



Reflections on hermit crab creative non-fiction methodology: Examples from a narrative study of running fathers

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we draw on research employing creative nonfiction (CNF) in psychology and the sport sciences, to outline the value of one untapped CNF methodology: the hermit crab essay. We expand the methodological repertoire for CNF in arts based research by advocating for hermit crab CNFs that borrow from ready-made structures, to present ‘real research material’ in newly creative and accessible ways. We use the r/AmItheAsshole online advice community as our borrowed structure, to create examples ‘in action’ from a narrative study of running and fatherhood. We outline reflections researchers might consider if using this form of CNF.

1. Introduction

In a contemporary qualitative research landscape that includes arts-based research (ABR), researchers in the social sciences are using the arts to “create new ways to see, think and communicate” (Leavy, 2018, p. 2). Qualitative researchers are exploring arts-based data (e.g., literary (non)fiction, poetics, vignettes, images, drawing, painting, performances) to make sense of, and show, the human condition, along with (re)presenting research findings using these expressive art forms (Chamberlain et al., 2018). Some researchers are using ABR in the social sciences under the umbrella of ‘narrative inquiry’ (Bochner and Riggs, 2014; Freeman, 2018). Narrative inquiry is a broad term for theories and methodologies that focus on stories as cultural sites of analysis because people use stories to make sense of their identities, experiences, and actions (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Stories are contextualized in narrative resources that provide people with a template from which to structure meaning, actions, and identity-related stories, including the stories they hear about others (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). Researchers subscribing to these assumptions seek to make use of stories to express identities and lives, using methods such as ABR, to show socially situated complexity (Bochner and Riggs, 2014). One way that researchers are accomplishing this, is by using creative nonfiction (CNF) to communicate research findings in artful and creative ways (Smith et al., 2016).

The central aim of our article is to explore the value of CNF as a

methodology to communicate research findings with a narrative sensibility. While on the fringes of qualitative research in psychology (Douglas and Carless, 2018), the use of CNF as a creative analytic practice (CAP) (Richardson, 2000) that tells a story grounded in research data employing literary conventions, is gaining traction in the sport sciences (Cavallerio, 2022; Smith et al., 2016). Building on that work, in this article we explore a less used form of CNF from the literary realm—the hermit crab essay (Miller and Paola, 2012). Our intention is to outline the value of hermit crab CNF as an innovative way to push CNF representation of qualitative research in new directions. We will detail more about hermit crab CNFs shortly, but for now they can be conceived of as writing forms that ‘borrow’ from structures (e.g., grandmother’s recipe, address book, rejection letters) to express content in creative and less expected ways (Miller and Paola, 2012). To accomplish this, we will show some examples of hermit crab essays constructed from a larger narrative study on running and contemporary fatherhood.

Our ‘borrowed shell’ is from an online confession and advice forum: r/AmItheAsshole. The r/AmItheAsshole forum serves to convey identity dilemmas identified in an example provided from our narrative analysis study of fathers who run, in the context of involved fatherhood. This forum is on the American social network internet community Reddit, and is a subreddit (i.e., micro-community based on a topic) with over 16 million subscribers, seeking and providing, feedback about relationship issues. The premise of r/AmItheAsshole is that an original poster (OP) posit a dilemma beginning with “Am I the asshole for ...” (current issue)

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or “Would I be the asshole if ...” (potential issue). Readers then weigh in with a rating scale of Not the Asshole (NTA), No Assholes Here (NAH), You Are the Asshole (YTA), etc., and offer solutions in a supportive but ‘keep it real’ manner (Golia, 2021). To be clear, we are not looking at the forum itself, but use its affordances to present content from running fathers’ words to show our narrative theme of identity dilemmas, using hermit crab CNFs.

To achieve our aims, we outline some tenets of CNF research methodology, followed by a discussion of the hermit crab essay in the literary realm. We then outline qualitative research examples of hermit crab CNF in psychology and the sport sciences, to discuss the value of the approach for representing research findings. To contextualize our hermit crab CNF examples in the r/AmItheAsshole structure, we provide an overview of our narrative study from which these CNFs are constructed. We then detail our rationale and process for using the online forum to show identity dilemmas from our research findings, followed by two examples of dilemmas represented as hermit crab CNFs. We conclude with reflections centring informed principles when using this form of CNF to advance qualitative research in psychology.

2. Creative non-fiction: an ABR methodology

Using CNF as a research methodology may be unsettling for researchers seeking objectivity or if they seek non-fictional stories to approximate the truth (Barone and Eisner, 2012). For others, the use of CNF is not unsettling when the line between fiction and nonfiction is regarded as blurred, which destabilizes the notion of a clean and straightforward methodological ideal (Barone and Eisner, 2012). Outside of qualitative research contexts, novelists, journalists, and other writers supposedly tethered to ‘just the facts’, have used metaphorical, evocative language, and storied formats, blended with real life happenings, to make their work accessible to audiences (Gutkind, 2012; Miller and Paola, 2012). Qualitative researchers in the social sciences are using similar literary techniques (e.g., creating characters, descriptive language, dialogue, engaging the senses) to create stories from ‘real data’ (i.e., interviews, observations, field notes) to make findings engaging, accessible, and persuasive (Caulley, 2008; Richardson, 2000).

