



# Creative non-fiction in dementia: Men's experiences of sport-focused reminiscence using narrative methods

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## ABSTRACT

Qualitative research methodologies offer valuable insight into important aspects of the lived experience of dementia, and provide inclusion opportunities for those with moderate to severe cognitive impairment. Narrative methods such as creative non-fiction (CNF) offer an evocative method to utilise direct accounts of the experience of living with dementia, to attenuate professionals and academics to best practice approaches to supporting their needs.

Men face unique challenges in finding appropriate support to help them to maintain a sense of identity following a diagnosis of dementia. Yet, academic literature seldom uses the voices of those affected when highlighting this issue. This study presents ethnographic data written as a composite narrative using CNF, to explore how social connections are formed through a structured sports-based reminiscence intervention for men living with dementia.

This article demonstrates how the CNF approach can be applied to ethnographic data, offering a detailed description of the writing process applied in this study. In particular, we discuss in detail the ways in which CNF writing techniques have helped to enhance the communication of key mechanisms observed during fieldwork.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Qualitative methods in dementia research

Dementia is a condition associated with a variety of progressive characteristics including cognitive impairment, memory loss, and difficulties in communication. Many clinical trials have utilised quantitative or mixed methodologies in carrying out research with people with dementia. However, many people living with dementia have been excluded from participation in quantitative methodologies owing to unhelpful assumptions about their capabilities or mental capacity (Bond and Corner, 2001). Positivist approaches position people with dementia as passive 'subjects', thus offering little phenomenological understanding of their lived experiences (Gibson et al., 2004).

Instead, interpretivist theories such as symbolic interactionism can offer meaningful participation in knowledge acquisition (Gibson et al., 2004), and resonate with the prevailing philosophy of person-centred care for people living with dementia. According to symbolic interactionism, individuals actively construct the world they perceive around

them; they are a product of their relationships and interactions with others, and the beliefs and perspectives conveyed by society (Reynolds and Herman, 1994). This maintains that a person living with dementia can be supported to maintain their personhood through meaningful interactions and relationships with others in the social world (Blumer, 1969; Kitwood, 1997). The symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that an attentiveness to the interactions and relations between people affected by dementia can form the basis of understanding their interpretations of the social world around them, irrespective of their condition or abilities (Kelley, 2017; Surr et al., 2021). Research methods which permit in-depth observation and meaningful representation of such interactions, such as ethnography, may be a key ingredient to advancing knowledge about the lived experience of dementia.

Those observing the social impacts of dementia recognise that the condition presents unique challenges to men; this is based on the societal expectations placed on them to cope with illness within a dominant masculine discourse (Sass et al., 2020; Tolhurst and Weicht, 2017). Men living with dementia may therefore perceive themselves to be marginalised from society by the physiological changes related to the condition.

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Some men may work to combat marginalisation by reinforcing their sense of self through interactions with others (Boyle, 2017; Tolhurst and Weicht, 2017).

However, the pressures of retaining a masculine persona of self-reliance and strength can impact the degree to which men seek help with the onset of dementia, and the extent of their involvement with both formal services and existing social networks for support. This puts older men with dementia at risk of becoming socially isolated and experiencing loneliness (Beach and Bamford, 2014), which can further undermine their health and wellbeing (Courtin and Knapp, 2015). Current understanding of the experiences of marginalised older men, in particular those living with dementia, is lacking. This provides a rationale for adopting a research methodology which amplifies the voices of men living with dementia to enhance understanding of their experiences.

### 1.2. Ethnography

Ethnography is a methodology rooted in symbolic interactionism; permitting understanding of a person's experiences through direct and sustained contact with individuals and their interactions with other people in their natural environment (O'reilly, 2012). Ethnography grants freedom to use multiple research methods such as observations, formal interviews, first-hand researcher accounts and photography. Ethnography is advantageous in dementia research as the range of methods are inclusive for people with moderate to severe dementia who, due to their cognitive impairment, may be unable to participate in formal interviews (Kelley, 2017; Surr et al., 2021).

In conducting an ethnographic study, the researcher aims to understand what groups, and individuals therein, perceive as important and meaningful. They do this by viewing the social world as far as possible through the insider's (emic) perspective using observation of and dialogue with participants (O'reilly, 2012). In ethnography, the immersive reconstruction of the social setting can be achieved by blending in as a participant, before observing and recording written accounts of events and interactions (O'reilly, 2012). Ethnography can involve different approaches to observation depending on the researcher's position (as they are too considered a 'research instrument'); relative to their degree of participation in, and social relatedness to, the group under study. The full extent to which the researcher is inside or outside the subject under study can be discussed through accounts of reflexivity (O'reilly, 2012; Wolcott, 1999).

