

# Doing descriptive phenomenological data collection in sport psychology research

## Abstract

Researchers in the field of sport psychology have begun to highlight the potential of phenomenological approaches in recognising subjective experience and the essential structure of experience. Despite this, phenomenology has been used inconsistently in the sport psychology literature thus far. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide theoretically informed practical guidelines for researchers who wish to employ the descriptive phenomenological interview in their studies. The recommended guidelines will be supported by underpinning theory and brief personal accounts. An argument will also be presented for the potential that descriptive phenomenology holds in creating new knowledge through rich description. In doing so, it is hoped that this method will be utilised appropriately in future sport psychology research to not only strengthen and diversify the existing literature, but also the knowledge of practitioners working within the applied world of professional sport.

Keywords: descriptive phenomenology; phenomenological interview; data collection; sport psychology; qualitative research

## Introduction

### *Research traditions in sport psychology*

For decades, sport psychology research has embraced the positivist traditions of the natural sciences and has been slow to adopt alternative epistemological and methodological approaches (Whiston, 1976). This has meant that the field of sport psychology has relied on questionnaires as the central mode of data collection when looking at a range of complex, subjective and, often times, deeply personal areas (e.g. anxiety, self-esteem, identity, self-efficacy). It can be argued that using questionnaires to measure such multifaceted constructs risks the subjective experience of each individual being reduced to the confines of a Likert Scale and even further condensed by statistical tests during data analysis (Keegan et al., 2014; Martens, 1979, 1987b). Although questionnaires and statistics certainly have their merits, it can be argued that the participants' individuality is compromised when they are made to fit into a predetermined category in order to be seen as significant (Martens, 1979; Keegan et al., 2014).

In more recent times, an increasing number of researchers in the field of sport psychology have moved from quantitative to qualitative inquiry for their studies (see Culver, Gilbert and Trudel, 2003; Culver, Gilbert and Sparkes, 2012). It can be argued that this shift towards qualitative approaches is due to the tendency of quantitative research to over-simplify experiences (Valle, King and Halling, 1989). However, despite this methodological shift, positivist traditions still exert influence in qualitative inquiry (Horn, 2008). This point is reflected in the strategies that exist for “legitimization” in qualitative research, such as the requirement to achieve trustworthiness in order to evaluate a study’s worth (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Horn, 2008; Sparkes, 2008).

Qualitative inquiry in the sport psychology literature has until now, shown an over-reliance on a structured or semi-structured approach to interviews and content analysis (Culver, Gilbert and Trudel, 2003; Culver, Gilbert and Sparkes, 2012). Therefore, it is argued that greater methodological diversity is needed to considerably increase our knowledge and understanding of sport psychology concepts (Krane and Baird, 2005; Sparkes, 1998; Streat, 1998). As a result, researchers in the field of sport psychology have begun to highlight the potential of phenomenology in recognising subjective experience with emphasis also being placed on the consideration of issues of an epistemological nature (Whitson, 1976; Bain, 1995; Dale, 1996; Nesti, 2004; Crust and Nesti, 2006; Culver, Gilbert and Sparkes, 2012).

The overall aim of this paper is to provide a theoretically informed, practical set of guidelines for researchers who wish to employ the descriptive phenomenological interview for data collection in future studies. This will be supported by brief personal accounts detailing how the author translated this theory into practice in order to benefit understanding. To allow for this, the author will create an argument highlighting how descriptive phenomenology as a methodology can advance the sport psychology literature. This will be followed by a critique of the use of phenomenology in the sport psychology literature thus far. The research discussed during the brief personal accounts in this paper are part of the author’s Doctoral research which employed descriptive phenomenology to examine the

lived experience of ‘critical moments’ (Nesti and Littlewood, 2010) in elite Premier League Academy football.

### *Introduction to phenomenology*

Prior to critiquing the use of phenomenology in the sport psychology literature it is important to distinguish between the two main approaches to phenomenology; descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology (Cohen & Omery, 1994). It is important to highlight the main differences existing between these phenomenological approaches as the philosophical underpinnings of each approach will inform the interview and data analysis process (Lowes and Prowse, 2001).

### *Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology*

Researchers using descriptive phenomenology commit themselves to an epistemological inquiry. Defined narrowly, epistemology is the study of the nature and source of knowledge and justified belief (Childers & Hentzi, 1995). Descriptive phenomenology focuses on describing and highlighting the participant’s lived-experience of a phenomenon. In order to examine phenomena, the researcher must enter into the attitude of the phenomenological reduction through the use of bracketing (Giorgi, 2009). Bracketing involves setting aside one’s natural attitude and a priori knowledge and assumptions in order to remain fully present to phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness (Husserl, 1913/1983; Giorgi, 2009; Bevan, 2014). It is worth noting that Husserl’s philosophical concept of ‘pure’ bracketing can never be fully completed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Therefore, the expectation is that the researcher will strive to bring into awareness their own biases, past knowledge, positivist tendencies to look for causality in the data and personal experience whilst dealing with descriptions of the participants’ experience in the present (Ashworth, 1999; Giorgi, 1997, 2009; Bevan, 2014).

