

Challenging the Performance Narrative: Life Stories of Michelin-starred Executive Chefs

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Abstract

Within high-performance sport, elite athletes typically story their careers after the performance narrative type, which may be problematic as it can lead to the justification of extreme performance enhancement strategies like excessive eating restrictions and poor mental health. Although previous research has indicated that people in other high-performance domains have a strong performance focus, no study to our knowledge has formally explored the underlying narrative of how they story their careers. To this end, we set out to explore how people in other high-performance domains story their careers, choosing to explore the careers of Michelin starred executive chefs. Two executive chefs, who both met the criteria of being executive chefs of Michelin-starred restaurants, participated in the study. Life story interviews (M=101 minutes) were conducted and subsequently explored through the principles of a holistic-form structural analysis. The findings revealed that the chefs crafted their career stories around a largely progressive self-fulfilment narrative type, rather than the performance narrative type, which seems to be dominant in elite sports and other high-performance domains. The study contributes a new narrative type that could be applicable in sports, facilitating a more balanced career development for elite athletes than the performance narrative type.

Keywords: *Career Development, Self-fulfilment, Narrative Types, Narrative Inquiry, Culinary Arts*

Highlights

- Elite athletes and Michelin-starred chefs may share several similarities.
- The study revealed an alternative to the performance narrative type: the self-fulfilment narrative type.
- The self-fulfilment narrative type may offer a healthier way to story elite athletic careers.
- Researchers should be open to storylines not centred around performance.

The appearance of narrative inquiry within sport and exercise sciences has become more visible over the last 25 years, in part, due to the relatability of stories and how we use them to process and understand the human experience (Book et al., 2024). Through narrative inquiry, researchers have found that while two people's stories may vary considerably, they may share the same overarching narrative (e.g., Demetriou et al., 2020; Busanich et al., 2014), allowing us to relate with another's personal experience despite our contexts being seemingly unrelated. Within high-performance sport, athletes seem to predominantly story their careers after the performance narrative type (Book et al., 2024), which may be problematic as it can lead to the justification of extreme performance enhancement strategies like excessive eating

restrictions (e.g., McGannon & McMahon, 2019), overtraining, or returning too quickly from injury (e.g., Everard et al., 2021). Researchers have found that performers in other high-performance domains (e.g., math and music) may story their careers similar to elite athletes, including the dominant focus on performance, but did not formally explore the underlying narratives of the stories (e.g., John & Thiel, 2022). It is, therefore, unclear if people in other high-performance domains story their careers after the performance narrative type or alternative narratives. To this end, we set out to explore how people in other high-performance domains story their careers. Due to the high-performance demands, tough working environments, and the arduous journey and immense dedication required to become a Michelin-starred executive chef (Burrow et al.,

2015; Traynor et al., 2021), we chose to explore the careers of Michelin-starred executive chefs.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is an approach that seeks to describe and interpret how people perceive reality and make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2016). Narratives are “the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories” (Frank, 2013, p. 75) and are used as templates by individuals to make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2016). Accordingly, exploring individuals' career stories and the narratives they use can garner a deeper understanding of how they experienced their careers (e.g., Ryba et al., 2017, 2021). Research has indicated that at the most general level, stories are either progressive (moving closer to the individual's goal), regressive (moving further away from the goal) or stable (no movement in relation to the goal; Gergen & Gergen, 1986), and follow five overarching *metanarratives* (i.e., quest, restitution, order, chaos, and decay; Book et al., 2024). These metanarratives form the basis of less general but more detailed *narrative types*, including discovery, relational, and the performance narrative type (Book et al., 2024).

Elite Athletic Careers

Before becoming elite, athletes normatively must train for several years (Wylleman et al., 2020). Starting at an early age, the athlete becomes initiated to sport and begins training. During adolescence, aspiring elite athletes become recognized for their talent, and their training and competitions intensify. After years of hard work, the elite athlete finally reaches mastery where they perform at their highest level and begin competing in international senior competitions (Wylleman et al., 2020). While performance has historically dominated discussions surrounding athletic excellence, there has been a growing interest in elite athletes' wellbeing and mental health (Schinke et al., 2024).

Elite athletes face several unique threats to their mental health (Henriksen et al., 2020). Firstly, the relentless pursuit of excellence, media scrutiny, fan expectations, and the uncertainty of athletic careers can have far-reaching consequences on their personal, social, and professional lives (Schinke et al., 2024). Secondly, the elite sport environment can malnourish athlete mental health by allowing cultures to arise that use bullying, condone excessive weight control, and pressure athletes to forego academic pursuits and non-sport friendships (Henriksen et al., 2020). Although sport organizations could promote mental health by viewing their athletes as whole persons from a life-span perspective (Henriksen et al., 2020), the elite sport culture often promotes a narrow focus on performance and a winning-at-all-costs mentality (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Due to the cultural emphasis on winning-at-all-costs, it is not surprising that elite athletes tend to story their careers after the performance narrative type (Book et al., 2024). Although elite athletes may perceive their athletic career and winning as highly meaningful, their focus on performance may lead them to overinvest in their athletic career (McDougall et al., 2015) and prioritize sport development over other aspects of their life, despite the low chance of success (Roderick, 2014). For instance, the performance narrative type may lead athletes to base their self-worth on their sporting performance and justify the sacrifice of friendships and extreme dieting measures such as food deprivation (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013; McGannon & McMahon, 2019). Although these elite