### 1.3. Creative non-fiction

Creative non-fiction is a technique for analysing and writing narratives grounded in real-life experiences (Narayan, 2007; Smith et al., 2015). CNF may be written in the first-person in the form of a memoir (Bloom, 2003; Tilden, 2004), but the existence of rich data provided by multiple contributors for this study warranted the use of third-person perspective to draw together thematically linked quotations, observational passages and reflexive accounts. Similar approaches have been observed in sociological studies of sport (Douglas & Carless, 2014), and narratives surrounding disability in war veterans (Carless and Douglas, 2017). Narrative approaches such as CNF are more sensitive to temporal aspects of experience, which resonate with the aims of sharing coherent and evocative first-hand accounts from men with dementia. This technique yields ethical advantages when compared to other narrative methods such as life histories or journals as, whilst remaining factually true to the data, the formation of composite characters and events protect participants' identities (Wiles et al., 2008). This ethical advantage carries a caveat, held by writers of CNF, to uphold the highest ethical standards by writing a story which aligns as closely to the truth in the data as possible (Bloom, 2003). By presenting data as amalgamated stories, the finished product retains a sense of the 'whole'. Compelling personal accounts can become fragmented and obscured by the

technique adopted by some narrative reports of presenting illustrative extracts from multiple sources under thematic headings (Smith et al., 2015).

Carless and Douglas (2017) argue that in domains such as professional sport, whereby the prevailing norms are centred around masculinity and performance, the experiences of people marginalised by injuries or health conditions are stifled. Parallels can be drawn to the context of men coming to terms with the onset of dementia who must incorporate narratives of loss, stigma and illness into their everyday lives. As Frank (2004; in Carless and Douglas, 2017) notes, for the wider social world to recognise marginalised stories, they must first be told. Creative non-fiction lends itself to the ethnographic methodology as a way of drawing together real-world scenarios in an accessible way (Carless and Douglas, 2017; Douglas and Carless, 2014), with the aim of rendering them relevant for a wide range of audiences. The collaborative process by which a researcher retells narratives can enable the reader to position themselves in unfamiliar situations and share experiences with the person telling the story (Cheney, 2001, p. 1), encouraging their own empathic understanding (Caulley, 2008).

### 1.4. Social interventions for dementia

A number of social interventions have aimed to promote social engagement for men adjusting to a dementia diagnosis (Clark et al., 2015; Kinney et al., 2011; Milligan et al., 2016). One such activity gaining popularity in the UK is structured, sports-based reminiscence offered by the Sporting Memories Network (SMN, 2020). Their community-based groups offer weekly physical sporting activities and facilitate discussions of past sporting events. Sessions are open to anyone over 50, but anecdotally generate higher attendance from men (Clark et al., 2015). Past evaluations of sporting reminiscence have demonstrated positive outcomes, such as improvements in social and cognitive functioning and mental wellbeing (Coll-Planas et al., 2017; Schofield and Tolson, 2010; Watchman et al., 2015). Through sharing sporting experiences men can demonstrate their knowledge and abilities as well as accessing ways to strengthen their sense of self, a contributor to well-being for people with dementia (Sass et al., 2020).

In spite of an increased interest in sporting reminiscence in academic research, there is a lack of literature highlighting men's first-hand reactions to sporting reminiscence and the ways in which such activities can promote social inclusion among their members. Previous studies have relied predominantly on quantitative reports, with the voices of people living with dementia represented by a minority of research publications, and limited evidence of participatory action in research design and conduct (Smith and Phillipson, 2020). However, research outputs which emphasise the first hand experiences of people living with dementia can encourage positive attitude changes towards those affected by the condition, leading to benefits such as improved quality of care from professionals (George et al., 2014). Research methods which employ creative approaches, such as storytelling, can be especially persuasive in this regard (George et al., 2011; George et al., 2014; Smith and Phillipson, 2020). This would suggest that creative non-fiction can promote engagement with the lived experiences of men living with dementia, and deepen understanding of the impact of social interventions such as Sporting Memories.

In response to the gap in understanding around men's experiences of sporting reminiscence, this article has two aims: I) To demonstrate the usefulness of using creative non-fiction in dementia research to represent the voices of those affected by dementia, and (II) to explore how men living with dementia experienced the social connections formed within Sporting Memories groups. An ethnographic approach was used to understand the ways in which Sporting Memories groups could attract and include men living with dementia, with the presentation of findings as fictional narrative to explore the perceived benefits to taking part.

## 2. Methods and materials

The ethnographic approach in this study drew on a combination of participant observation; semi-structured interviews; session materials; and researcher reflexivity. Although visual field data was also recorded in the form of photographing session activities, only written data from observations and interviews were used to form the CNF in this article. Ethnographic fieldwork took place within five Sporting Memories groups across the north of England, which were purposively sampled to offer variety in terms of location, group size, and range of activities. Data collection spanned a period ranging from 4 to 11 months at weekly groups; the duration of each session was between 90 min and 2 h. Two of the participating groups took place in community libraries, and three were held in function rooms at football grounds.

This study was granted ethical approval by the Leeds Bradford NHS REC (ref: 17/YH/0366). Data were collected by the lead author CSs. Participants could opt to take part in observations, or interviews, or both. Where group members with dementia lacked capacity to give informed consent advice of a personal consultee (relative/friend) was sought, in accordance with the requirements of the Mental Capacity act (Department of Health, 2005).

Five individuals took part in observations only, and 46 took part in both interviews and observations. All were offered the opportunity to be interviewed with a spouse or friend; ten interviews were conducted as a dyad on the participants' request. See Table 1 below for demographic information of study participants.

