Traveling Down the Academic Road:
A Reflection

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

My academic career has largely comprised sociohistorical research projects exploring the ways that social relations shape sport for various marginalized groups in society. To do this, I have taken a “less travelled” road as an academic, actively seeking to intertwine my academic and nonacademic lives. This goal aligns with the wisdom outlined in the quote above by T.S. Eliot—that in the end, all I can do (with certainty) is to know myself more fully.

I have always liked The Road Not Taken, a poem by Robert Frost,² because it prompts us to remember that we are actively constructing the ways that we will live our lives. It also challenges us to consider “the road less traveled”—pursuing questions that others may not be asking, using methodologies others may not support—as a legitimate choice for our work. It also encourages us to embrace the paths we choose rather than be timid in our actions, and then to see where that takes us.

Pursuing Questions Others May Not Be Asking:
My Theoretical Road

On my “road,” life and academic work are personal. C. Wright Mills was my inspirational starting point for this academic approach. I was introduced to his ideas in one of my doctoral classes, where we read “On Intellectual Craftsmanship,” an appendix in The Sociological Imagination.³ He encouraged academics to intertwine their personal and academic lives, so that each one draws on and learns from the other. His approach fit with values I held at the time: taking a holistic approach towards my life, using history to help me make more sense of the present, grounding my work in current problems, engaging in personal reflection, and being both playful and fiercely committed to making sense of the world. His words legitimated what I felt at that time—and thus it became a “truth” I began to “do” in my life.
I allowed key experiences in my life history to prompt my choice of road—what Laurence Chalip[^1] labels “focussing events” in a policy context, since they require a policy response, or in my case, a further clarification of my direction. A decision to work with Aboriginal peoples in the Northwest Territories (NWT) for my doctoral research in 1978, and to do that by heading to and living in small Aboriginal communities where I was dependent on them for my emotional and academic survival, helped me experience being marginalized, and thus by extension recognize my privilege, and the socially constructed nature of “truth.” Experiencing very different possibilities for sport in the North, including traditional games with their accompanying culturally distinct values, and then learning and playing with Northerners helped me to “do” and not just read about these activities, and to know better the people who created and continued to celebrate them. I saw the value of “doing” as central to knowledge production—I enjoyed and grew from the process, and found myself engaged in and contributing to the lives and conditions around me as well as producing knowledge that I and others found to be worthwhile.

Coming to the University of Windsor in 1984 to replace a professor in Sport Sociology rather than Sport History, and taking on the Outdoor Recreation course the following year, prompted me to further “see differently” as a central part of my academic job, because through these courses I was actively teaching others to do the same. Teaching and working with students and colleagues has kept me “in shape” because the processes and counter-intuitive/cultural values I promote are constantly being challenged, constantly requiring the kinds of reflection and communication that push me and others to build new understandings rather than rest comfortably in “taken-for-granted” ideas. For example, I teach my outdoor recreation students about the concept of “pacing”—going at a speed with tasks where you are not rushing. We reinforce this idea on our wilderness trip because it reduces the chance of injuries that can occur when students are rushing and thus not fully attending to the situation. However, upon returning home to the school environment, my tendency to rush through days packed with multiple tasks is then challenged. How can I ask students to pace themselves and then not continue to try and do the same myself, even though living a rushed life is taken for granted in a university environment?

Taking sabbaticals during which my knowledge base has been extended and challenged—with Aboriginal peoples in Australia in 1991, with northern peoples in Alaska and the NWT in 1998, with public health officials and sportspeople as part of the Yukon Canada Winter Games in 2007—have also been central “focussing events,” as they took me outside the university environment and helped me re-remember the constructed nature of that environment as well as the places I was visiting. I returned, clear(er) again, that “truth”—both mine and others’—is socially constructed and highly contextual.

The longer I have taught and researched, the more evident it has become to me that both history (e.g., the points I just made about my own academic path) and philosophy are the underpinnings of knowledge. My foundational values have thus also shaped my choice of road. First, I realize that my value system is relational, meaning that I need to facilitate for others what I wish to achieve for myself. For example, using research to help clarify my “truths” requires that I likewise encourage those around me to adopt a similar process to find their “truths,” rather than just to