performers are professionally successful, they might suffer from identities completely tied to their careers, social isolation, inflexibility, and/or problems maintaining healthy personal relationships and severe psychological stress when facing threats toward the performance narrative type such as injuries and retirement (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2009; Ryba et al., 2015; Åkesdotter et al., 2023). Accordingly, whilst the pursuit of winning may feel meaningful and lead to personal satisfaction, it also has significant drawbacks (Ronkainen & McDougal, 2025).

The Restaurant Industry

Restaurants are operated by *kitchen brigades*, which are arranged along a hierarchy where the executive chef, a position that very few will reach, is the highest position (Borkenhagen & Levi-Martin, 2018). Out of the few that manage to become executive chefs, even fewer manage to reach the most prestigious level, the Michelin stars. Of the approximately 15 million restaurants that exist worldwide (Elbasha & Baruch, 2022), less than 0.00025% (3707) have Michelin stars (Michelin Guide, 2024) making the attainment of Michelin stars a significant achievement. To reach this level, aspiring chefs often work several years, moving between multiple restaurants and countries (Borkenhagen & Levi-Martin, 2018), making significant sacrifices to their social life and relationships whilst facing intense challenges such as relentless working hours (e.g., 18-hour shifts), pressure, physical violence, threats, and insults, which are commonly accepted due to their drive, ambition, and commitment to the executive chef (e.g. Alexander et al., 2012; Burrow et al., 2015; Traynor et al., 2021). It is commonly believed that attaining stars requires an elite skill set, unwavering dedication throughout several years, and extreme sacrifice, including family, relationships, hobbies, and mental/physical health (e.g., Burrow et al., 2015; Traynor et al., 2021). However, sacrifices are no guarantees for success, as the Michelin guide is highly selective even at the expense of not selecting deserving restaurants (Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). Before a restaurant gets a (better) rating, it is tested by several inspectors who assess the quality of the cuisine over a certain period (Guide Michelin, 2022). These visits are unannounced and anonymous (Guide Michelin, 2022), which necessitates rigid consistency of quality as each visit can result in gaining or losing a star (Ehrmann et al., 2009).

It is important to note that although attaining Michelin stars has large benefits like a substantially improved reputation, customer attraction (Bang et al., 2022), and revenue (Moreno-Gené et al., 2023), it is not without drawbacks. Losing a star carries significant consequences for venues as it can result in serious declines in reputation and revenue (Matta & Panchapakesan, 2021). As such, retaining stars can be a stressful endeavour, drastically increasing the pressure on chefs and owners (Gazzola et al., 2024), potentially leading to anxiety and depression (Acosta, 2020), loss of control (Peng, 2021), and suicidality (Kelly, 2018), resulting in several chefs choosing to give back their stars to relieve the pressure (Matta & Panchapakesan, 2021).

Summary and Aim

Throughout the 20-plus years of narrative research in sport and exercise, it has been discovered that athletes seem to predominantly story their careers after the performance narrative type. Although people in other performance domains seem to share the dominant performance focus (e.g., John & Thiel, 2022), few researchers have formally explored the underlying narratives of their career stories. It is therefore unclear if

these professionals story their careers after the performance narrative type or alternative narratives. Chefs at the Michelin Star level and elite athletes have several similarities like high performance demands, many years of work needed to reach the elite level, and the need for psychological skills (e.g., MacNamara et al., 2010; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2019; Traynor et al., 2021). Whilst narrative research on the careers of elite athletes may inform the understanding of how Michelin-starred chefs construct their careers, the career narratives of Michelin-starred chefs may, in turn, provide a novel perspective that could be useful in the elite sport context. Accordingly, we set out to explore how Michelin-starred executive chefs story their careers and to what extent their storied experiences reflect patterns of high-performance culture that echo those seen in the elite athletic domain.

Methodology

The study was philosophically underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological social constructionism which is characteristic of narrative inquiry (Papathomas, 2016). Guided by ontological relativism, we sought to capture the participants' personal experiences rather than discovering an 'objective truth.' At the same time, drawing on social constructionism, we view all knowledge as theory laden and embrace our biases as integral to the co-constructed knowledge produced in this study.