### 2.1. Reflexivity

Fieldwork was carried out by the lead author. As a young woman with limited sporting knowledge, my place as an outsider was apparent to others in the field. This may have placed me at a disadvantage, as trust may have been harder to develop without an obvious connection through sport. However, my previous experience of working with people living with dementia made me feel comfortable in the group settings, and attenuated me to the ways in which group members with dementia communicated and responded to those around them. Additionally, my characteristics meant that I was more noticeable to members of the groups, meaning that people were more likely to take an interest in me and the purpose of my visits. A prolonged period spent in the field allowed group participants to become familiar with my presence, and boosted my interest and appreciation for sport. This was achieved with encouragement from the group members who were compelled to nurture my sporting knowledge and gave me valuable insight into their personal sporting histories.

### 2.2. Data analysis and representation

The full corpus of ethnographic field data were analysed using a reflexive iteration of Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013), which is a widely used and versatile approach to interpreting qualitative research data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Traditionally, TA is a systematic technique which allows 'patterns of meaning' or themes to be highlighted and explored across a full set of data, painting a picture of the ways in which people think and feel about a topic of interest (Braun

and Clarke, 2006).

Given the exploratory and experiential aim of the study, it was necessary to maintain an alertness to novel concepts within the data and allow the analysis to take shape using a combination of inductive and deductive interpretations. As TA is not tied to any particular epistemological perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2013), it offered flexibility to accommodate the depth and breadth of data, and the symbolic interactionist perspective taken in this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA has also been used in previous ethnographic in studies of men-only weight management groups (Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2018) and nursing (Cruz and Higginbottom, 2013; Purc-Stephenson & Thrasher, 2010).

### 2.3. The CNF writing process

Following the completion of TA (Braun and Clarke, 2013), I selected resonant quotes and observations for each theme and placed these into an order that appeared to show a narrative progression, as a scene or conversation would in real life. Once these components were arranged I thought about the types of participants that were most commonly reflected by the data I had chosen, building these individuals into a scene. I dove into writing a description of the scenario and composite characters around these data, with a situation and first-person narrative in mind. A lengthy editorial process of discussion and re-writing as an authorship team followed. Changes during this process included moving from a first-person (from the researcher's perspective) narrative to the third-person, to give greater prominence to the different voices and perspective of the research participants, and a large host of characters were reduced to two or three to aid the focus on individual experiences and aid the reader in getting to know, in more depth, particular characters within the narrative. This back-and-forth between the authors occurred several times before the story was refined so that it both reflected the themes identified from the data and worked as a narrative that was rich and engaging for the reader. During this process I also sought feedback from relatives and friends, to gauge a male perspective on my writing and ensure the CNF communicated a narrative story rather than an academic piece of writing.

A creative non-fiction appears far devolved from traditional presentations of ethnographic data, and quality requires skill to achieve (Smith et al., 2015). I utilised dialogue to reflect genuine interactions observed during fieldwork to reflect relationships between characters, and descriptive language to 'show' rather than 'tell' important points in the story (Caulley, 2008; Smith et al., 2015). Good stories require complex central characters, such as a hero (ine) and a villain (Narayan, 2007; Smith et al., 2015). For the presentation of the non-fiction in this study, I chose to develop characters who most closely represented the similarities between participants, namely husband and wife dyads working to manage the negative impact of a dementia diagnosis. However, some key differences between participants also gave value to the narrative, such as the unique experiences of members with a professional sporting background.

By introducing characters with expressed thoughts, emotions and relationships with one another, this method of presentation can convey further the meanings behind the words and actions of genuine participants. To support this, I used direct group member quotes within an appropriate context combined with descriptions of actions, body language and thoughts to 'go beyond' the linguistic content of the quotes. These were sometimes truncated for clarity, but naturalistic features of speech were retained to maintain a conversational quality to the dialogue. This was a remnant of an inclusive style of transcription as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013), allowing important information about meaning and context to be gleaned from features such as pauses, nervous laughter and changes in volume. In describing the minutiae of actions from the characters, we are able to imagine the people in the scene, their movements and their body language. This can help us to imagine what the person might be thinking or feeling in that situation.

**Table 1**

Interview participant demographics.

Participant type	Number of participants	Age range (mean)
Men with dementia	12	59-82 (73)
Spouses (all female)	13	60-82 (71)
Additional group members (all male)	9	64-75 (70)
Facilitators/volunteers	12 (5 male)	23-79 (51)

Further transitional dialogue and descriptive sentences were written connect the data together, and help the narrative to progress through the story. Although these were author-generated, my reflexive fieldnotes ensured that these sections of text remained as true to the real-life setting as possible. Credibility was achieved through application of thick description of the setting in notes and reporting, and the use of the CNF style which emphasised 'showing' in addition to 'telling', triangulation of findings through the use of multiple data sources, and member checking with participants. This was achieved through follow-up visits to participating groups to discuss findings in a simplified format (not including the completed CNF at this stage) and request feedback on the conclusions drawn.

There are disagreements over whether the creative non-fiction technique is simply a genre of representation, or an analytical process (Narayan, 2007; Smith et al., 2015), because proponents of the method are reticent to outline strict methodological parameters. However, writers of CNF can utilise existing criteria to self-evaluate the quality of their writing. Our appraisal of the quality achieved in this study will be discussed in detail following the presentation of findings.

