 496). These examples highlight the somewhat contradictory positions held by the authors; one the one hand claiming to respect each paradigm in its own right, and on the other positioning relativism as superior. For example, Smith and McGannon (2018) argued that "the idea that criteria can be universally applied to all forms of qualitative research is problematic" (p. 114) but later moved on to suggest their line of reasoning about inappropriate procedures should be accepted by *all* qualitative researchers across paradigms. They suggested that "member checking is (…) an ineffective marker to judge the rigor or quality of qualitative research" and that "the practice of intercoder reliability and intercoder agreement is ineffective for ensuring that results are reliable. Like with member checks, researchers should therefore give up using that method as a way to ensure rigor" (p. 117). We will now turn to the problems associated with the relativist account of quality in qualitative research that has been advocated in these three articles.

The 'anything goes' problem

Although realist scholars would generally agree with several relativists claims (of theory-laden knowledge, the impossibility of fixed criteria, and science as a social practice), a key critique of relativism centres on the (im)possibility of rejecting knowledge claims and the incoherent logic of this process. The common counterargument to relativism is that if there are multiple realities and truth is relative, then the only rule that survives is that "anything goes" and that any claim must then be treated as valid in its own terms (Boghossian, 2007). Being aware of this critique, "anything goes" was explicitly addressed and rejected by Smith and McGannon (2018, p. 116) as well as Sparkes (1998, p. 380) and Sparkes and Smith

(2009, p. 494). However, the logic used to refute the "anything goes" argument needs careful scrutiny.

The starting point of the relativist approach is the impossibility to rule out certain interpretations and explanations on grounds for being *wrong*, because in "a relativistic world of multiple mind-dependent realities there is no technical court of 'last resort' to appeal to in order to sort out trustworthy interpretations from untrustworthy ones" (Sparkes & Smith, 2009, p. 493). Sparkes (1998) first countered the "anything goes" argument by suggesting that, within a relativist perspective, "reaching agreement and passing judgment become practical and moral tasks rather than epistemological ones" (p. 381). From a practical point of view, Sparkes (1998) explained that "the process of sorting out conflicting interpretations and applications for qualitative researchers occurs through debate, discussion, and the use of exemplars" (p. 381), but without explaining which "practical" reasons are valid for accepting certain interpretations and explanations. A similar problem remains for judging validity based on morality. In any research project, the principal investigator, co-authors, research participants and critical friends are often likely to have different moral principles. Sparkes offered no guidance on whose morality will be trusted in passing judgement and why. For example, in the case of conflict, is the researcher going to assert their own beliefs as superior to participants', or vice versa? Sayer (2000) noted that relativism is often promoted as the ethically superior position that centralises marginalised voices, but it can equally serve the interests of those in power as it can allow for dismissing others' critique as simply residing in a different discourse or paradigm. To sum up, if practical and moral principles are to be prioritised when assessing different knowledge claims, a problem remains on judging whose practical reasons and morality are (in)valid and why anything does *not* go.

Smith and McGannon (2018) move the discussion on to offering member reflections or dialogues with critical friends as ways to enhance the rigour of qualitative research but offer

no grounding from which multiple and alternative explanations generated in these procedures should be dealt with. Exploring multiple ways of knowing through member reflections or dialogues with critical friends is likely to confirm that people will have different perspectives and interpretations of any given phenomenon, but Smith and McGannon do not specify which perspective(s) should be trusted to inform future research and applied practice and why. For Smith and McGannon (2018), "other and/or additional plausible interpretations of the data can exist that are also defendable but are not being utilized in a particular study or at that time" (p. 114). Without further explanation of the logic of the treatment of these multiple "truths", their account offers no guidance for the underlying principles of "practical" action of rejecting certain knowledge claims (i.e., combating the 'anything goes' problem).

Relatedly, a central thesis of Smith and McGannon's (2018) article is that researchers are allowed to flexibly modify their lists of criteria based on their different purposes and situational contexts. While this appears to be a reasonable suggestion to protect against fixed, procedural criteria, it becomes problematic when other researchers (and presumably reviewers) might also "apply different criteria as they go about the practical task of judging different studies" (p. 116). This leads to another contradictory situation that plays out in Smith and McGannon's (2018) criticism of researchers who selectively modify Tracy's (2010) list of criteria immediately before advocating for selectively modifying lists of criteria (see pp. 115-116). Here, it appears that some of their rules are intended to apply to all paradigms (e.g., everyone should abandon member checking and inter-rater reliability) whereas other rules (e.g., the lists can be modified) are specific to relativists only. This conclusion presents a difficult situation to manage for anyone wishing to understand and evaluate a body of work across paradigms within academia, let alone practitioners working with athletes, coaches and sporting organisations outside of academia.