Participants, Ethics, and Data Collection

Purposive sampling and two inclusion criteria were used to inform the recruiting of participants, requiring them to: 1) be above the age of 18 and 2) have been the executive chef of a Michelin-starred restaurant. Potential participants were identified via internet searches for chefs who fit the inclusion criteria and contacted through email or social media. Two candidates showed interest and were recruited. In compliance with the ethical guidelines of the first author's national government, the participants received an information letter, detailing the purpose of the study and what participation would entail, as well as a declaration of consent, including the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at all times, which they signed. To maintain confidentiality, demographic information was kept general. The first participant (pseudonym Chatarina) was a Northern European woman in her 40s with over 25 years of experience working in restaurants, including several years working in Michelin starred restaurants. The second participant (pseudonym Jerry) was a Northern European male in his 60s who had over 45 years of experience in restaurants, including several years working in Michelin starred restaurants. Chatarina was currently active as a culinary director, whilst Jerry worked as a restaurant owner.

Once the participants had signed the declaration of consent, interviews were scheduled, and a semi-structured interview guide, loosely inspired by the holistic athletic career model (e.g., Wylleman et al., 2020), was created to ensure that the participants' stories encompassed their entire careers. The interview guide included questions about the start of their careers, their journey through the hierarchy, their first star, and the current day. The interviews were conducted online and began with general questions such as "what does cooking mean to you" and progressed to more specific questions such as "what was it like becoming an executive chef" and "how did you get into cooking." As narrative researchers ask unrehearsed questions, react, and interact authentically during

interviews (Papathomas, 2016), several follow-up questions were asked. The interviews had a similar duration (Chatarina 108 minutes, and Jerry 94 minutes), and the participants were talkative and happy to share their stories. There was also a short follow-up interview of about 10 minutes with Jerry to clarify details regarding his career.

Data Analysis

A narrative holistic-form structural analysis was used to identify the underlying structure of the stories (Lieblich et al., 1998), focusing upon the plot, the elements that hold it together, and the overarching narrative type (Lieblich et al., 1998). The analysis followed Smith's (2016) guidelines: 1) transcription of the data, 2) identification of the narrative type(s), 3) typology building, and 4) representation of the findings. During the first step, the data were transcribed verbatim, followed by the second step, where the interviews were listened to, and the transcripts were read multiple times to better understand the stories. After a sufficient understanding of both stories had been achieved, sections of the interviews that seemed meaningful were marked. Sections were deemed meaningful if they outlined significant events (e.g., promotions, attaining stars), alluded to, or detailed the participants' motivation or feelings). During this step, close attention was paid to the participants' phrasing. For example, Jerry mentioned how one job transition was "a big step down" and Chatarina mentioned how a restaurant she worked at was "a sinking ship," signifying a decline. These sections were used to identify the structure of the stories (see Figures 1, 2) and later coded as themes indicating central aspects of the stories (e.g., belonging, creativity, exploration). The themes were compared to each other and the stories to see which themes had more sections supporting them and fit the entirety of the stories better. One theme (self-fulfilment) best captured the essence of both stories and was supported by the most sections. Studies were then researched to explore existing metanarratives and narrative types, resulting in many alternatives, for example, the *sink or swim* (Lieblich et al., 1998), *performance* (Carless & Douglas, 2013) and *quest* narratives (Book et al., 2024). However, while both participants' life stories followed a quest metanarrative, no available narrative type that truly captured the stories was found. Accordingly, a new narrative type termed *self-fulfilment* was identified in the third step.

During the fourth step, large sections of the interviews were arranged chronologically to construct realist tales (e.g., Book et al., 2020): *There Has to Be a Challenge* (Chatarina) and *This is Where I Belong* (Jerry), which are presented below. Three criteria were used to decide which sections would be included: relevance, coherence, and meaningfulness. For a section of the transcript to be included, it had to be relevant to the participants' careers, coherent with their stories, and seem meaningful to them. For example, both participants discussed the history of the restaurant industry and although it was interesting, it was not relevant or meaningful to their stories and was therefore excluded. The findings were then read multiple times and adjusted until all sections fit the criteria.

To ensure rigor, three recommendations from Smith and McGannon (2017) were followed: member reflections, critical friends, and criteria. Firstly, both participants were asked to reflect on both their tale and narrative. Chatarina thought that the tale and narrative were accurate. Jerry thought that the narrative was accurate and clarified some details of his career such as when he started working at different restaurants and when he became a father. Secondly, a critical friend provided feedback on the

narrative identification process and the article in general. Due to the feedback, the narrative identification process was described in more detail and sections of the article were restructured. Finally, as discussed above, three criteria were used to ensure the quality of analysis and representation of the findings.