### 3. Results

This section presents the narrative theme 'creating a deeper connection' and reflects discussions between male group members with dementia and their partners in relation to the social connectedness formed within the sporting memories groups. This story has been selected as it forms an introduction to the characters to the story, in addition to reflecting a range of different mechanisms in conveying the thematic content. The story is set within a local Sporting Memories group in their fictional hometown of Esterley, reflecting the experiences of spouses Richard and Dianne, and the volunteer facilitator Nick. The data presented under this theme will then be explored in relation to the contribution to knowledge, and the quality and appropriateness of creative non-fiction as a method of presentation.

#### 3.1. Creating a Deeper Connection through Sporting Memories

Nick arrived to his voluntary post at Esterley library with enough time to remove his coat and fill the kettle before the rush of early arrivals. Moments later, founding members Dianne and Richard appeared in the doorway, smiling in eagerness. The two of them were layered in so much winter clothing that Nick hesitated for a moment before recognising them. "Is it cold out there, folks?!" The two of them chuckled as they began unzipping their coats. Dianne helped Richard to take his seat around the table, looking around expectantly for others to arrive until she regained her senses and darted over to raid the biscuit selection before the rush began.

The community room was a long, narrow section of the library, and not the usual place to host a group of sports enthusiasts. Children's paintings and posters of colourful characters from beloved books filled the walls, but Nick had done his utmost to cover the tables along them in old football memorabilia, newspaper clippings and brightly coloured games equipment. Nick flicked on his laptop and, after some tutting and tweaking of cables, the large television flickered to life and a video reel began to play of famous moments from local matches.

No sooner had Dianne left when Richard stood with a wobble, walking with an unsteady gait toward the gents' toilet. He shuffled carefully across the room, placing his hand on the back of chairs and table edges to support each step. Being Esterley FC's top centre forward in the sixties had taken its toll on his joints; it seemed as if he could lose his footing at any moment, and Dianne constantly fretted about his refusal to use a walking stick. Nick kept a watchful eye on him, knowing he had waited for the chance to use the facilities alone; he would sooner take his time to walk somewhere than accept a steady arm from someone close by.

"Erm- Nick?" Connor, a young member of staff from the library shook

Nick out of his trance. He was struggling to keep his hands around the edge of a dog-eared cardboard box overflowing with booklets. Nick's face lit up and he quickly placed his hands underneath the box. Connor allowed him to take its weight, stepping back and awkwardly pulling at fresh creases in his shirt.

"Brilliant!" he placed the box on the table and grinned at Dianne, who was walking towards the pair with a coffee mug in each hand, crunching the last mouthful of a chocolate digestive. "We've had a donation of some match day programmes. I expect Richard's name will be in a fair few of these." He leafed through the top layers before turning back to Connor. "You ought to have a look through some of these lad, you'd be amazed at the stuff in them. Like this advert here, look how much pie and peas at half time used to be! You wouldn't even know how much that is in today's money would you?" Connor nervously shook his head and smiled, his lips firmly closed. He had been working at the library for little over two months, and reminded Nick of his own son as a teenager. He was quiet, but conscientious and kind, and the group members seemed to really enjoy having him around.

Nick nudged Connor gently. "Now Connor, let me introduce you to our guests of honour. Here we have Richard and Dianne Graves. Richard is a big star around here." He nodded in the direction of the esteemed footballer, who was timidly making his way back from the toilet. "He scored record numbers, even against some of the greats. Charlton, Hurst ... boys from the '66 England squad."

Connor's eyes widened. "It's great to meet you, s-sir!"

Nick chuckled, as Dianne gave Connor a reassuring grin.

"Have you been coming here long?" He asked.

"Oh-y- yes!" a smile spread across Richard's face. "We're here every Wednesday, rain or shine. It's all sport."

Dianne nodded. "That's right, it suits us down to the ground. Even when he wasn't playing ... you've always been football daft haven't you Richard?"

"Yes, yes. Yeah, there's some kind of topic I can get interested in certainly yeah. Otherwise you just go to a coffee morning, and they just sit there and talk about ... nothing really but they go and have coffee and cake and that. But they just ... I'm not saying I'm above them or anything like that but they ... they talk about ..."

Dianne squeezed Richard's hand, helping him finish his thought. "Some of the other groups we've tried have been a bit ... touchy-feely for you haven't they love?"

He nodded. "I'm there talking to people on a par with-with me sort of thing. I'm-mainly in one way, a lot of our friends never played football or things like that, but I can associate myself with-as a sportsman with the people here. We've all got a lot in common and they've all-you know, got lots to say to each other and er ..."

Nick put a reassuring hand on Connor's shoulder. "Sport is that one thing that binds so many blokes together isn't it? There's nothing quite like it I don't think. I think you get that sort of ... camaraderie in sporting people. Where you don't get that sort of friendliness in everyday life. In sporting people you do, don't you? You're in the changing room and then there's ... it's like being in the changing room. To me it's-everybody feeds off each other-somebody says summat then you just take it on again to the next person and ... well that's what happens."

Dianne nodded knowingly, "I think it is simply because love it or loathe it, it's always been in your life, from being a child. So no matter what-what your memory is, you've got a basis for talking about sport. And-it does help the men in particular ... everybody has-has a memory, which is a lovely basis for something because that is the one thing ... that it's touched absolutely everybody. So even- and me, I've always been around sport but I couldn't run, couldn't catch a ball ... some of the funny stories about them taking tumbles and their injuries and the like I can relate, and it's just as good fun."