CNF contrasts with representing ‘data’ (e.g., interview quotes, media excerpts) peppered throughout a research findings section to ground interpretations in theoretical accounts (Smith et al., 2016). Some researchers have termed this practice as ‘story analysis’ whereby stories are objects of study, and narratives that frame them are placed under analysis (Smith and Monforte, 2020). Researchers using CNF accomplish analysis *in and through* writing using creative forms of representation to *show* lived subjectivity, relational lives, and theory in research findings, rather than in a carefully edited research report (McMahon, 2016; Smith et al., 2016).

While it is beyond our scope to outline all the reasons why researchers might choose CNF (see Smith et al., 2016 for a discussion), we view CNF as a methodology to show an array of research findings and theoretical points, rolled into one paper or (re)presentation context. As a form of ABR, this approach is not an easy way out of writing up research findings. Our experiences with CNF align with others who have written about using this ABR craft: it can be analytically difficult (Douglas and Carless, 2018; Orr et al., 2021). Uncertainty is part of narrative inquiry; stories can be contentious and out of control (Smith and Sparkes, 2009). A carefully crafted CNF may thus fall short of intentions and open to multiple interpretations once researchers ‘put it out there’ (Orr et al., 2021). CNF representations also allow others to witness, reveal foreclosed self-identities, and create new or different understandings (McMahon, 2016).

Although CNF is less utilized in psychology, a special two volume issue of the journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on ABR (Chamberlain et al., 2018), highlighted some CNF research. One example from Douglas and Carless (2018) showed how CNF stories presented in a hybrid format of confessional tales evocatively reveal ethical tensions

and learnings in the research process. The stories were artful and aesthetic renderings of the authors’ (un)doings intertwined with participants’ voices in psychological contexts (e.g., mental health). Researchers in the sport sciences have also embraced CNF to communicate findings to show what this form of ABR inquiry offers in terms of understanding and social change (Smith et al., 2016). Cavallerio’s (2022) edited collection titled *Creative non-fiction in sport and exercise research* brings together 11 chapters centring sport/exercise examples, to show the ‘what, why and how’ of CNF. Pertinent to our focus on parenthood and sport, researchers are constructing CNF vignettes (i.e., short stories using specific characters and moment) grounded in narrative inquiry, to explore recreational sport and motherhood intertwined with tensions of life-balance and gender ideologies (e.g., McGannon and McMahon, 2022; Ritondo and Trussell, 2023). These examples are but a slice of CNF research in the sport sciences, giving a nod to the potential of CNF as a methodology to push qualitative researchers to communicate findings differently.

2.1. The hermit crab essay: a less tapped creative non-fiction

One way that researchers may think differently when presenting findings is to consider hermit crab CNF, which is termed a ‘lyric essay’ by literary CNF writers (Gutkind, 2012; Miller, 2015). CNF writers Miller and Paola (2012) outline lyric essays as bending, or even abandoning, CNF conventions that qualitative researchers often emulate by arranging life experiences into a clear plot by creating characters, time sequences, and vivid scenes to spark imagination and senses, to form a coherent story (Cavallerio, 2022; Smith et al., 2016). Lyric essays may be fragments or juxtapositions of points without beginning, climax or end, even meandering in ways that do not make sense at first glance. Put simply, “lyric essays do not necessarily follow a straight narrative line” (Miller and Paola, 2012, p. 127), finding their home in four categories of writing: flash non-fiction (e.g., brief essay, sometimes in poetic structure), collage (e.g., placing textual or image fragments wholly something new), braided essay (e.g., weaving multiple voices/points repetitively, arriving at a textured whole), and hermit crab essay. While each of these categories of CNF writing holds potential value for qualitative ABR representation, we focus on hermit crab CNF in greater detail given our aims.

The hermit crab essay was originally conceived from Miller and Paola’s (2012) geographic landscape in the Pacific Northwest, USA, where they observed how hermit crabs occupy shells of other mollusks, to protect their exposed underbellies. By occupying the shell of another, these crabs form a hybrid creature that is protected, but (re)animated in different ways, depending on the shell it inhabits (Singer, 2023). A hermit crab CNF then, is when writers borrow from existing forms (e.g., fiction, poetry, theatre) to express narrative selves and/or material that may not have a home in traditional CNF writing (Miller and Paola, 2012). Mundane formats (e.g., blogs, recipes, email exchanges) can also be used to encase ‘real material’ in newly creative and animated ways (Singer, 2023).

One of the more well-known hermit crab essay examples in the literary realm titled *We regret to inform you*, shows the above points. Brenda Miller used the affordances of rejection letters to structure a self-reflection journey grounded in relational stories (Miller, 2018a). Some entries conveyed humour about youth (e.g., October 12, 1970, “Dear Young Artist, Thank you for your attempt to draw a tree ... With regret and best wishes, The Art Class Andasol Avenue Elementary School”). Other letters conveyed emotional loss to ‘peer below the surface’ about miscarriage (e.g., October 26, 1979, “Dear Potential Mom, Thank you for providing a host home for us for the few weeks we stayed in residence. It was lovely but, in the end, didn’t quite work for us ... With gratitude, Ira and Isabelle”) (Miller, 2018a). Miller has discussed the themes (e.g., children/lack thereof, searching for self through loss and life roles) conveyed in the letters, and the value of the ‘shell’ to create shared learning for readers (Miller, 2015). Another example discussed

by Miller and Paola (2012, p. 134) is Eula Bliss' *The pain scale*. This hermit crab CNF used a scientific scale to measure pain from 0 to 10, to structure content on the pain intersecting with Bliss' life, while problematizing how science tries to measure the immeasurable.