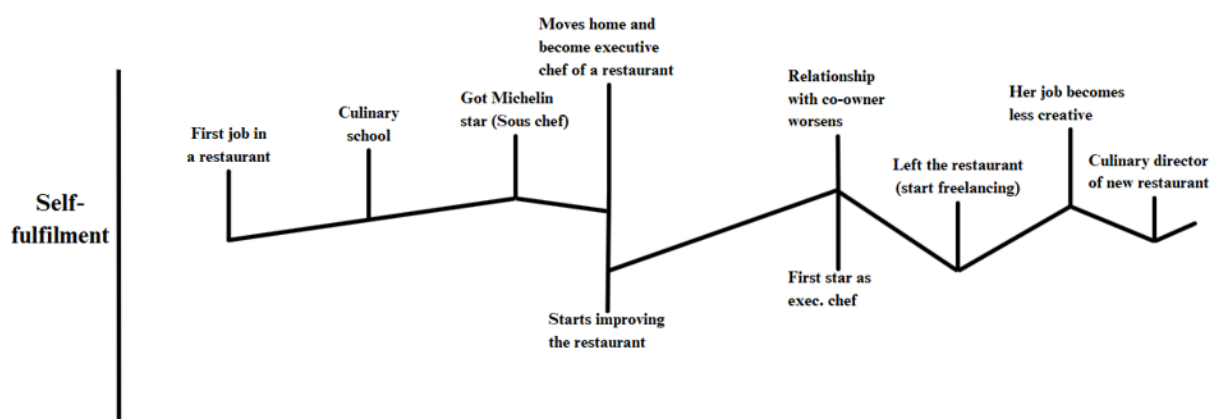
Findings

Both participants told overarchingly progressive stories with Jerry having three sharp declines, ending with stabilization (see Figure 1) whereas Chatarina had longer and less steep declines with a progressive ending (see Figure 2). Both stories followed the self-fulfilment narrative

type, and the quest metanarrative. The self-fulfilment narrative type centres around the protagonist who seeks adventures and challenges on a journey to fulfilment. The protagonist can experience self-fulfilment in different areas including career progression, sports, and discovery. The self-fulfilment narrative type can therefore overlap with other narrative types such as performance and discovery. Following the self-fulfilment narrative, Jerry and Chatarina's career stories were characterized by a low focus on awards and status (in contrast to what would be expected by a performance narrative) and an overarching focus on wanting to learn, push their boundaries, and doing what they enjoy and find meaningful. The two tales are presented below.

There Has to Be a Challenge

Figure 1: Chatarina's narrative structure



Chatarina's journey started when she got a summer job in a restaurant.

I was about 17-18... By chance, I got a summer job in a kitchen. It really was an aha experience for me. Life can be like this too... You can actually do things instead of sitting at school where everything is theoretical.

At 20 years old she decided to move abroad to enter a college cook apprentice program. She studied there for four years and learned a lot. After graduating, Chatarina's boyfriend at the time moved to Berlin and she decided to follow.

...I went around with my CV and looked for jobs... I got lucky and got a job even though I didn't speak German. It was a pretty small restaurant, we were four cooks... In practice, I was a chef de partie... It was nice and such, but it was a bit too small and I thought it was a bit too old-fashioned...

Chatarina started looking for other jobs but did not find one that spoke to her. She started getting desperate but eventually managed to find one and got hired as a co-chef de partie. "The executive chef didn't think I could do it alone so I shared it with another guy who eventually couldn't handle the pressure so I became the sole chef de partie". The staff had high ambitions and eventually achieved their first Michelin star.

It was super fun, it was a lot... (Achieving a star) wasn't something we talked about, but somewhere there was a wish or maybe a hope... I felt like we were performing well and knew that if someone wanted to give us a star, fine they could do that if they want but we already knew that we were performing well.

The star resulted in a lot of extra work for the staff which got in the way of cooking.

...We already worked 14-hour shifts five days a week, which wasn't that much compared to other restaurants at that level... but I thought it was a lot... I thought it was enough and the other parts were a bit unnecessary... I didn't think it was fun. I only wanted to cook. I didn't want to write a bunch of recipes and every additional thing... The craftsmanship, just creating something with your hands was the thing that allured me from the beginning... You can always improve... I've always competed against myself in that way and I find it really fun...

She continued working at the restaurant for three years and rose through the hierarchy.

I took more and more responsibility as a chef de partie and then the sous chef position became

vacant, and it was natural for me to fill it... It wasn't a planned strategy. I also wanted to make orders, have contact with the farmers and vendors that we bought from, cook the sauces and this and that... I was thirsting for knowledge. I wanted to try things. I read a lot of new things, new techniques, and new recipes so I wanted to experiment...

Suddenly, her father was diagnosed with cancer and only had one year left to live so she moved back to her hometown. "There were some Michelin star restaurants in cities nearby, but nothing intrigued me... I wanted to continue learning but as nothing inspired me, I had to accept leaving that kind of gastronomy (Michelin star level) behind me..." During vacations, she had worked at a restaurant in her hometown. Upon her move back she asked the owner if there was a vacant position and he offered her the executive chef position.

You could say that the restaurant was in a major crisis... it was a sinking ship and it got worse and worse. I went in with my savings and became co-owner as they needed capital in the business to not lose their liquor license... The restaurant was established but had a bad, really, really bad reputation... Bad food, bad service, overpriced... I saw it as an exciting challenge... (Becoming an executive chef) was easy, it came naturally to me... I can judge what I do and know that it's good enough. I had confidence in that, and it's based on good mentors along my journey and education... They've played a really big role.

Chatarina began working on turning the restaurant around.

