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

62 Within these developments, many qualitative researchers have rejected the term ‘validity’
63 for its association with what is variously labelled as the ‘rationalistic’, ‘scientific’ or
64 ‘positivist’ paradigm as it is inappropriate for qualitative inquiry (e.g., Guba, 1981; Wolcott,
65 1994). Instead, qualitative researchers have often preferred terms such as trustworthiness
66 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or more broadly rigour (Smith & McGannon, 2018) or quality of
67 qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Tracy, 2010) when discussing the issue of
68 assessing different knowledge claims. Stemming from the extensive work of scholars
69 advocating the relativist paradigm, three conceptual papers in SEP (Smith & McGannon,
70 2018; Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Smith; 2009) have outlined the implications of relativism on
71 considerations of what they have variously termed the validity, rigour and quality of
72 qualitative research. These articles have been cited 1061 times (according to Google Scholar,
73 1.3.2019) and have therefore had a considerable impact on the methodological landscape of
74 the field. On the other hand, the potential problems associated with the relativist stance
75 promoted in this work have not been considered in SEP.

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

78 by Smith and McGannon (2018). To avoid the numerous issues associated with
79 (mis)labelling and caricaturising a body of work, we focus on the relativist approach as it is
80 explicitly described in the published articles (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes, 1998;
81 Sparkes & Smith; 2009), while also acknowledging that relativism has many different
82 variants such as ontological, epistemic, conceptual, cultural and moral relativism (Iosofides,
83 2012). Smith and McGannon's (2018) paper centres on ontological relativism which Smith
84 and Sparkes (2016) explained in suggesting that "qualitative researchers adopt a relativist or
85 internal ontology (...) Multiple, subjective realities exist in the form of mental constructions"
86 (p. 11). After scrutinising the problems associated with the relativist approach to
87 rigour/quality of qualitative research, this paper makes a constructive contribution by
88 outlining the philosophical assumptions of realism and develops an alternative, realist
89 approach to inform the assessment of qualitative research. In doing so, we align with those
90 suggesting that validity is not easily discarded as a concept for scientific research (e.g.,
91 Hammersley, 1992; Maxwell, 1992, 2017; Morse, 2002; Whitemore, Chase, Mandle, 2001),
92 and describe the principles and practical actions that realist researchers might engage with in
93 attempting to reduce threats to validity. We argue that understanding the main concepts and
94 arguments of realism is necessary for researchers, reviewers and editors to make informed
95 assessments of realist research as well as the on-going debates between realism and
96 relativism.

97 We consider this contribution important because the extensive critiques of the relativist
98 position from realist scholars in other fields over several decades have not been
99 acknowledged in SEP (Hammersley, 1992, 2008, 2009; Hunt, 1990; Maxwell, 1992; Porter,
100 2007; Sayer, 1992, 2000; Siegel, 1986), nor has the development of a (critical) realist
101 alternative in the related field of sport coaching (North, 2013, 2017). Although the debates
102 about realism and relativism are by no means new (see the exchange between Hammersley,

103 2009 and Smith & Hodkinson, 2009), a realist response is necessary within SEP because it
104 appears that SEP scholars are not aware of the wider dialogues and developments that are
105 taking place and, as we will show, realism has been misunderstood in previous SEP literature
106 on validity. Given Sparkes and Smith's (2009) and Smith and McGannon's (2018) invitations
107 to further dialogue and critical reflection in their concluding remarks, our contribution should
108 be a welcomed addition to the literature. It should also be noted from the outset that our
109 engagement with this debate here should not be confused with a lack of respect and
110 admiration for scholars taking a relativist approach whose work has undoubtedly played a
111 leading role in the advancement and acceptance of qualitative research in sports-related
112 fields.

113 **The Relativist Approach to Validity**

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

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

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

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

146 Smith and McGannon's (2018) recent, extensively cited¹ paper rearticulated the
147 problems associated with traditional procedural criteria discussed by Sparkes (1998) and
148 Sparkes and Smith (2009) and suggested that these procedures were based on philosophically
149 problematic assumptions about theory-free knowledge. After arguing that epistemological

¹ 277 citations in Google Scholar, 1.3.2019.

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

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

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

190 ***The ‘anything goes’ problem***

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

199 (2009, p. 494). However, the logic used to refute the “anything goes” argument needs careful
200 scrutiny.