There are numerous examples of hermit crab literary CNFs for those interested in using this form of CNF for qualitative research representation. We recommend delving into these, to get a sense of this writing style, and its potential. Adrian's (2018) book in the literary realm aptly named *The shell game*, is one source with over 20 different CNF hermit crab essays, showing how recognizable shells convey moving and thought provoking life meanings. While the essays used different mundane forms (e.g., trivia board game, auto theft report, recipe for apple pie, 1970s movies played in a theatre), they each created an artifact out of experience, transforming difficult or everyday life moments, into a new kind of story.

When using hermit crab CNF to communicate qualitative research findings, the term 'essay' is a misnomer, as researchers are not writing essays in the literary sense. Additionally, depending on the 'shell' adopted to structure content of research findings, there are multiple affordances one can adopt, departing from essay formats. Examples of this work in qualitative research and psychology are rare, but some related work grounded in poetic inquiry can be viewed as hermit crab CNF. Miller's (2018b) study of frail older Australians living in a residential care facility, created five poems from interviews to show themes linked to leisure activities in different ways (e.g., activities make life worth living, activities remind one of loss and aging bodies, disability and/or cognitive decline). Participants' words from interviews were (re) arranged into poems using rhythm, emotion, imagery, metaphors, tone, and humour (Miller, 2018b). Miller invited readers to reflect on the narrative poems in contrast to traditional modes of qualitative representation. Although the poems appear short and simple, the artfully arranged words from participants into poetry forms convey loss, grief, and visceral realities of aging in new and different ways for researchers in psychology to witness, learn from, and ponder.

We have also used poetry as hermit crab CNF to make aspects of (re)traumatization of researchers visible and bring trauma informed practices to the fore (McMahon et al., 2024). In this paper, the lead author detailed how she moved from an abuse victim in sport to abuse prevention advocate, intertwined with identities of research expert and survivor. She constructed three poems to reflect on (re)traumatization that occurred from one journalist, other swimmers contacting her, and social media abuse, when she spoke out in the media. The first poem was titled *when words evade* to show silencing and the role of poetry to express her 'voice'. Two other poems used words/phrases, and rhythm techniques to convey social media abuse (titled *The second wave*) and harm from the journalist who questioned her credibility and researchers who publicly lauded the journalist (titled *L'assassin de l'écriture*). While these hermit crab CNFs did not represent research findings, they invited readers to witness experiences and consequences (e.g., self-harm, alcohol abuse) that can occur in the research process (McMahon et al., 2024).

Other hermit crab CNF examples come from sport science researchers who have borrowed structures akin to the hermit crab CNF style, to show research findings. McMahon et al.'s (2017) ethnodrama of elite swimmers used a theatre production, to weave autoethnographic vignettes and media fragments of (self)representations of elite swimmers. The authors used the structure of theatre drama (e.g., stage and lighting direction, costume dress, scripted Acts) to show front stage vs. backstage content of athletes' narratives of body angst and public surveillance(s). This ethnodrama is an example of how research findings can be presented in a borrowed 'shell' (i.e., stage play), to show a dominant and damaging ideology of 'slim to win' literally getting under the skin to influence relational stories. A final example comes from a study of athletes, injury, and chronic pain using 'therapeutic letters' to represent research findings as CNF (Day et al., 2023). Twenty one participants wrote a letter to their 'younger self' to provide wisdom and/or

advice. The letters were placed under dialogical narrative analysis (i.e., explored content of stories and effects), with findings transformed into a 'collective letter' CNF. Like Miller's (2018a) 'regret to inform you' letters, Day et al.'s (2023) collective letter to a younger self used affordances (e.g., "Dear Younger Self, I am writing as an older wiser self ...") to structure, and contrast, their findings with traditional literature on chronic pain/injury. The collective CNF letter cast younger selves as heroes rather than victims of pain, problematized fixing pain through medical practices that silence or trivialize suffering and showed both acceptance and isolation of emotional stories for younger and older selves (Day et al., 2023).

While different in topic matter and CNF orientations, the literary and qualitative research examples outlined allow us to suggest some reasons why researchers might consider using hermit crab CNF to represent research findings. First, like the hermit crab's underbelly, qualitative researchers are sometimes faced with material that feels exposed and in need of a home. Such material might include communicating difficult or sensitive topics, as shown in the research examples above, in ways that allow for witness, empathy, or additional insight from these 'new kinds of stories'. Participants might also express non-linear or fragmented stories, or 'small talk' about ordinary events connected to relational identities and cultural meanings worth highlighting (Georgakopoulou, 2015). In these cases, an unexpected or mundane shell might be useful to structure content through the 'borrowed form' to convey these moments in creative, evocative, and transformative ways.