Something that's very important is that there's clear directing and through line. It's hard to make it work with several chefs as you'll have multiple visions that has to be woven together and it can easily become a mishmash and then it's neither one or the other, you get something that's half good. The combination (that made it work) must have been that my vision was pretty stringent and I executed it with a pretty authoritatively... I was very driven in many ways. I was pretty skilled in my profession and could do all positions, supervise all stations and cook all of the food... I sought media attention to get publicity for the restaurant... I called the local newspaper and said that I was a chef and it was asparagus season so if they needed asparagus recipes, I got it. I created a cooking network, appeared at a local festival and everything like that to get publicity for the restaurant... Slowly but surely it went in the right direction... We got more guests, the revenue and the profits increased... It was a small profit, but it got a little bigger. We were able to reinvest in the restaurant and hire more people so slowly but surely it got better.

Although the restaurant became more successful, her relationship with the co-owner worsened.

I started understanding why the co-owner stopped being friends with his ex-partner. He was pretty troublesome to deal with to put it lightly. We really had our arguments... I wasn't really a

confrontative person but he really pulled out my worst sides.

She continued making improvements and after a few years, she achieved a Michelin star.

I never had that goal (achieving a Michelin star) there... At that time the Michelin guide didn't test my hometown... It was completely ungraspable, surrealistic... People started calling and stopping by to congratulate me... after a while people started bringing flowers. We ended up having so many flowers that we didn't have anywhere to put them... Media called and dropped by to take pictures... there was a TV crew looking for the restaurant... From coming in the morning to take care of the kitchen by myself because we didn't have much booked, to the bookings just filling up that day and forwards... It was a completely crazy day, completely crazy...

She continued working at the restaurant and retained the stars for a couple of years.

I thought it (getting a star) was really good and the level that we were supposed to be on. My co-owner was kind of interested in an additional star. I thought that we could work on it in the long run but I wasn't ready for it then...

Throughout the years, her relationship with her co-owner continued to deteriorate and kept her from becoming a mother.

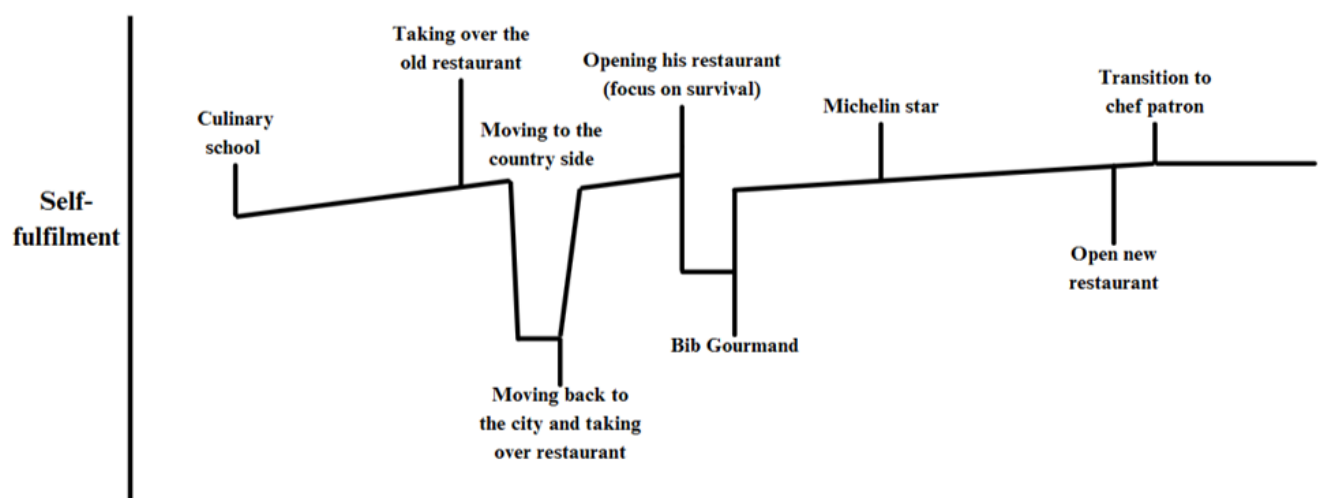
I've had all the preconditions to become a mother and run the restaurant because we were so established, but I didn't want to have my co-owner near a child. I didn't want to do that to a child, have such a person in our lives. Because of that, we didn't have a child then... Our relationship was so infected that we couldn't be in the same room... The last straw was that the restaurant began to stagnate because... he drained the company's money to invest in his new project. I saw no other option than to leave... It was really hard. I really went from something, not to something. I really didn't want to leave but there was no other opportunity. I had to leave for my own sake.

She decided to take a break from being an executive chef and focused on rekindling the joy of cooking that had been diminished by the toxic relationship. She started holding workshops, guest-worked at restaurants, wrote a book and became a mother. After a couple of months, she accepted a job as a creative consultant for a company and worked there for a couple of years. Eventually she began longing for a challenge and decided to restart her chef career.