As a research methodology descriptive phenomenology differentiates itself from other qualitative approaches in that it rejects the traditional objectivity measures placed upon qualitative research by positivist traditions (Lin, 2013; Sanders, 1982; McClellan, 1995). In other words, whilst descriptive phenomenology remains focused on the description of experience, qualitative methods

move past descriptions and in order to generate theory or to satisfy positivist assumptions. However, this does not mean that descriptive phenomenology only offers idiosyncratic descriptions (Lin, 2013). In fact, it can be argued that phenomenology has its own unique specifications for achieving critical and objective research (Crotty, 1998). It is critical in that it problematises that which is taken for granted in the natural attitude and objective in that it reveals the inherent structures that constitute human experiences (Lin, 2013; Sanders, 1982; Crotty, 1998). Therefore, descriptive phenomenology is radically different from other qualitative approaches in that it can provide psychological knowledge without; theorising, placing a thematic focus on dialogue, literary analogies or theoretically based interpretation (Wertz, et al., 2011).

To further this, descriptive phenomenology can facilitate the study of a number of important terms such as spirit, courage, love, fear, hopes and dreams which are rarely examined in the research yet are widely referred to throughout sport (Kerry and Armour, 2001). This subjective clarification of the athlete's experience may not only enhance and advance the sport psychology literature but also the ability of practitioners to better understand the world that their athletes live in. From an applied perspective, phenomenological techniques may be used by sport psychologists to best support athletes during their complex, personal and ever changing journey through elite sport (Nesti, 2004).

### *Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology*

Researchers influenced by Heidegger's interpretive approach commit themselves to an ontological inquiry. Ontology is the study of the nature of being, existence, or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations (Creswell, 1994). Interpretive phenomenology allows for a more personal input from the researcher in the form of theories or the researcher's own suppositions (Mackey, 2005). Therefore, bracketing is not a fundamental concept in the interpretive approach. Instead, the researcher 'participates in making the data' through interpretation of phenomena rather than focusing on description and clarification (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Kerry and Armour, 2000, 7).

### **Phenomenological interview in Sport Psychology**

The main tool for data collection in phenomenological research is the phenomenological interview (Dale, 1996). The descriptive phenomenological interview begins with an open-ended question related to the phenomenon of interest and the follow-up questions are open, *non-leading* and based on the descriptions provided by the person being interviewed (Crust and Nesti, 2006). In other words, the descriptive phenomenological interview is unstructured in nature and during the interview encounter itself, the researcher should view the participant as the 'expert' (Dale, 1996).

Dale's (1996) paper was one of the first to highlight the potential of the phenomenological interview in allowing an athlete to provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences within sport. However, since then the phenomenological interview has remained under-utilised in sport psychology research. To the author's knowledge, there are no existing guidelines available within the sport psychology literature on how to conduct a descriptive phenomenological interview. Although there are papers addressing the use of the phenomenological interview in other human science disciplines (such as health care and nursing), the emphasis has been mostly theoretical with few clear practical guidelines being offered even if the researcher was to venture further afield for guidance (see Lowes and Prowse, 2001; Englander, 2012; Bevan, 2014).

#### *Review of phenomenological research in sport psychology*

Although researchers have attempted to employ descriptive and interpretive phenomenological approaches in their studies, the most prevalent method in the literature is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith and Osborn, 2008). IPA is an approach to qualitative analysis which was derived from phenomenological principles. IPA has a particularly psychological interest in how people make sense of their experience (Larkin and Thompson, 2011). Although the phenomenological approach and IPA is beginning to appear within the field of sport psychology, it can be argued that the majority of this research has been applied inconsistently or inaccurately thus far (Allen-Collinson, 2009). The table below provides a summary and critique of phenomenological research in sport.

Insert table here.

Table 1. A synopsis and critique of phenomenological research in sport.

In summary, this table has highlighted that the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological approaches employed in sport psychology research have been largely neglected. It is crucial for researchers to understand that the philosophical underpinnings of their chosen phenomenological approach will inform the data collection as well as the analysis process and should therefore be made explicit (Lowes and Prowse, 2001). Failure to do this will result in methodological confusion, undoubtedly affecting the quality of the research (Lowes and Prowse, 2001). For example, it is argued that semi-structured interviews are not appropriate for descriptive phenomenological research as the use of pre-determined questions opposes Husserl's central concept of bracketing (Lowes and Prowse, 2001).

Therefore, in the following section the author will offer clear guidelines for conducting a descriptive phenomenological interview. The guidelines will be presented under each heading or sub-heading. Each guideline will then be supported by underpinning theory and where appropriate, brief personal accounts. The guidelines offered are aimed at those who wish to employ the descriptive phenomenological approach in future research.