Researchers might also centre topics and findings by choosing a structure that explicitly relates to aspects of themes/findings (Miller, 2015). For instance, McMahon et al.'s (2017) use of a theatre play allowed them to show how public (e.g., self-posts on social media) performances of the body using the front stage affordance, are internalized into private performances using the affordance of backstage self-presentation. Day et al. (2023) sought to explore how present (older) selves are impacted by past (younger) selves, navigating chronic pain, to provide research and therapeutic insight, using younger self letters to structure findings. Our hermit crab CNF used r/AmItheAsshole forum to structure our study findings using certain affordances of the platform. We explore these points in detail in our rationale and process section.

2.2. Contextualizing journeys of fathers who run: a narrative study

As our CNF hermit crab essays were constructed from our narrative study on fatherhood and running, it is useful to outline some context of the study. We sought to build on research exploring involved fatherhood, fluid masculinities, and sport. Researchers have shown that fatherhood meanings have shifted as gender relations and family policies have changed, with some men striving to be 'involved fathers' (Atkinson, 2022). Some fathers may experience guilt when leaving children to work and/or fear not living up to involved father ideals, but also feel pulled to conform to traditional masculinity ideals (e.g., self-preservation, family providers) (Hunter et al., 2017). Involved fatherhood may also affirm 'caring masculinities' and/or 'hybrid masculinities' that allow for caring and traditional masculinity ideals through autonomous practices (e.g., leisure/hobbies, hard work) (Eisen and Yamashita, 2019). Sport is a fruitful space to learn more about socially constructed fatherhood (Cohen, 2016; Fletcher, 2020), particularly regarding how sport intertwines with tensions of fatherhood and masculinities in narratives. Although men are shown to negotiate tensions related to fatherhood and work-life balance (e.g., sport and parenting responsibilities) (Fletcher, 2020), the exploration of fathers' recreational sport pursuits is rare (Cohen, 2016).

We used narrative inquiry grounded in a relativist ontology and an epistemology of social constructionism to expand this understanding. From this perspective, identity conception "shifts from selves and identities as individualistic, real, and interior-based, to them being constructions derived from narratives and performed in relationships"

(Smith and Sparkes, 2009, p. 5). From a relativist narrative inquiry perspective, father runners' experiences and actions are afforded and/or limited by stories (e.g., running provides freedom, running takes time from family) that allocate identity meanings (e.g., involved father, runner), in narratives (e.g., good fatherhood).

After the first authors' institutional ethical approval was obtained, we interviewed five competitive athlete fathers 35–47 years of age (mean age 39.5), about their journeys as athletes and parents, and how they negotiate training and family spheres. Our interest was in recreational runners who compete in distance races (e.g., half marathon, marathon), as they negotiate careers outside of sport, in contrast to elite athlete fathers. Competitive running fathers also train for performance goals in addition to fitness and/or fun, which may provide new insights into the fatherhood, sport, and masculinity nexus. The men in our study were from North America ($n = 3$) and the United Kingdom ($n = 2$), identified as White, worked 30–50 h per week in middle-class employment, and devoted 6–15 h or more per week to training depending on time of year/training cycle. All men had female partners, at least two children, with one child under 7 years of age. Interviews were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, by treating participants' stories as objects of study, to identify narratives that frame them (Smith and Monforte, 2020). Our analysis identified a narrative theme threading stories: identity dilemmas in the context of hybrid masculinities, in a good fatherhood narrative. In what follows, we outline our rationale and process of constructing hermit crab CNFs in the borrowed structure of r/AmItheAsshole forum, to show multiple features of this narrative theme.

2.3. Appropriating r/AmItheAsshole: rationale and process

The research team consisted of two women (authors one and two) and one man (author three), with extensive experience as qualitative researchers in parenthood and sport topics. We followed a 'critical friend process' to discuss potential 'shells' to structure study findings, used previously when constructing CNFs (McMahon et al., 2024). We followed CNF literary writers Miller and Paola's (2012) suggestion of becoming familiar with hermit crab CNFs, attending to how they express different thematic content. The first author led this process by reading sources (e.g., Adrian's book *The shell game*) to get a sense of which writing forms might be useful to show our study's narrative theme features. This practice is an essential step to get a sense of this craft, and its origins (see Day et al., 2023; Miller, 2018b). Because we sought a shell related to themes/findings of gendered dilemmas and fatherhood, some were less useful than others. For example, grandmother's recipe for soup or a math test to structure findings made less sense.

We used CNF literary writer Miller's (2015) brainstorming process of choosing a *potential* form to "practice using our imaginations, filling in details, and playing with the content to see what kind of effects we can create" (Miller, 2015, para. 2). During this process we tried 'therapeutic letters' (see Bacigalupe, 1996) to structure thematic content, which led to the first author placing participants' words in creative ways to communicate hypothetical dilemmas to partners (e.g., Dear Jan ... I've tried to be a good husband and father, but lately it seems ...), other runners (e.g., To the Pathfinders ... I enjoy running with the group, but the time pressure is too difficult), and to their children (e.g., Dear Jasmine ... I'm scared I'm going to screw you up by being selfish with my running). While this process worked, the research team settled on online advice forums because the affordances lent themselves to explicit dilemmas related to relationships (Golia, 2021). Our intention with the therapeutic letter example is to show that more than one shell might be appropriate, but one may work better. The choice of suitable shell was not accomplished using a formulaic linear process and definitive set of steps. We encourage an informed, but fluid 'trial and error' process, whereby researchers try different forms to see what unfolds as they play with content from participants' words to best express narrative themes.