I've taken the culinary director position at a new restaurant... I can feel that I'm crazy, leaving a well-paid, really good nine-to-five job... It will be very chaotic at the start. I'm going to have to work very much. There'll be a bunch of nights and weekends or rather only nights and weekends. With children, you're a little crazy to do it. Sometimes I wonder what's wrong with me but there's something in me that needs a challenge. It can't be too easy, there has to be a challenge and a little uncomfortable, otherwise, I don't feel well.

This is Where I Belong

Figure 2: Jerry's narrative structure



Jerry began cooking as a young boy together with his family and grew up spending time in the kitchen when he could. When he turned 16 he decided to enrol in a catering college. "As soon as I went to college, I realized that this is where I belong. I need to concentrate a bit more now. I felt happy and I was in the right place" The college ignited his passion and upon graduating he wanted to journey out in the world.

One of my pals who was at college with me, his elder brother had a job in Zurich so... we took a job in Zurich and I spent a year there and loved it so much that I spent another year in Switzerland.

Once he started working in Zurich he wanted to improve and move up the ranks.

You go in as second or third commis and what you want to be doing is to become the first commis, the demi chef, the chef de partie so you just watch them and how they perform. The good ones you learn from, the shit ones you discard... There's a high turnaround in this trade you know so if you're there, the chef's going to say that next week your chef de partie and that's it.

Although it was hard at first, he learned to deal with the pressure and eventually found it easy.

The first few years are difficult, but you just got to see it through, as simple as that... You either go with it (the kitchen environment) or you don't... In Zurich, the sous chef would come and put his head on your shoulder and say "how are you, you all right you English bastard", and hit you up the ass with a roasting fork. But that's what they did. "Ahh yes chef, I'm fine boom". Okay fine, you won't let that happen again... All that sort of stuff went on then but it's not as bad as people say... I think you've got to be a certain type (to handle the kitchen environment and lifestyle)... One day you walk into the kitchen and everything clicks and this is your life, this is where you belong. That happened to me and I never looked back.

Despite the rough environment, Jerry wanted nothing more than to spend time in the kitchen. "You could do 80 or 90 hours a week easy... I thought well look, what am I going to do? Watch Coronation Street on the TV? No, I'd rather be in the kitchen...". A year later, Jerry was intrigued by a Michelin starred restaurant in Germany and got a job there as a chef de partie. "I worked my way up to sous chef level, and that was quite a big jump... In the beginning, it was tough, it was a challenge but I loved challenges hehe.". Jerry had a good position at a good restaurant but wanted to continue to learn and improve.

I went to this other Michelin place... I wanted to see what was going on there. I had to take a bit of a pay deduction and a lesser position (chef de partie) but you know that was for a year or so... I never saw it as a demotion. I saw it as I'm going in to work at a better restaurant, and I've got to learn that. I used that as well to get me to a better restaurant...

Jerry continued working in Germany but eventually required a meister's exam to progress.

I thought, you know I've been away from home now. Do I really wanna be away for another 5-10 years? It just didn't appeal so I thought I'd go back to England, that was home. That's where my family was so it was a turning point...

After a year Jerry moved back to England and got a job at a two-starred Michelin restaurant as a chef de partie.

(The executive chef) was a big chef, a big name and I wanted to go there... My boss in Germany knew him and I got a job there... You know it went from one star to two and it was very focused... Within that restaurant, if you became part of that team you were considered as one of the elite ones in there so that was what put me in a good stage.

After a year he switched restaurants again.

...They just rang me up out of the blue and said there's a sous chef job going for you, it's your job if you want it... I went and had a look and thought yeah it's a bit more money, a bit more responsibility... (The restaurant) was shit, it was rundown, it was dreadful. The chef had been there since the war, it hadn't moved forward, it had really gone down... We became the talk of the town, we went from no covers to 100 lunches and 100 dinners every day. We turned it around and to be a part of that team was a great feeling and a great privilege... I loved it more than anywhere really...

After a couple of years, Jerry accepted a head chef position at a countryside hotel.

You know it was just the lure of the job. They were offering us big money... London was expensive so we (he and his girlfriend) moved out for a better life, for a better future. Then we got married and settled down... I regretted a couple of those jobs, to begin with... I didn't find my feet until I got back to working in a city environment. I don't like working out in the sticks, I'm a city person...

Jerry eventually moved back to the city and got a head chef position at another restaurant.

I think I did my best days there... I revived a fortune of that place. It was a bit of a landmark, but it had gone into a decline. I lifted the profile and the hotel won hotel of the year, this that and the other...

After a couple of years, the restaurant got caught up in a corporate takeover.

I thought fuck this. I either go back to London or I open up my own place... I'd rather be in charge of my own destiny than letting these arseholes be in charge of me... I care about food more than what they cared about business so I had to do it for myself. That's what I realized. I borrowed a bit of money, it wasn't big money compared to today but it was big enough. I worried, but I borrowed it from within the family so that was good... I said look, all I want to do is survive in business, so I could have been a wine bar, a brasserie, a restaurant, a night club, a bordello. I could have been anything as long as it made money and survived...