Richard had been nodding along vigorously with everything Dianne said. He chuckled, "we just go off at a tangent to anything! But just starting off with something sporty always ... yeah it's the ... it's the camaraderie that goes on there ... I know they have a bit of banter but



it's just a nice feeling isn't it? And if there's a little odd swear word comes out from yours truly ...” Dianne glanced at Richard with a raised eyebrow, trying to contain her smile; he didn't show his cheeky side as often nowadays, and she could tell he was raring to go today. He responded with a grin, throwing a wink at Connor. Richard's warmth made the young librarian feel at ease, as he realised they had something fundamental in common.

Nick: “Yeah ... and you'd have to pick a very good topic for everybody to stay interested I think. I mean I don't think you could do one on work ... you might be able to do one on ... I don't know really! I don't think you can! You know I mean what is there ... work? Politics, it would be dismal wouldn't it ... it'd be awful, really. You need summat that gets people together and ... it does.”

Within half an hour the session was in full swing. People sat in small clusters laughing together over old pictures; others were engaged in heated discussion over a 'spot the ball' competition. Dianne looked on as she watched her husband at a nearby table, in a joyful conversation with his friends as they huddled together over old newspaper clippings. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him make the first move to interact with other people, and now he was laughing and sharing a joke with friends he had known long ago from his days at Esterley FC. Richard leaned back in his chair and sighed contentedly. He could sit and talk about the old days for hours. He had reconnected with lots of old faces over the last few months; mates he'd played with at the club who brought back so many good memories. Then again, they'd reminded him of some embarrassing ones too. Richard could be a hot-head in his younger days, and he'd thrown some blinding tantrums on the pitch when he didn't get his way, but he knew he had the skill to get away with it. This would happen often before he and Dianne married; before they had three little mouths to feed. He kept his head down once he realised he needed the work.

Richard's friend Chris had nearly regained composure as he finished his last anecdote, another story about Richard getting his own back on their “stubborn bastard” of a manager. His face was flushed from trying to contain the volume of his laughter. Chris had begun his relatively short footballing career with Esterley, joining the under-21s as a midfielder towards the end of Richard's run. Richard's reputation as the best centre-forward the club had ever seen lingered long after his retirement, and Chris had idolised him; even through his 'bad boy' years. Although he loved to think about the old days, Richard felt a pang of relief to see his wife well out of earshot of their conversation.

Chris mirrored Richard's posture, sighing and landing his palm on the table. “It's great this, remembering the good old days.” Richard grinned as Chris continued. “Things were just ... better back then, we didn't know it at the time like, but ... football nowadays ... I wasn't interested in any of them really cos it's this back passing and all this and yet now ... alright with England, I mean they're playing a really good game now so yeah it's really worth watching now ... but you know, all those years that we haven't seen any success at all. Football had a big part in my life. But er ... nowadays it doesn't of course and not from the fact that I can't do anything, but from the way the sport has gone in this country to my-mind ... but yeah sport was always the top of my mind really.”

“Yeah I think that's a big part like, it-it's really good to be able to talk about, the game you played you remember that.” Richard's gaze shifted into the distance, as more images of his glory days flicked through his memory. “And ... sometimes, that's all you've got when you're older and you're not able to go out and recreate them.”

Chris nodded with enthusiasm. “It's quite interesting when somebody'll talk about something from their-cos, obviously most of the people here remember more stuff from probably the sixties and seventies and stuff like that. And the seventies was sort of, when I was starting to get into sport and going to watch it, so, I can relate to quite a few things that people have seen they were older than me but they were watching as I was starting to watch them.”

Richard nodded thoughtfully for a second, before sitting upright, his

face fallen. “You always have to remind me about being an old git compared to you don't you.”

Nick had tried not to make too much of a fuss over Richard and Dianne when they first arrived at the group in its early days, almost two years earlier. He just couldn't help himself; he felt like a boy again as he started listing his favourite moments from Richard's career. Nick reeled off stories of penalties he had flawlessly snuck in time and time again, replaying the action vividly in his mind. Dianne had chuckled, recognising the tell-tale look in Nick's eye of a star-struck fan. He hadn't wanted to jump to the wrong conclusion, but he could sense something was different about Richard. He still had a twinkle in his eye, and a wide, toothy grin; but whenever he started to speak, it seemed like he was searching through a fog to find the right words in a conversation. Nick twigged instantly what could be affecting him but struggled to find a way to ask them about it.

Dianne confirmed his suspicions a few weeks later, even though Nick had only intended to ask her about their first impressions of the group.

“What a difference it's made being here!” Dianne exclaimed with a sigh. “You know ... I do worry about him sometimes,” she admitted, her gaze fixed on Richard in a fit of laughter as he fumbled with his ping pong serve, watching the ball bounce out of view behind a shelving unit. His face lit up with a shining smile as his opponent rolled his eyes, muttering insults under his breath as he strode after the runaway ball. Richard's playful exchange gave her an overwhelming sense of comfort and familiarity, like hearing a beloved song on the radio she had forgotten existed.