Our additional rationale for choosing r/AmItheAsshole (AITA) was

symbolic given our interest in gendered narratives, and that relationship advice forums have shifted from feminized spaces to spaces where men enter the conversation for help seeking online (Golia, 2021; Neville, 2012). The research team zeroed in on AITA both by chance and by design. Authors one and two were avid consumers (though not posters) of this subreddit, and it was serendipitous that the AITA affordances lent well to expressing identity dilemmas from study findings. To get a further sense of the language and tone on the forum specific to our themes, the first author searched for posts on 'fatherhood' and 'fatherhood and exercise'. Related to this point, we noticed that people in the r/AmItheAsshole online community confess problems in colloquial ways to examine relationship conflicts, linked to fluid identities and snippets of their lives. The spirit of this structure aligned with how the men in our study expressed identity dilemmas related to fatherhood and running in short story examples from their everyday lives.

Using this subreddit as our hermit crab CNF also allowed us to use affordances of the structure to show nuanced tensions that men experienced, in similar, and unique ways. To accomplish this, the first author constructed AITA posts to create a 'composite character' using words/dialogue from the men's interviews, (re)ordered in creative ways. Speaking styles of participants were retained and constructed in the colloquial style of the forum. To be clear, conversations between different posters in our CNF are not actual conversations from the interviews but have been imaginatively (re)created. These (re)creations were refined by the research team, and the third author further weighed in as to the authenticity of men's voices, as a father, coach, and avid sportsman. We also used the forum's conversational structure to show relational identities and hybrid masculinities intertwined with dilemmas, within, and across, the men's journeys as fathers who run. The men weighing in with judgement in each CNF are also composite characters created to 'make the long story short' using participants' words again (re)ordered in new ways. Our intention with this practice was to verge on polyvocal 'mansplaining' to show social-relational meanings of fatherhood vs. running tied to identity dilemmas couched in fluid masculinities in involved fatherhood narratives.

The AITA format ultimately allowed us to play with showing a socially desirable identity position of 'not being an asshole' (i.e., accomplishing an involved father identity and caring masculinity) vs. being on the cusp of 'being an asshole' (i.e., not manning-up as a good father by adjusting training and running). The use of this 'asshole affordance' in conjunction with the creation of composite characters, allowed us to communicate social-relational pressures men negotiate to maintain running and identities as involved fathers. Affordances such as upvotes/downvotes were not included as we did not think these added to the narrative features.

2.4. Identity dilemmas: responsibility vs. freedom

In what follows, we provide two examples of AITA CNF posts and responses as they might appear in the structure of the forum. Consistent with self-identity expression in this online space, as part of the process outlined above, to create composite characters, the first author used social/virtual personas (i.e., internet IDs to present and anonymize the self), used abbreviations related to the identities of 'Am I the Asshole' (AITA), 'Not the Asshole' (NTA), and included the Reddit bot that summarizes the dilemma by the original poster (OP), to which others respond. To further show the value of hermit crab CNF for qualitative researchers in psychology, we organize the AITA posts into conversations centring on everyday life and mundane events (Georgakopoulou, 2015), using the concept of 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig et al., 1988). Like stories in narrative inquiry, ideological dilemmas are embedded in social-relational contexts, and challenge conceptions of dilemmas as simple 'either or choices' emerging from attitudes in the mind (Billig et al., 1988). Instead, ideological dilemmas are common-sense notions people use to decide how they should think and act, displayed in socially constructed identities and tensions worked up in conversations, in

contextual discourses (Billig et al., 1988).

Researchers in psychology have explored ideological dilemmas in media discourses, to learn more about caring masculinities and ‘new fatherhood’ identity (Hunter et al., 2017). Findings showed that media accounts of fathers who take on primary caring roles find themselves in the ideological dilemma of gender equality in principle, but practical constraints in practice. These dilemmas make it difficult for uptake of involved fatherhood identities and practices against persistent normative expectations that men are financial providers (Hunter et al., 2017). Our AITA hermit crab CNF could be valuable for psychology researchers interested in showing ideological dilemmas worked up in conversations in narratives. Applied to running fathers the concept of ideological dilemmas is shown on AITA as men negotiate identities as involved fathers (Atkinson, 2022), and display a hybrid masculinity (i.e., caring-hegemonic) through an ‘athlete identity’ (Cohen, 2016). Specifically, our CNFs using composite characters posting dilemmas, and men who respond, centred dilemmas of responsibility vs. freedom, whereby men’s responsibility to others (children, partners) conflict with a ‘runner’ who wants to be true to himself to be ‘free to run’. The freedom to ‘be a runner’ is sometimes at odds with family responsibilities which also make them better men as involved fathers. This is a freedom they enjoy that resists traditional notions of masculinity. The subreddit’s affordance of ‘not being an asshole’ vs. ‘being an asshole’ coalesces these dilemmas shown in the following CNFs.