Jerry was mostly focused on surviving but this soon changed.

...After 18 months, we got a bib gourmand and that gave us a little bit more of a direction. We thought fucking hell, let's concentrate on being a restaurant rather than everything else. We thought we'll concentrate on that and push ourselves... I was a bit pissed off really. I thought we should have gotten a star, so I thought fuck that. What do you have to do to get a star...?

Jerry became motivated to attain a star as and saw it as a challenge. He and his staff reflected and realized that they had to intensify their focus, improve their produce,

and start cooking a la minute¹. During this time, he also became a father and after five years of focus and improvement, Jerry achieved his first Michelin star as an executive chef.

(It was) more of a relief really, than euphoric haha. We just thought the hard work starts now. Once you get it you have to retain it... You don't want to get one then lose one in a year so, there's a bit of pressure to keep it for a few years.

Although Jerry could have potentially gotten additional stars, he had other priorities "I also had a family to worry about... You need a life, so the balance of life was more important than becoming a three-star man.". After several years of retaining the star, Jerry opened another restaurant and started to move out of the kitchen and eventually took a more administrative role.

Time comes when you think that well if I want to keep my chefs and the business, I have to step out. It was a bit of a no-brainer... I lost a little bit of control in both places... I thought I needed to step back and look at it as a bigger picture... You can't run a kitchen and another restaurant elsewhere.

The new restaurant was more successful than they anticipated and got a Michelin star its first year. Jerry still runs the restaurants, which have both retained their stars, which he attributed to his high standard and team culture.

We've developed a culture I suppose where everyone works at that standard throughout the building, from the office team to the cook team to the service team to the sommelier team to the bar team. We've got people that are highly motivated individuals... We work in a place where there's a mutual understanding. You have to have a culture to do that so our whole culture is about that really... I suppose that we've always worked like that. We're still a premiership footballer, we're only getting old, we're still playing at that level. I think that's a level that if you learn that, you can't go back. For me, the only way back is to put me in the box and put me under. That's the way it is. That's the way I am...

When Jerry looked back at his career, he discussed how one desire was always there.

I suppose it was always to work at a premiership... That's the way I'm wired... I want to be the best I possibly can. I want to challenge myself. For me, it's not about a job that pays my mortgage and this, that, and the other... I knew early that it (the restaurant life) was a hard life. If I wanted an easy life I should have gone to university and taken a degree, and become an accountant or a lawyer but then I'd be a boring bastard and I don't want that... I'm way past retirement age for most people in England but I love it, I'm carrying on. There's only one life you got and you got to be happy.

¹Cooked and served immediately instead of being made in advance

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore how Michelin-starred executive chefs story their careers and to what extent their storied experiences reflect patterns of high-performance culture that echo those seen in the elite athletic domain. The findings revealed two overarchingly progressive stories centred around self-fulfilment as well as factors that may have facilitated the participants' career development.

Career Narratives

Similar to elite athletes, reaching the top in the restaurant industry often involves working for several decades (Borkenhagen & Levi-Martin, 2018) in hostile working environments whilst enduring long working hours, verbal abuse, physical abuse, low pay (Alexander et al., 2012) and extreme sacrifice (e.g., social life, romantic relationships, mental and physical health; Burrows et al., 2015; Traynor et al., 2021). For the chefs that manage to reach the top (i.e. attaining Michelin stars), the pressure to retain the stars can lead to drastically increased pressure (Gazzola et al., 2024), potentially leading to anxiety and depression (Acosta, 2020), loss of control (Peng, 2021), and suicidality (Kelly, 2018), resulting in several chefs choosing to give back their stars to relieve the pressure (Matta & Panchapakesan, 2021).

In contrast to the dominant performance narrative type in sports (e.g., Book et al., 2024) and possibly the restaurant industry, Jerry and Chatarina offered alternative stories based on the self-fulfilment narrative following a mostly progressive structure with three declines and/or stagnations. Similar to the athletes following the performance narrative type, Jerry and Chatarina made several sacrifices, however, their reasons for sacrifice seemed to be different. Instead of storying their careers as a pursuit of the Michelin stars, Jerry and Chatarina storied their careers after self-fulfilment, electing not to pursue additional stars, although they believe they had the potential to attain them. Instead, Jerry chose to focus on his family and maintain a more even work-family balance while Chatarina prioritized her wellbeing and family. Their lack of a performance narrative type and obsession with the Michelin stars helps to explain why they did not experience the substantial pressure and stress associated with attaining/retaining stars (e.g. Matta & Panchapakesan, 2021). Although individuals following a self-fulfilment narrative will naturally make sacrifices in their pursuit of self-fulfilment, they may be less likely to sacrifice their health and other aspects of their life, as it could diminish their sense of self-fulfilment rather than improve it.