Notwithstanding the inherent contradictions in respecting different paradigmatic approaches while simultaneously championing relativism, Smith and McGannon (2018) propose some criteria that can be used to judge research from all approaches. In their final argument, it is proposed that *all* researchers should ensure the overall philosophical coherence (manifest in paradigmatic positioning, methodology, interpretation and stated criteria) of any piece of research and in so doing make an exception to their objection to universal criteria. The principle of philosophical and logical coherence appears to provide a way of combating "anything goes" since incoherent projects can now be ruled out. Furthermore, they use the coherence principle to rule out (critical) realist approaches by arguing that "combining epistemological constructionism and ontological realism is neither possible nor sustainable (…) what must now be accepted is epistemological constructionism and also ontological relativism (i.e., multiple and mind-dependent realities)" (p. 105). Once they have made this absolute truth claim that appears to be one that should be true to others, too, relativism becomes self-defeating. Consider the following paradoxes:

(1) If relativism is right, it undermines its own relativistic notion of truth, and therefore cannot be right (Sankey, 1997; Siegel, 1986). The alternative to this is maintaining the idea of multiple truths which is coherent with the relativist argument, but this means that there are no better reasons to adopt the relativist perspective instead of a positivist or realist one (because they are true too). As Sayer (2000) noted, "to argue for relativism is to encourage anti-relativism too" (p. 77), because for a relativist there should be no 'ultimate' grounds for favouring one perspective over another.

(2) In insisting that relativists need to know the ontological, epistemological, ethical and methodological foundations of any piece of research before evaluating its validity, relativists presuppose the existence of certain universal standards and again reject relativism (see Siegel, 1988).

(3) If paradigms were truly incommensurable and their knowledge claims should only be evaluated within their own internal logic of justification, it would follow that there should be no debate between paradigms and no need for relativists to focus on showing the inconsistencies of other paradigms.

The logical inconsistencies of relativist claims are further explained by numerous scholars including Boghossian (2007), Hammersley (1992, 2009), Hunt (1990), Porter (2007), Sayer (2000) and Siegel (1986, 1988). In our analysis, we suggest that the fundamental issue in dealing with the "anything goes" problem from the relativist perspective is the reluctance to commit to the notion that judgements about qualitative research are implicitly judgements about how well our data, interpretations and theories refer to a 'real world' that exists independently of researchers' conceptions of it. By rejecting the existence of an external reality, the relativist position removes a crucial anchor to which knowledge claims can refer and therefore necessitates a reliance on methodology instead (akin criteriology). In contrast, if a realist position is adopted, the validity of knowledge claims in the sense of how well they describe, explain and theorise the 'out there' returns as a central concern for researchers. We will now move on to exploring why combining ontological realism and epistemological constructivism is both possible and sustainable and then outline a realist perspective on validity.

A Realist Alternative

While no conceptual papers have discussed realism in SEP, realist philosophical positions are increasingly being used in empirical SEP research (see Arnautovska, O'Callaghan, & Hamilton 2017; Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2019; de Grace, Knight, Rodgers, & Clark, 2017; Schweickle, Groves, Vella, & Swann, 2017) and sport coaching theory and research (North, 2013, 2017; McCarthy & Stoszkowski, 2018). Yet,

297 there exist numerous examples of it being misunderstood in theoretical debates about
298 qualitative research more broadly and in SEP specifically. Indeed, the realist alternative has
299 often been mispresented as a form of foundationalism, positivism or naïve objectivism (Hunt,
300 1990; Maxwell, 1992; Sayer, 2000). The distortion of realism in relativist accounts, in turn,
301 has potentially prevented SEP scholars from engaging with its primary arguments. Smith and
302 McGannon (2018, p. 105), for example, use the labels "neo-realism, subtle realism, post-
303 positivism, or quasi-foundationalism" to refer to the same basic idea without discriminating
304 between them. In conflating realism and post-positivism in this way, it would appear that
305 realist philosophy has been reduced – by some – to referring simply to a 'looser' version of
306 positivism. As such, we hope to provide some clarity about what the realist claims are while
307 at the same time expanding on how those claims can help navigate qualitative researchers
308 through the issue of validity.