2.4.1. AITA for continuing my running when it makes me a better father? - HighwaytoHellandBack-1981

Sport is a big part of my life and I hope it always will be. These days I train to compete in distance running races. I’m not an elite athlete by an stretch, but I am quite competitive for my age classification. I’ve been married to Jules for almost 9 years, and we have one child (Lucas) who is 3, and another baby on the way. Before Lucas was born, I was quite selfish in terms of dedication to my training and sport. Now with Lucas being a toddler and my wife working fulltime and pregnant, I try to be a good husband and father, juggling time between work, training, and quality family time. Jules and I also trade off day to day caring for Lucas (e.g., bathing or feeding him).

Lately when I’m back from a run, I see that Jules can’t deal with him, so I changed how long I train and when I do it, to be more present and supportive. But now I’m burning the candle at both ends; I’m in a cycle of getting up early or going out late, to fit it all in. The training is something I enjoy and the ‘me time’ helps me deal. Jules says that something must change because it isn’t fair to us as a family; the regular training schedule works for me but not the family and the modified schedule does not work for anyone. I agree with Jules – but there must be a way to support her and keep the family harmony, without giving up my running. I believe that I’m not the same person when I don’t train. AITH for trying to find a way keep running if it makes me a better husband and father?

Judgement BOT AITA

OP offered the following explanation for why they might be the asshole: wanting to run to better oneself despite creating stress for themselves, his wife, and child - is he an asshole if he continues?

Dude_Tiny2001

No Assholes Here (NAH) – But a tricky situation. It looks like you don’t fully see what she goes through to be a mum when you aren’t there, but she might not fully get all what running does for you. As a father of two myself, I’d open some communication. Sit down as a team, see what give and take there is so you can care for your family and yourself.

Dough-NutSprinleslova

NAH Jules and the OP are clearly stressed as working parents, and parents-to-be. Not their fault. But running can be recalibrated, kids and

wives are more precious. Scale back and just run for a hobby, otherwise you risk being a selfish AH and less balanced.

Beast_Millennium

NAH but the OP is a bit rigid in mindset. You’re a father with another bub on the way and running time seems presented as an either or option. Pick shorter races or find ways to bring the family (if they’re game). Might even be nice to have them at races if that’s possible? That way your kids see the importance of exercise, and everybody wins.

Morpheus77

NAH but borderline YTA mate. Two words: running stroller. You’ll have time with the current kid and new baby, plus get your running in, while allowing your wife her own time and a break.

UPDATE: AITA for continuing my running

HighwaytoHellandBack-1981

Thanks for providing feedback. It made me re-evaluate how much my running means and why I need it to be better. I communicated it to Jules and we discussed it. I realized after writing the OP and reading the comments just how much my sport is entwined in who I am. Now that the new baby arrived a month ago (another boy!), my running really helps me with who I want to be, the way I want to feel, and be more chilled out. Jules and I plan things a bit better since my OP so I’m not so wound up with fitting training in. She really sees it now as she acknowledges when I need to get out, then she immediately sees a change in me when I come back.

With two kids now I feel like I’m more responsible. I keep a schedule for when I can train but only if it’s not disrupting everyone. This way I’m more available. So, backing off on my training a bit was an easier decision than I thought. Every day is a new experience and now that Lucas is growing, I noticed he sees my training, and he loves it. That’s a huge motivator when he loves seeing me go out and come back. It’s like this thing where I get back, give Jules a break by having something planned for Lucas and me. Sometimes I take him for breakfast or he’s giggling when joining me for stretches after his bath. Maybe ITA for saying this but being a parent has made me better athlete.

3. New post

AITA for telling my extended family to mind their own business about my training and running races?

i_run forWalkers038

This is honestly bothering me as its been going on for about two years off and on since my second child was born. I am a 38 year old father who runs. I used to do triathlons about 5–8 times a year but gave them up once Isobel was born; she is the 3 year old sister to Phoebe our other daughter who is 7 years old. My extended family are all into triathlons and do them regularly. They all have kids but they work around it. I couldn’t train and be involved with my girls, do fulltime work, plus quality time with my wife. The training is all consuming– mind, body, and soul- and so I quit two years ago when Isobel was one year old. Now I do half marathon races. I only do ones near home or travel if the family can come but those are rarer because they don’t work for family. I think I’m a good runner, and I could be better, but I only run 3xs a week plus one long run Saturday mornings, before the girls are up. This keeps me ‘race ready’ and I’m fine with my times, which are good enough at this point in my life.

All of this sets the stage for some family members (i.e., brother, brother in law) offering unsolicited training and racing advice. They text me training plans to which I politely say, “thank you”, and then go about my schedule. I can’t remotely begin to try this stuff because it puts me back in rigid training and time-consuming mode and it’s a ‘lose-lose’. Then they follow up – “Hey Walker, how’d that plan go?” and “why

don't you get a babysitter and do a long run" or "your race time is too slow, why don't you bring Phoebe for a play date, and we'll do speed drills". What they are offering does not work – it's not a 'win-win' for running and the family. And yes, I've told them this politely, to no avail.