What Sport Could Learn From These Stories

As discussed, the performance narrative type is the dominant narrative in sport, which can lead to several negative outcomes (e.g., Everard et al., 2021; McGannon & McMahon, 2019). The self-fulfilment narrative type may offer a healthier alternative to the performance narrative type by facilitating a more balanced approach toward elite performance, helping elite athletes find self-fulfilment in more areas of life than sports. Elite athletes storying their career after self-fulfilment could, for example, find fulfilment in growing as a person, in their relationships, or by combining their athletic career with an additional foci like work or studies. Lastly, their focus on fulfilment may help athletes obtain a sense of meaningfulness in their transition to, and during, their post-athletic career, thereby facilitating a transition that can be difficult for many athletes (e.g., Barth et al., 2021). However, it should not

be assumed that a dominant self-fulfilment narrative would be free from drawbacks.

For instance, individuals following the self-fulfilment narrative type may be unwilling to make unfulfilling choices, which somewhat mirrors how elite athletes using the performance narrative type are unwilling to make choices that could impair their performance (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013). For instance, Jerry and Chatarina both left seemingly comfortable jobs due to a lack of self-fulfilment, which just as easily could have put them and their families in less desirable situations than they had been in previously. Even though Jerry and Chatarina found self-fulfilment in their subsequent jobs, there was no guarantee that they would find their new jobs more meaningful. Researchers have discussed that it can be difficult for workers to obtain and maintain meaningfulness in their jobs (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017). Similarly, self-fulfilment may be equally as unpredictable, constituting a potential pitfall of the self-fulfilment narrative type. Furthermore, researchers have also discussed that an excessive focus on meaningfulness may lead to overwork and acceptance of poor working conditions (Bailey et al., 2018). Relatedly, Jerry and Chatarina's pursuit of self-fulfilment involved decades of long and likely stressful periods, including working 70+ hours a week, working in hostile environments, moving to new countries, and financial risks.

Finally, much like meaningfulness, which may have both benefits and drawbacks in vocational and athletic contexts (Ronkainen & McDougall, 2025), the self-fulfilment narrative type may be a double-edged sword. Offering a potentially healthier alternative to the performance narrative type, helping athletes find fulfilment outside of sports, the pursuit of self-fulfilment may also make it harder to accept jobs and career decisions that feel unfulfilling and lead to potentially negative outcomes such as overwork and the acceptance of poor working conditions.

Limitations and Future Research

Whilst attaining one Michelin star is of great merit, chefs can attain two additional stars by meeting even more rigid performance standards. Accordingly, the experience of executive chefs with two or three stars might differ from Jerry and Chatarina. Furthermore, both chefs were European. Chefs from other cultures, such as Asian or American cultures, might also have different experiences. Exploring the careers of chefs from other cultures and chefs with additional stars may therefore provide new insights. It would also be valuable to explore whether chefs who focused on attaining the stars experienced more negative outcomes than Jerry and Chatarina. Lastly, we want to highlight the role of researchers in future research.

According to McAdams (2006), stories that succumb to one narrative are too simplistic to be true. Although the performance narrative type is likely present in the stories of most elite athletes, researchers may contribute to the dominance of the performance narrative type by only listening to those kinds of stories (Carless & Douglass, 2013). In the current study, parts of Chatarina and Jerry's careers were centred around performance, which could have been focused on during the interviews and highlighted in the analysis, whilst downplaying their pursuit of self-fulfilment, to produce two tales following the performance narrative type. It is not in the nature of narrative inquiry to say that one tale is "truer" than another, but it is important to acknowledge that two researchers could have had two different foci (e.g., performance, personal growth) during an interview with the same athlete, resulting in two unique stories with different underlying narratives (e.g., Ramos et al., 2024). We do not argue that future researchers should downplay the performance narrative type to highlight other

narratives, as it would be misleading and diminish the authenticity of the participants' stories. Instead, we encourage future researchers to be mindful of the questions they ask, listen for storylines following alternative narratives, and be open to personal definitions of athletic success that go beyond simply winning.

Lastly, the self-fulfilment narrative type may offer a healthier alternative to the performance narrative type but may also have its own drawbacks. Accordingly, we encourage researchers to explore self-fulfilment stories in a sports context to better understand potential benefits and risks. These studies could later be complemented by quantitative approaches (e.g., structural equation modelling) to better understand the impact and mechanisms behind the potential consequences of the pursuit of self-fulfilment.

Conclusions

Despite their surface differences, elite sports and elite performers in the restaurant industry have several similarities and potentially share the same dominant narrative (i.e., the performance narrative type). Unlike

comparable studies of elite athletes and professionals in other performance domains, the participants' careers did not centre around performance. Instead, the participants provided alternative stories guided by the self-fulfilment narrative, which may have facilitated a more balanced career development while still reaching a high level in their performance domain. Accordingly, the self-fulfilment narrative may offer a healthier alternative to the performance narrative type and could be beneficial in sport as well as the restaurant industry.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the two participants for graciously sharing their stories and making this article possible. We would also like to thank Natalia Stambulova for her feedback during the first drafts of the article.

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