“I feel like I worry about lots of things with him now, but just I don't know if he's getting the chance to open up to other people. I tell anyone that'll listen when I'm struggling but it's never been in his nature. He just ... gets on with it.”

Nick folded his arms, his sleeves rolled up to reveal a scattering of faded, blue-black tattoos. He followed Dianne's eyeline towards Richard. “It's a sad fact, that's the way a lot of us blokes tick, isn't it?”

Nick had been a military man, and he embodied the quiet stoical nature Dianne sensed in her older brothers after their many years of serving in the army. Dianne turned to look at Nick and smiled faintly. “Oh ... I wish it wasn't. This stiff-upper-lip and all that. It was alright when he was young, he's never needed to see the doctor, always just worked ... nothing seemed to trouble him. These days I don't know what he's thinking or feeling.”

“Yeah, I mean there's, there's a stigma around talking about mental health and-ailments that aren't physical *anyway*. And that's ... it's definitely truer I think of older men. You know they don't want to talk about how somebody else feels never mind themselves, don't wanna know about that! Well they do I mean, to a degree ... you know, but it is ... even those small amounts is an awful lot more than what it would be otherwise.”

It reassured Dianne to know Nick understood where she was coming from. He sighed, leaning back against the wall and turning slightly towards Dianne. “I think- I mean just based on what I've seen from the guys that come to the group, men in general will talk about anything apart from how they feel.”

“It's good that they're just talking then, I suppose.” Dianne looked down, an expression of sadness washing across her face. “And of course now he's ... he's got dementia. I wonder how he'll come to terms with that.”

“Oh ... I'm sorry Dianne.” Nick hesitated, unsure of how to respond.

She looked up at him again, giving him a reassuring smile and shaking her head. “We've known for a while, it's just getting used to it now ... they think it could be from heading the ball ... but then maybe it's just Alzheimer's-that's the usual one they get, isn't it. Our consultant thinks his playing days could have something to do with it, anyway.”

Nick grimaced, shaking his head. “Blimey, I'd never considered that could do it ...” he was interrupted by the sound of jeering from the other side of the room, as Richard overshot the other side of the ping pong table and the ball rolled to a standstill at Nick's feet. He picked it up and

held it out for Richard, who chuckled as he walked over to retrieve the ball from his outstretched hand. "I suppose there's been a lot of conversations, about heading the ball. And the long-term damage. There's always been conversations about how heavy and solid and you know, er ... what an impact the old style of footballs had. And certainly for Richard, well you were renowned for scoring goals with your head weren't you?"

Richard shook his head as he caught the end of Nick's conversation with his wife. "I tell you what, if one of those leather balls hit you ... you felt 'em. *Especially* if we were playing in the rain!" he whistled. "But you took it, you'd knock a hundred of them in if you could, for the good of the club. You just got on with it. Football was my life back then ... it still is." He looked back at his opponent who had placed his bat on the table, arms folded, awaiting his return to the game. "And I wouldn't change a bloody thing about it."

#### 4. Discussion of the creative non-fiction

The above story has offered an alternative approach to communicating ethnographic study data, by moving beyond what was 'told' to the researcher during fieldwork and drawing the reader into the real-world setting, to better understand the actions and interactions between the characters.

This story renders the mood of character interactions as metaphors for important features of real-life events. The description of the energy Richard conveys before the session began in comparison to his persona later in the story could be seen to represent the way participants described the impact of the social intervention on their moods, especially for those who were unable to articulate their feelings for themselves. Richard experienced pleasurable connections to others through their shared interest in sport. A qualitative approach in this study allowed the exploration of these relationships, with the dialogue facilitated by the creative non-fiction approach introducing analytical discussion of this concept in the form of a two-way conversation. Nick and Christopher's replies helped to summarise the concepts which Richard and his wife explored in this section, suggesting that a group unattached to a unified topic could potentially expose Richard to 'touchy-feely' discussions which could make him feel uncomfortable. This view is reflected in existing literature, based on some men's feelings towards support groups for testicular cancer (Seymour-Smith, 2008). The participants in Seymour-Smith's study were more likely to accept support if they felt a degree of respect towards other attendees, something which Richard showed by feeling he was alike to other sports enthusiasts in his group. Groups of men who identify similar characteristics with one another can begin to adopt socially feminised behaviours that would typically be 'off-limits' in groups of men, such as engaging in health behaviours and monitoring their weight (Bunn et al., 2016; Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2019), suggesting an indirect approach to health-related topics that may be difficult for some men to acknowledge.

This theme also exemplifies the ability of a group, wherein people share similar circumstances and experiences, to create a 'safe space' for individuals to avoid feelings of awkwardness or stigmatisation. People living with dementia may feel greater motivation to find out about supportive groups because of the way the condition is perceived in society. According to Festinger, when people experience uncertainty in adverse situations, they are more likely to seek out other people who they can affiliate with in order to make sense of how they should see the world, and precipitate feelings of normalcy (Davison et al., 2000; Festinger, 1954). This could be motivated by situations where a person is diagnosed with an illness such as dementia and their existing social positioning becomes compromised and therefore, they must seek other social affiliations. In contrast to thematic analyses involving multiple contributors, where the features of individuals are not usually described, CNFs can use composite characters and some common features of the participants can be reflected in descriptions within the text. In this scenario this has helped to demonstrate that Richard's frailty and gentle

demeanour is only part of his character, and we learn more about his history and boisterous nature as this pervades around those with whom he feels most comfortable.