The last straw was my brother in law and brother accosting me at Tesco's and shitting on me for not putting my 3 year old in a stroller to go in a road race with them. I told them to F all the way off - and mind their own business.

Now no one in the family is speaking to me and my wife got dragged into it. She says I should take it on the chin – AITH for telling these people to mind their own business about my running?

Judgement BOT AITA

Original Poster (OP) offered the following explanation for why they might be the asshole: extended family are giving them unsolicited running advice and pressing to do training/races that disrupt his goals as a father. He told them to mind their business– is he an asshole for telling them off, and should he apologize?

WouldaCoulda

NTA even though you told them to F-off. This is on your extended family to back off and stop being AH's. You are trying to be a better husband and father by changing your running for your life. I totally get why the old 'triathlon way' isn't you anymore. For what it's worth I think your bro and bro in-law are AH for projecting onto you. They seem worried about their own personal glory so they drag you along to run, trying to find ways to get you to bring your kids so they can run. It's selfish and I agree with you, it's a bit strange. It's too bad your wife got dragged into it. Can you apologize to keep that peace and keep your distance (no pun intended) from them?

Tri-Guy_999

NAH - Triathlete here and father of three young ones under 8 years old. I was going to post NTA for the OP and call the 'bros' AH but I can see all sides. I get where OP/Walker is coming from because triathlons are not for the weak or those that can't put in serious time to work hard and get results. Doing that with a family takes a village and a lot of sacrifice. The OP has that village as they are trying to make you a better athlete. They are out of order though for trying to force you when you're heart isn't in it and you changed your goals to run less competitive. Maybe let things cool off and contact them in a few weeks. As an aside, if you ever decide to run with your kid in a stroller, hit me up - I got some tips on what to buy and how to do that. It's a nice way to spend time with kids.

Co-Co-pop

NTA this is YOUR life and not theirs. Work-family balance is tough and you set a clear line and boundaries with that. Your family won't listen so you had to go a bit extreme. But the OP/Walker is also driving family away which might be the goal here? People really shouldn't meddle like this but if you care about family you might apologize.

I run forWalkers038

Hey just to clarify I am family-oriented, so my extended family are important to me and do matter. My goal isn't to drive them away but to be able to have my own running goals in peace and keep my personal balance. I respect what they want to do with their own training, I'm just not there anymore. Tri-Guy_999's suggestion to run with my daughter in a run-stroller isn't to make me a better runner but so I can spend time with her. It is good to hear that suggestion from an angle that aligns with my goals rather than make me a better racer or whatever.

J-Blake008

NTA it's admirable that you are manning-up to your responsibilities and not getting sucked in by your (very fit) family. Bless them for their high fitness and goals, it's cool that they do it with kids. I don't think

they are asking you to be selfish and to neglect your family. It seems like they want the running-family balance thing to be done their way which isn't your way. I reckon you could apologize when you're up for it and then lay it on the line in terms they *might* understand: sacrifice and winning. Tell them you are not motivated to compete like you used to, you aren't good enough to win any prize in a race, so there's nothing in it for you. Say you'd rather be a better husband and father than sacrifice that for something that isn't going to happen (e.g., fast times, winning).

4. Concluding reflections: on tapping the untapped

While the use of CNF as a form of ABR to represent research findings is less utilized by qualitative researchers in psychology, CNF is gaining traction in the sport sciences (Cavallerio, 2022; Smith et al., 2016). In this article we drew on this burgeoning body of work to outline the value of CNF as a methodology to show research findings in evocative and accessible ways. We then put forward the less tapped hermit crab essay from literary CNF (Miller and Paola, 2012) as a CNF methodology qualitative researchers might consider. Our rationale in choosing hermit crab CNF was to expand the methodological repertoire and spark additional ways that researchers might practice the craft of CNF. We advocated for CNFs that borrow from recognizable structures to encase 'real research material' in newly creative and animated ways (Singer, 2023). Our narrative study of fatherhood and running provided a jumping off point to show examples of hermit crab CNF 'in action', by borrowing affordances from AITA online advice community.

Some key reflections to consider relate to what Smith (2019) noted regarding untapped methods/methodologies in qualitative research, which is that researchers should not use hermit crab CNFs just because they are untapped. A risk with this approach is that researchers rely on employing the less charted to "innovate for innovation sake" (Smith, 2019, p.156), keeping decision making opaque and casting aside informed and principled decisions. Earlier in this paper we discussed hermit crab literary CNF and qualitative research examples, along with our example 'in use', to suggest reasons why qualitative researchers might consider adding hermit crab CNF to the ABR repertoire. Our process of constructing AITA CNFs also provided researchers with potential ways to engage with the craft. To build on these suggestions we offer some points that we used to make informed decisions throughout our journey of 'tapping the untapped'. The points are grounded in fluid appraisal criteria recommend by ABR researchers in the social sciences (Barone and Eisner, 2012) and CNF sport science researchers (Cavallerio, 2022; Smith et al., 2016). Researchers should not view these points as rigid rules but rather engage their own "imagination in ascertaining other criteria that may emerge from encounters with arts based work in the future" (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 171). In other words, qualitative researchers might adapt these suggestions depending on their projects, goals, and findings, to hone this 'crabby' CNF craft to make transparent, informed, and principled choices.