201 The starting point of the relativist approach is the impossibility to rule out certain
202 interpretations and explanations on grounds for being *wrong*, because in “a relativistic world
203 of multiple mind-dependent realities there is no technical court of ‘last resort’ to appeal to in
204 order to sort out trustworthy interpretations from untrustworthy ones” (Sparkes & Smith,
205 2009, p. 493). Sparkes (1998) first countered the “anything goes” argument by suggesting
206 that, within a relativist perspective, “reaching agreement and passing judgment become
207 practical and moral tasks rather than epistemological ones” (p. 381). From a practical point of
208 view, Sparkes (1998) explained that “the process of sorting out conflicting interpretations and
209 applications for qualitative researchers occurs through debate, discussion, and the use of
210 exemplars” (p. 381), but without explaining which “practical” reasons are valid for accepting
211 certain interpretations and explanations. A similar problem remains for judging validity based
212 on morality. In any research project, the principal investigator, co-authors, research
213 participants and critical friends are often likely to have different moral principles. Sparkes
214 offered no guidance on whose morality will be trusted in passing judgement and why. For
215 example, in the case of conflict, is the researcher going to assert their own beliefs as superior
216 to participants’, or vice versa? Sayer (2000) noted that relativism is often promoted as the
217 ethically superior position that centralises marginalised voices, but it can equally serve the
218 interests of those in power as it can allow for dismissing others’ critique as simply residing in
219 a different discourse or paradigm. To sum up, if practical and moral principles are to be
220 prioritised when assessing different knowledge claims, a problem remains on judging whose
221 practical reasons and morality are (in)valid and why anything does *not* go.

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

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

234 Relatedly, a central thesis of Smith and McGannon’s (2018) article is that researchers
235 are allowed to flexibly modify their lists of criteria based on their different purposes and
236 situational contexts. While this appears to be a reasonable suggestion to protect against fixed,
237 procedural criteria, it becomes problematic when other researchers (and presumably
238 reviewers) might also “apply different criteria as they go about the practical task of judging
239 different studies” (p. 116). This leads to another contradictory situation that plays out in
240 Smith and McGannon’s (2018) criticism of researchers who selectively modify Tracy’s
241 (2010) list of criteria immediately before advocating for selectively modifying lists of criteria
242 (see pp. 115-116). Here, it appears that some of their rules are intended to apply to all
243 paradigms (e.g., everyone should abandon member checking and inter-rater reliability)
244 whereas other rules (e.g., the lists can be modified) are specific to relativists only. This
245 conclusion presents a difficult situation to manage for anyone wishing to understand and
246 evaluate a body of work across paradigms within academia, let alone practitioners working
247 with athletes, coaches and sporting organisations outside of academia.

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

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

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

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

277 The logical inconsistencies of relativist claims are further explained by numerous scholars
278 including Boghossian (2007), Hammersley (1992, 2009), Hunt (1990), Porter (2007), Sayer
279 (2000) and Siegel (1986, 1988). In our analysis, we suggest that the fundamental issue in
280 dealing with the “anything goes” problem from the relativist perspective is the reluctance to
281 commit to the notion that judgements about qualitative research are implicitly judgements
282 about how well our data, interpretations and theories refer to a ‘real world’ that exists
283 independently of researchers’ conceptions of it. By rejecting the existence of an external
284 reality, the relativist position removes a crucial anchor to which knowledge claims can refer
285 and therefore necessitates a reliance on methodology instead (akin criteriology). In contrast,
286 if a realist position is adopted, the validity of knowledge claims in the sense of how well they
287 describe, explain and theorise the ‘out there’ returns as a central concern for researchers. We
288 will now move on to exploring why combining ontological realism and epistemological
289 constructivism is both possible and sustainable and then outline a realist perspective on
290 validity.

291 **A Realist Alternative**

292 While no conceptual papers have discussed realism in SEP, realist philosophical
293 positions are increasingly being used in empirical SEP research (see Arnautovska,
294 O’Callaghan, & Hamilton 2017; Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2019; de Grace,
295 Knight, Rodgers, & Clark, 2017; Schweickle, Groves, Vella, & Swann, 2017) and sport
296 coaching theory and research (North, 2013, 2017; McCarthy & Stoszowski, 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 misrepresented 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-

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

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

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

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

358 [Insert Table 1 Here]

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

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

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

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

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

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

397 *The plausibility, adequacy and utility of research accounts*

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

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

414 pertains to the accounts or conclusions reached by using a particular method in a particular
415 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

553 [Insert Table 2 here]

554 **Conclusions**

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

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

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

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

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

580 After outlining the differences in underlying assumptions and how validity is
581 understood in relativist and realist research, it is important to note that in practice realist
582 qualitative researchers often rely on similar methods as relativists, including ethnography,
583 case studies, interviews and observations (North, 2017). Furthermore, narrative and
584 discursive approaches that have been sometimes presented as closely tied to relativism (see
585 McGannon & Smith, 2015) are also being applied from a realist perspective; for discourse
586 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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