309 In the following, we present what we consider to be the necessary and pertinent
310 characteristics of the numerous philosophical and methodological forms of realism. In doing
311 so, we draw on key realist scholars, some of whom identify as 'critical realist' (Archer, 2007;
312 Bhaskar, 1975, 1989; Collier, 1994; Sayer, 1992, 2000) and others as 'subtle realist'
313 (Hammersley, 1992), 'scientific realist' (Harré, 1970, 2012) or more loosely as 'realist'
314 (Maxwell, 1992, 2012; Pawson, 2006). So while we acknowledge that these approaches have
315 certain differences, we maintain that there are generally some core, identifiable
316 characteristics of realism that help shape qualitative research.

317 ***Epistemological constructionism and ontological realism***

318 It is first necessary to point out that many realist claims are similar to those held by
319 relativists and therefore are unlikely to warrant any objections. These agreements can
320 generally be located in discussions about epistemology – that is, claims about knowledge
321 (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Such familiarities are evident in Sayer's (1992 p. 5-6) "theory-

laden" and "concept-dependent" view of knowledge which also accepts that "concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object". Indeed, Bhaskar (1975, p. 16) recognised that science is a "social product", and Collier (1994, p. 16) noted that realism treats "all theories as fallible, and open to transformation". Additionally, notions of "complexity" are central to Pawson's (2006; 2013) and Sayer's (2000) approach to realism which insists on the importance of attending to the ambiguity of the social world.

A number of realist claims, however, significantly depart from those held by relativists and positivists. These disagreements can generally be located in discussions about ontology – that is, claims about reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Perhaps the most obvious is the assertion that the world exists independently of researchers' knowledge of it – this is generally referred to as ontological realism and is the basis upon which much of our alternative approach relies. Essentially, ontological realism is made possible by a crucial distinction between ontology and epistemology. As Wiltshire (2018) pointed out, realists claim that epistemology and ontology have been conflated and collapsed both within positivism and relativism (Bhaskar's 'epistemic fallacy') leading to the assumption that interpretive epistemologies necessitate relativist ontologies and that realist ontologies necessitate objectivist epistemologies.

Contrary to the relativist position, for Archer (2007), ontological realism simply means that "there is a state of the matter which is what it is, regardless of how we do view it, choose to view it or are somehow manipulated into viewing it" (p. 195). From a realist perspective, although social-psychological phenomena are most often complex and multifaceted, they are not considered 'multiple' in the sense of residing in multiple different realities. As Sayer (1992) asserted, "social scientists and historians produce interpretations of objects, but do not generally produce the object themselves" (p. 49). He also claimed that by

not accepting the distinction between ontology and epistemology, relativism becomes similar to positivism in that it reduces "thought and its objects together, only the direction of the reduction is different" (p. 67). That is, whereas positivism reduces the real to the observable (and therefore many philosophers of science would describe positivism as anti-realist in denying that there is 'a real world' behind what we experience; Brinkmann, 2017), relativism reduces the real to thought (mind-dependent constructions). Without denying that either our methods are imperfect or that the psychological objects of our research are themselves somewhat socially constructed, realism reclaims that idea that science is an "attempt to align explanations of reality with reality itself" (Williams, 2018, p. 30). In Elder-Vass's (2012, p. 3) terms, social scientists "should be both realists and social constructionists". For a further illustration of key realist claims, see table 1.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

The alignment between constructionist epistemology and realist ontology is contested with respect to social and conceptual objects in the relativist arguments reviewed in this paper. For example, Smith and McGannon (2018, p. 105) argued:

> Committing to the belief that knowledge is socially constructed means that theory-free knowledge is *unachievable*. On the other hand, believing that there is a social reality independent of us that can be discovered – however ideal, approximate or subtle – means that theory-free knowledge *can be achieved*. Thus, the realist ontology held by the researcher contradicts the constructionist epistemological they hold – they cannot have it both ways.

The reason that we claim this view is mistaken is because "theory-free knowledge" is not the same as ontological realism. As has been highlighted already, realism does not make ontological statements that are "theory-free" – in fact, they are precisely and explicitly

theoretical, but the objects to which those theories refer have an existence beyond researchers' mere 'internal' mind-dependent constructions (Westhorp, 2018). Indeed, a critical error is made when stating that ontological realism involves "believing that there is a social reality independent of us that can be discovered": by adding "that can be discovered" the point becomes an epistemological one.