The experience of attending Sporting Memories groups attenuated us to the importance of personal narratives. The men who were open about their diagnosis of dementia told their life stories with pride, regularly repeating these in the company of insiders and outsiders alike. Richard explicitly defined himself as a sportsman. His references to his career and sporting past demonstrate ways in which men can strive to inform others of their masculine qualities to maintain their sense of self (Boyle, 2017; Tolhurst and Weicht, 2017). His involvement in Sporting Memories allowed him to feel a similar sense of masculinity to his younger days, typified by the use of a traditional masculine lexicon in descriptions of himself ('most groups of lads'). He enjoyed many instances of close interaction with other men during work and recreation, bridging the gap between his past and present selves (Bartlett, 2007). In this narrative, quotes were combined to illustrate meaningful comparisons or connections pertinent to the theme, such as the likeness between Richard's former working environment and the group of men he has found at Sporting Memories. The use of the changing room setting in Richard's example is characterised in part by a gender-segregated environment. He explained how members of a team can foster a shared identity within an enclosed boundary such as a changing room, and how this can facilitate feelings of camaraderie or togetherness (Carone et al., 2016). He likened this to the familiar feelings of camaraderie he felt during his time working in a male-dominated industry, indicating that Richard experienced multiple scenarios in which a shared masculine identity enabled bonds between him and other men (Bunn et al., 2016). Storytelling can help in conveying certain masculine qualities of interactions, for instance by injecting playful mockery into the story which can be inherent in all-male environments (Coates, 2003; as cited in Watts, 2007). This is brought to life in the narrative by the playful mockery and banter between Richard and his old friend.

Bunn et al. (2016) claimed that homosocial environments have a potential to become counter-productive in terms of engaging men in supportive interventions. Groups comprising of only men can begin to collude in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and create oppressive, hyper-masculine environments (Bunn et al., 2016). This may not always be the case; for example, in interventions which have a typically feminised basis, men may prefer to be in a same-gendered environment (Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2017; Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2019). However, it is possible that the impact of ageing and ill-health on male self-perceptions of masculinity may render them uncomfortable in overtly masculine environments, and a gentler atmosphere which is fostered by, and inclusive of a female influence may be preferential for this reason. This narrative provided the opportunity to show the nature of Richard and Dianne's relationship through her actions, and the ways in which Dianne supported her husband while encouraging him to maintain his social connection to the outside world.

Richard's wife expressed her concerns about his willingness to seek and accept help for his emotional needs. As Nick raised with Dianne, ill health can be stigmatised among groups of older men, and health conditions which are lesser visible or understood can marginalise men further (Link et al., 1997). Nick alluded to a stoical approach to coping with life-changing conditions such as dementia, commonly associated with masculine behaviour (McCaughan et al., 2011; Tolhurst and Weicht, 2017). However, masculine ways of coping are amenable to change and can be context-specific (McCaughan et al., 2011). Many facilitators taking part in this study viewed Sporting Memories as a vessel to encourage discussion and awareness of health-related issues, and subsequently a potential solution to this problem. By connecting in the context of sport, group facilitators believed that meaningful, supportive dialogue would follow as relationships developed. This effect has been observed in overtly masculinised environments, in particular within the construction industry, whereby the support felt among close colleagues encouraged uptake of health initiatives (Hanna and

Markham, 2019). Furthermore, fieldwork for this study coincided with the release of a high-profile BBC documentary exploring the relationship between dementia and football (BBC, 2017). Many group participants watched this programme, which seemingly led to an increased consciousness of the dementia-football link within the groups and seemingly normalised the topic of dementia within a Sporting Memories context.

Those with career histories in football had been left with enduring physical injuries and potential health complications in later life. An unexpected finding under the topic of sport and health consequences was that many participants who were former professional footballers did not regret having headed the ball throughout their career. However, those who retired as a consequence of injury did feel let down by their clubs, or by the game itself. This could suggest that those who may have developed dementia as a consequence of head trauma are forced into adopting an 'accept and move on' mentality, in order to cope with a fate in later life that they are powerless to change. This may also provide further evidence to suggest Richard wished to downplay the impact of

dementia on his life (Pearce et al., 2002; Tolhurst and Weicht, 2017; Tolhurst et al., 2017). Instead, in settings such as Sporting Memories they could realise the extent to which others valued their former selves and celebrate their achievements (Gearing, 1999). Dianne's attempts to maintain lightness and take care of Richard in this narrative have been written as a metaphor for many of the spouses at Sporting Memories groups who would strive to contribute as helpers to maintain the flow of sessions and show their gratitude for the group facilitators through their actions.