A central criteria we considered is the ontological and epistemological grounding of our project and the implications for the CNF process (Smith et al., 2016). While such consideration is a given for most qualitative researchers, ontology and epistemology also inform the ways that creative techniques (e.g., characters, language, settings) are used to convey world views of people intertwined with the socio-cultural realm (Cavallerio, 2022). Because we grounded our project in relativist narrative inquiry and social constructionism, we viewed identities as made possible and visible (or not), in stories, in narrative resources (Smith and Monforte, 2020). Because the men in our study were White, middle class, heterosexual, and enjoy running as a privileged hobby to enrich neoliberal selves, we attuned to the language used in our CNFs. Toward that end we centred this privilege (e.g., space to run, entering races, agency as involved fathers, personal betterment) linked to a socially desirable hybrid masculinity for middle class men in our CNF. We thus made informed choices (e.g., words, phrases, tone) to reflect men's social status with verisimilitude, when using the AITA forum to structure

content into conversations that ‘ring true’. We mean this is the sense of authenticity linked with facets of the men’s privilege, not in a realist sense of accessing truth or reflections inside of participants’ minds.

The above criteria bring us to the informed decision of considering the social significance of the findings communicated as a CNF. Barone and Eisner (2012) note that ABR should not just show something new or interesting but demonstrate thematic importance by focusing on social issues pertaining to the lives of people within a society. They further use the term ‘incisiveness’ which is when ABR gets to the heart of a social issue (Barone and Eisner, 2012). While some readers might debate as to why anyone should care if men run competitively and participate in races, the literature that grounded our study and narrative analysis findings suggest that the topic has social significance for understanding contentious gender equity issues impacting well-being and parenthood. The principle of incisiveness also assisted us with using AITA as our borrowed shell to ‘get to the heart of the matter’ by borrowing this symbolically gendered online space to show something socially significant about contemporary fatherhood and ideological dilemmas related to gender equity and parenthood.

Qualitative researchers might also consider the research examples we outlined using hermit crab CNFs (e.g., poetic forms, theatre/dramatic play, letters) to achieve thematic importance by centring social-psychological issues (e.g., chronic pain, researcher re-traumatization, athlete body control, frail adults in aging care) (Day et al., 2023; McMahan et al., 2017; McMahan et al., 2024; Miller, 2018b). Researchers might also circle back to the process we outlined to choose our shell, including becoming familiar with the array of hermit shells at their disposal, to decide what hermit crab CNF form, might prove useful for their purposes. To further achieve incisiveness, we also suggest revisiting the pedagogical potential of CNF stories to ‘do things’, on, and for, people (Smith et al., 2016). By making research findings accessible using hermit crab CNFs, researchers can open conversations/awareness around particular social issues and lived experiences, leading to shared understanding with communities.

For example, our work using poems as hermit crab CNFs made the lead researcher’s voice visible to the research team and sport community-sparking duty of care recommendations for survivor-researchers (McMahan et al., 2024). This work also engaged with other forms of ABR (e.g., drawing, collage) which could be combined with hermit crab CNF, researchers might use for advocacy, witness/learning, researcher reflexivity, and academic writing. Day et al.’s (2023) use of a collective ‘letter to younger selves’ holds potential to engage practitioners (e.g., psychologists, sport science staff) in shared understanding and advocacy for silenced pain/injury experienced by athletes using therapeutic letter writing (Bacigalupe, 1996). Qualitative researchers in psychology might find the foregoing CNF examples useful, or consider additional ones, to bring foreclosed issues (e.g., trauma, suffering, mental health) to the fore in an accessible manner not always possible with traditional research findings/reports.

The final principled decision involves thinking with, and through, theory (Smith et al., 2016; Smith and Monforte, 2020). We used narrative inquiry to construct our hermit crab CNFs, in ways that attuned to short stories from the men’s interviews to centre fluid identities and masculinities linked to narratives. This point is reflected in our rationale section, where we noted why we chose AITA as a structure and outlined our process to show narrative features/themes in different and accessible ways by being aware of, and using, certain contextual affordances. We also wove in the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) when constructing CNF examples to continue to think with theory when presenting fathers’ identity dilemmas. Researchers might consider employing a hermit crab CNF shell with affordances using dialogues (e.g., theatre drama script, online communities, advice column) to show how ideological dilemmas on different topics are worked up in conversations and discourses/narratives. Being theoretically principled allowed us to create composite characters and identity positions in our hermit crab CNF to *show*, not tell, the theoretical significance of findings

(Smith et al., 2016).

Our final reflections on ‘tapping the untapped’ hermit crab CNF may not work for all researchers, but we hope that qualitative researchers will appreciate the potential value. There is much to be gained by borrowing the shell of another to communicate research findings in newly creative and accessible ways. Hermit crab CNF shows the value in using a less expected form to direct imaginative and socially constructed content because, “the truth itself lies in the form. In the structure and in the scaffolding. In the exposed ducts and pipes and beams. In space as well as time. In the fact that all writing forms an artificial shell” (Singer, 2023, p. 84).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kerry R. McGannon: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jenny McMahon:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Chris Zehntner:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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