As this point is understandably philosophically challenging, an example may be helpful here. Taking the argument above presented by Smith and McGannon (2018), if we ignore – for a moment – the explicit *content* of the argument and consider the implicit assumptions in the *use* of the argument, it is possible to illustrate a version of ontological realism in action. Here, it is self-evident that the authors use rational argument to make a truth claim about reality (implicit in the language of "they cannot have it both ways") – the reality of a conceptual argument, not of physical nature. Presumably, this reality is understood as being real for others not just themselves (this is implicit in publishing for an audience of others) and hence refers to a shared truth. Moreover, we might further assume that this claim is also thought to hold true in the event of a strange epidemic that somehow eradicated the entire population of SEP researchers in the immediate future (since there is no indication of this argument being dependent on any socio-historical or political context). As such, while the argument is indeed the product of the authors' mind-dependent conceptual activities, they are not assumed to refer to the authors' concepts but instead refer to a reality external to themselves. In this way, we assert that affording a realist ontological status to socially constructed concepts is not some naïve, misguided and outdated mistake which denies the socially constructed nature of concepts, but instead is a commitment to making statements about an external reality beyond the individual interpreting subject. Given that the above example suggests that relativists already share this commitment, we are optimistic that

common ground can be achieved through greater clarity, discussion and transparency about such arguments.

The plausibility, adequacy and utility of research accounts

Now that the realist positions on epistemology and ontology have been outlined, it is possible to make the case that validity can be a welcome and constructive concept for judging the credibility and quality of qualitative research. The importance of validity was downplayed by Sparkes (1998, p. 378) who cited Wolcott's (1994, pp. 366-369) statement that "I do not accept validity as a valid criterion for guiding or judging my work. I think we have labored far too long under the burden of this concept". As we have seen so far, relativism embraces multiple and mind-dependent realities, and it remains unclear how validity can be assessed (i.e., against which reality?). On the other hand, if a realist perspective is accepted with the assumption that some interpretations and explanations will eventually represent reality better than others, what follows is that the question of validity returns as a central concern.

From a realist view, Hammersley (1992, p. 69) explains that "an account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain, or theorise" (for similar definitions, see Maxwell 2017 and Porter, 2007)[2]. As such, the realist approach "sees the validity of an account as inherent, not in the procedures used to produce and validate it, but in its relationship to those things that it is intended to be an account *of*" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 281). Furthermore, validity

> pertains to the accounts or conclusions reached by using a particular method in a particular context for a particular purpose, not to the method itself, and fundamentally refers to how

[2] However, not all realist scholars prefer to use the term validity. For example, critical realists including Bhaskar (2009) more often use terms such as judgemental rationality and explanatory power whereas Sayer (1992, 2000) often discusses practical adequacy of knowledge claims.

well these accounts and conclusions help us to understand the actual phenomena studied (Maxwell, 2017, p. 119).

However, as validity can never be verified as a 'mirror image' of reality, our alternative realist suggestion is to consider 'ontological plausibility' as a guiding principle. We borrow this term from Harré (2012) who notes that "taking plausible theories to be putative descriptions of actual states of affairs" (p. 23) is the best way to make claims about the real world which, in turn, helps shape our empirical investigations. As such, research accounts can be more or less valid by being more or less ontologically plausible. This notion is also evident in recent realist scholarship considering the ontological status of causation (Tilley, 2018). That is, realism is not only interested in making claims about observable events and experiences, but also engage in explaining why those events and experiences may or may not occur.

Realist scholarship is quick to point out that their account of causality is radically distinct from the law-like and 'constant conjunctions' model of causality often associated with positivist science. For realist scholars, causes are often directly unobservable inferences but are nonetheless considered as referring to real 'mechanisms' with potential 'causal powers'. As these mechanisms operate within the complexity of social worlds, they only produce predictable outcomes within particular contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Because these causal mechanisms are usually unobservable, we find the notion of plausibility quite suitable. Furthermore, while we recognise that causation raises discomfort with many qualitative researchers because of its historical and political connotations, we agree with North (2017, p. 284) who noted that "acknowledged or not, causality is implied in almost all research accounts – whether steered by scientistic, interpretive, representative, political or storytelling ambitions. It is always there, it is inevitable. Explanation always evokes causal language."

Furthermore, realist researchers also suggest that research accounts can be more or less valid based on their empirical adequacy and practical utility. The notion of empirical adequacy requires investigations to have gathered sufficient observational data to support the claims made, and to ensure that they have recorded what they have seen and heard as accurately as possible (Maxwell, 1992; Sayer, 2000). Although the nature of 'sufficient' data will be specific to different projects, for example, using multiple or mixed methods, prolonged engagement with the environment, and ensuring that the most suitable participants have been involved in the study can be some ways to increase the researchers' confidence that they have collected adequate data to support their interpretations and explanations.