Through creative non-fiction, additional context can be given in the form of thoughts, internal monologues, and summaries. In this section we are able to experience reminiscence in action and reflect on previous experiences, learning how these have shaped impressions in the present. Similarly, describing Richard's non-verbal reactions to the situation in this section negated the need for an explicit verbal representation of his feelings, which is something which the men in this study were not always acutely aware of or able to articulate. This demonstrates a way of 'showing' the same reactions that the men showed to me as an observer

Quality criterion	Main characteristics through which quality is achieved
Worthiness of the topic (Smith et al., 2015; Tracy, 2010)	The rationale for exploring this topic in light of personhood and social identity for men living with dementia through CNF has been explored in detail in the introduction to this article. Personhood and gender studies in dementia is both interesting and highly relevant based on current trends of academic research, and the introduction of sporting reminiscence contributes new ideas to the existing knowledge base.
Rich Rigor (Tracy, 2010)	The duration of fieldwork and number of sites visited, in combination with a variety of data collection methods, should provide compelling evidence towards the depth and breadth of ethnographic findings, and fidelity of the story to the environment and events under observation.
Sincerity (Tracy, 2010) or Expression of a reality (Smith et al., 2015)	The reader is alerted to the position of the researcher through section 2.1, 'reflexivity'. This, combined with the inclusion of characters unfamiliar with the experiences of the main protagonists in the story allows the reader to understand the subjective reality of interactions and events.
Credibility (Tracy, 2010) or evocation and illumination (Smith et al., 2015)	Our findings are written through triangulation with multiple sources of data, utilising direct quotes and verbatim notes from the field. The narrative is evocative and emotionally engaging, and expressions of emotion were corroborated by member-checking with participants during the fieldwork phase where possible.
Resonance (Tracy, 2010) or Aesthetic Merit (Smith et al., 2015)	We have endeavoured to create a narrative which is compelling, and moves the reader to understand the meanings conveyed through skilful and quality representation.
Significant contribution (Tracy, 2010)	This study represents the first known usage of the CNF method to present findings related to the experience of dementia, and provide a detailed description of how the method can be applied for future reference. This article therefore contributes considerable methodological knowledge to the given area of interest.
Ethical (Tracy, 2010)	This study has been conducted to the highest moral and ethical standards. Section 2, 'Methods and Materials' outlines the process of obtaining ethical approval for the study and ensuring informed consent for participation.
Meaningful Coherence (Smith et al., 2015; Tracy, 2010)	The narrative resonates and engages with existing literature, as demonstrated in the discussion. The findings are drawn from data gathered through justified methods associated with ethnography.
Incitement to action (Smith et al., 2015)	The narrative is written in a way which should encourage positive action around the subject matter, and convince readers of the importance of meaningful social interventions which support the personhood of people living with dementia based on a shared interest.
Focus (Smith et al., 2015)	The findings have been analysed thematically to retain a focus around 'creating a deeper connection' through Sporting Memories, the central organising concept of the study.

Fig. 1. Quality assessment in this study.

through a written narrative.

Given this is the first study to use creative nonfiction in the context of presenting qualitative research findings related to dementia, it is important to consider whether this approach has been successful and worthwhile in this study. Tracy's (2010) 'big tent' criteria were followed alongside Smith's (2015) taxonomy of quality creative non-fiction writing, which contain several overlapping or related concepts. Fig. 1 presents these criteria alongside an evaluation of their use in this study.

Creative nonfiction is a technique which is credited with producing research which is evocative and provokes empathic responses (Carless and Douglas, 2017; Caulley, 2008) and fulfils what Tracy (2010) refers to as 'aesthetic merit'. Dementia can be a powerful and highly emotive subject to explore through qualitative research, which is why the creative nonfiction technique was deemed a good fit for presenting the data in this study. In telling the stories of participants with meaning and depth of emotion, this can help to change perceptions of the lived experience of dementia (George et al., 2014). During the writing process in this study, it was common for the personalities of individual participants to seep into the characters in the stories. It is often recommended that authors allow familiar personalities to influence characters in creative writing (Wilson, 2001), as this can facilitate depth and realism.

It is important to consider the limitations of the CNF approach. In presenting data in a longer form, the constituent meanings under the theme must be retained by the reader, to be discussed at the end of the passage. However, the multitude of ways in which a theme can be conveyed through CNF may help to evoke the 'feeling' behind the data, before this is ready to be discussed. We as female researchers hold differing perspectives to the men whose experiences we have conveyed in the CNF. However, the ethnographic approach accepts that an outsider will never truly appreciate an insider's view (Fetterman, 1998; O'reilly, 2012), and this has been accounted for by adherence to the words and actions of participants, as well as actions to share findings with participants for coherence and resonance. Through use of observational and interview methods, we set aside assumptions about men's attitudes to health, dementia and social participation in their communities and learned about the individuals contributing to this study (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). In terms of the wider study, participating groups were limited to those within commutable distance of Leeds, England. These groups were entirely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, and this lack of diversity limits the extent to which this narrative account can represent the views of men living with dementia.

This study presents the first instance of creative non-fiction in relation to the provision of post-diagnostic support for dementia. This has added rich colour to our findings, allowing participants to remain visible as fully-formed characters with real-life experiences, conveying the emotions they experienced in the setting. This also enabled rich ethnographic observational data, which may not be fully reflected in conventional presentations of research findings, to add depth and context to the stories.

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#### Author contributions

Cara Sass: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Visualisation. Claire Surr: Writing – review & editing; Supervision. Lorena Lozano-Sufrategui: Writing – review & editing; Supervision.

#### Submission declaration

An alternative version of the thematic interpretation of the results in this manuscript is available as a doctoral thesis; the version presented in

this article has not been published elsewhere.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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