Additionally, Sayer (1992) suggested that researchers should seek to have practical utility in our empirical checks. He claimed that researchers "should perhaps think of knowledge not so much as a representation of the world, as a means for doing things in it" (Sayer, 1992, p. 48). Given the applied nature of much SEP research, we consider this point to be particularly pertinent for researchers, reviewers and editors within the discipline. According to this approach, research that can demonstrate its findings can be used as a means for *doing things* in the world – in all its complexity, fluidity and multifaceted nature – should reasonably be judged to have greater validity than research that cannot. In line with Archer's (1998, p. 194) support for "practical social theories" it should be noted that this is not merely a pragmatic approach interested only in outcomes, but a deeply theoretical and explanatory approach interested in understanding the real reasons why events and experiences come to be.

In considering the principled goals of ontological plausibility, empirical adequacy and practical utility in qualitative research, we have found Maxwell's (1992, 2012, 2017) typology of validity particularly helpful. Maxwell outlines how validity can be thought of in three ways. First, he describes *descriptive validity* which, rather straightforwardly, refers to the factual accuracy of the qualitative research account. This type of validity is concerned

with whether a researcher has invented, mistaken or distorted what they observed. For example, imprecise transcriptions, faulty memory, or selective note-taking could be threats to descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2017). An ethnographic study investigating a coach-athlete relationship, for example, ought to be concerned with accurately recording detailed notes shortly after observing an interaction or event during fieldwork. Descriptive validity, however, can be in the primary (direct) sense, concerning the relationship between the researcher and the observed event, or in the secondary (indirect) sense, concerning the relationship between the participant's observation of the event. So in the same study, the researcher might also conduct an interview with the athlete who recalls something the coach said. Descriptive validity is concerned with how accurately the athlete recalls what was actually said.

Secondly, Maxwell describes *interpretive validity* which he considers to be especially important for qualitative researchers because it has no real counterpart in quantitative research. Interpretive validity is concerned with the meanings held by participants and thus are subject to being transient as well as contested perceptions of the same event. From a realist perspective, participants' interpretations are an important part of the reality that researchers try to understand (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). In the coach-athlete relationship example, the researcher may gather data suggesting that the athlete perceives that he/she is being bullied and abused. The researcher may interview the coach separately and gather data suggesting that the coach perceives his/her disciplined coaching method as being character-building. These are two real perceptions of the same coach-athlete relationship. Interpretive validity is not concerned with distinguishing whether one is more accurate than the other, only that the research account reports these perceptions in the way that they are perceived and experienced, despite limited access to participants' experiences. Maxwell (1992) wrote,

> Interpretive validity is inherently a matter of inference from the words and actions of participants in the situation studied. The development of accounts of these participants' meanings is usually based to a large extent on the participants' own accounts, but it is essential not to treat the latter accounts as incorrigible; participants may be unaware of their own feelings or views, may recall these inaccurately, and may consciously or unconsciously distort or conceal their views (p. 290).

So while interpretive validity is different from descriptive validity because "there is no in-principle access to data that would unequivocally address threats to validity" (p. 290), he suggested that a crucial part of the empirical adequacy of the research account is the perspective of the participants of whom the account is about (Maxwell, 1992).

Maxwell's third type of validity is *theoretical validity* which is concerned with greater abstraction and, importantly, "refers to an account's function as an *explanation*, as well as description or interpretation of phenomena" (p. 291). Continuing with the same example, the researcher may also gather evidence that the athlete has low self-esteem, engages in self-harming and is considering retiring from the sport. The researcher may postulate that these things are the result of the experience of feeling bullied and abused, in combination with occupying a subjugated power position in the coach-athlete relationship, which was legitimised by a 'win-at-all-costs' performance culture within which the coach did not understand the harm that he/she was doing. We can see that theoretical validity relies upon descriptive and interpretive validity but necessarily transcends them both. Challenges to the validity of this theoretical explanation exist, but they usually refer to the terms used, the connections made and logic applied and hence are different from descriptive and interpretive validity.

For theoretical validity, the question is whether the applied theory has legitimacy in explaining the phenomenon, and how well it can stand the test against different forms of

evidence and alternative, rival theories. The validity of this explanation may be tested by intervening in certain aspects of the phenomenon (e.g., changing the power relationship between athlete and coach, the performance culture around their relationship, or the coach's knowledge of what the athlete is experiencing) and observing whether a change has occurred in the athlete's low self-esteem, self-harming behaviour and thoughts about retirement. Of course, even if a change has occurred, the explanation cannot be accepted as final, rather it could be, at best, the most plausible available explanation at a given time.

Taking this typology forward, we could say that research accounts with greater ontological plausibility can empirically and practically demonstrate that (i) their observations more accurately reflect the events of the real-world (descriptive validity), (ii) their interpretations more accurately reflect the perceptions and experiences of participants (interpretive validity) and (iii) their theorising can more coherently explain the events of the real-world and participants' experiences of them (theoretical validity). In this way, qualitative researchers can rely on certain somewhat enduring principles (not procedures) to guide the considerations of validity which are not thought to be merely "the way researchers seem to be conducting their particular kind of inquiries at the moment" (Sparkes & Smith, 2009, p. 494). Importantly, whereas the relativist approach rejects validity and the notion that a 'real-world' exists independently of researchers' conceptions of it and hence runs into inconsistencies and difficulties in dealing with the 'anything goes' problem, some of these realist suggestions explicitly help researchers identify how their descriptions, explanations and conclusions can be more or less plausible and defendable. Researchers could ask, how empirically adequate is the research account? How ontologically plausible is the research account? How much practical utility does the research account have?

Thinking with the realist approach outlined here allows reconsidering how SEP scholars might work with validity in qualitative research. The realist position advocated by Maxwell

rejects the focus on validity procedures in a list-like manner that is advocated by both positivists and relativists (whether they are universal or flexible lists) and reorients researchers to consider the various threats to the accuracy and plausibility of their interpretations and explanations. As Maxwell (2012) argued, no specific procedure can guarantee sound interpretations and true conclusions, but researchers can address different (descriptive, interpretive and theoretical) threats to validity and thus increase the credibility of their research account. Although realists and relativists have a different view on validity, they might actually use the same procedures (such as member reflections and critical friends) for different underlying reasons. To hopefully initiate a fruitful conversation in SEP, we have provided a list of questions and possible procedures that can help researchers work with threats to descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity in Table 2. However, we call for greater development and interrogation of these ideas as we work to advance our collective scientific practice.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to offer a critique of the burgeoning approach to quality, rigour and validity in qualitative SEP research based on the relativist paradigm and develop alternative principles based on a realist approach. Although this paper has been the first to introduce the realist perspective in SEP, the debates between realism and relativism have had a long history in other scientific fields, and proponents of both sides have been rarely persuaded to accept each others' views (see Hammersley, 2009; Smith & Hodkinson, 2009). While we do not expect that an agreement will be reached in this case either, we argue that it is important for SEP researchers to be introduced to both sides of the debate so that they have

a clear understanding of both relativist and realist claims and points of disagreement. To reiterate the key points of the paper, we offer the following conclusions:

(1) Similar to the relativist position advanced by Smith and McGannon (2018), realist scholars agree that knowledge is theory-laden, concept-dependent and fallible. They also agree that the complexity of the social world is a central aspect of qualitative research and that no standardised procedure can guarantee true interpretations and valid theoretical inferences.

(2) Realist scholars refute ontological relativism for its logical incoherence and maintain that relativism has mistakenly collapsed ontology to epistemology (Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy). Holding a constructivist epistemology and realist ontology is both possible and sustainable and is a pre-requisite for making knowledge claims that have some relevance beyond researchers' own mind-dependent reality.

(3) Realist research is fallibilist and seeks to scrutinise how our knowledge claims might be refuted, possibly because of descriptive, interpretive or theoretical threats to validity. Researchers, reviewers and practitioners can have more confidence in knowledge claims that demonstrate greater ontological plausibility, empirical adequacy and practical utility.

After outlining the differences in underlying assumptions and how validity is understood in relativist and realist research, it is important to note that in practice realist qualitative researchers often rely on similar methods as relativists, including ethnography, case studies, interviews and observations (North, 2017). Furthermore, narrative and discursive approaches that have been sometimes presented as closely tied to relativism (see McGannon & Smith, 2015) are also being applied from a realist perspective; for discourse analysis, see Fairclough (2005) and for narrative psychology and narrative analysis, see

587 Crossley (2000, 2003). Given that increasing number of SEP researchers are drawing on
588 realism in their empirical studies, it is necessary for reviewers and editors in the field to
589 become knowledgeable of this approach to provide a fair assessment of this research. We
590 hope that the critical debates and dialogues will continue with the common aim of enhancing
591 the validity of qualitative research in SEP.

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