### **The descriptive phenomenological interview – Applying theory to practice**

*The author recommends that great care should be taken while preparing the initial question for the interview. The question should relate in a non-leading and open way to the phenomenon under investigation.*

Phenomenological interviews should begin with a question that relates in a non-leading and open way to the phenomenon under investigation (e.g. 'Can you tell me about your experience of 'hitting the wall' in marathon running?'). As the only question that can be concretely prepared in advance for the descriptive phenomenological interview is the first question, the researcher should put careful thought into what it is they want to ask. An appropriate opening question will give the interview the best chance of success. Unstructured interviews in qualitative research, particularly grounded theory, may

be viewed as beginning in a similar way to the phenomenological interview. However, a grounded theory researcher is often discouraged from asking an opening question in such a direct manner as it 'would preconceive the emerging of data' (Glaser, 1992, 25). Therefore, grounded theory researchers typically begin an interview with a general research question instead (Charmaz, 1990). It is argued that the directedness of the initial question in descriptive phenomenology provides the researcher with a unique opportunity to focus on the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009).

### ***Sampling***

*Participants for descriptive phenomenological interview should be selected using purposive sampling. Researchers should be prepared for the possibility of some interviews not going to plan. The researcher should discard interviews prior to data analysis where bracketing was compromised.*

Participants for descriptive phenomenological research are selected using purposive sampling, which is a form of non-probability sampling (Polit & Hungler, 1999). Sampling in descriptive phenomenology differs from sampling in other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory which generally prefers to use theoretical sampling (Elliot and Timulak, 2005).

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection whereby the researcher collects, codes and analyses the data simultaneously in order to direct further data collection (Coyne, 1992; Glaser, 1992). In other words, theoretical sampling is controlled by emerging theory which directly contradicts descriptive phenomenology's central concept of bracketing (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Lowes and Prowse, 2001).

Purposive sampling is not informed by emerging theory. Instead, purposive sampling requires the researcher to 'hand-pick' participants who have experience of the phenomenon being studied at the start of the data collection process (Dale, 2000). Therefore, purposive sampling is used in descriptive phenomenological research as it allows the researcher to focus on the experiences and phenomena

which are critical to the study (Dane, 1990). It is important to note that it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that recruited participants have the experience of the phenomenon needed for their study. As a result, there should be no need for the descriptive phenomenological researcher to engage in further sampling once the study begins.

Interestingly, the literature does not offer specific guidelines on the appropriate sample size for phenomenological research. For example; Giorgi (2008) recommended at least 3 participants, Morse (1994) recommended at least six participants, whilst Creswell (1998) recommended between five and twenty-five participants for a phenomenological study.

In descriptive phenomenological research the aim is to sample expressions of life-world experiences relevant to the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, it can be argued that sampling should focus on quality over quantity (Todres, 2005). Phenomenological research is not concerned with generalisability or making quantitative comparisons between different populations of people (Todres, 2005). Instead, the sample size is evaluated by the completeness and quality of the information provided by the participants (Connell, 2003).

When recruiting for the descriptive phenomenological interview, the researcher must remember that this approach is heavily dependent upon linguistic ability (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, using a method like descriptive phenomenology requires the participant to be comfortable in using their own 'everyday' language to articulate their experiences to the researcher, and vice versa. This means that the descriptive phenomenological interview may be unsuitable for those with poor oral and verbal skills (Nesti, 2004).

In order to illustrate this point, I will discuss how I reached the final sample size in my research. In all, I interviewed eight participants for my study and I included five interviews for the data analysis phase. I excluded three interviews from the data analysis stage because during the interview itself the participants gave limited descriptions which made responding with open-ended or probing questions very difficult to achieve. In an attempt to keep the conversation flowing, I asked the participants leading questions about their experience. For example, I specifically asked a participant if they



had experienced a certain event in order to open up the dialogue. However, doing so meant that I was no longer bracketing to the best of my ability. In fact, it could be argued that this was my own perception of a critical moment and not theirs, even if they had experienced the mentioned event. The aim of the descriptive phenomenological interview is to allow the participant to describe their experience of a phenomenon, not to lead the participant down a pre-determined path in order to generate a response as I had done. Therefore, I made the decision to omit the three interviews prior to the data analysis phase. I did this because in descriptive phenomenology, the quality of the data analysis depends on the quality of the data (Lowes and Prowse, 2001). By asking leading questions the data was arguably contaminated with my own interpretations of the participants' experience. As a result, I recommend that researchers should discard any interviews, prior to data analysis, where bracketing was compromised in this way in order to remain congruent to the philosophical underpinnings of this approach which centres on bracketing.

It can be argued that this point highlights a potential challenge for sport psychology researchers as the participants, particularly as top level athletes may be unwilling to truly open up in the way that this approach requires. My participants were youth footballers in a Premier League Academy. Given the masculine culture which exists in most football clubs, the three athletes mentioned may not have been comfortable or even accustomed to expressing themselves in the way that is needed (Nesti, 2011).

Therefore, the author argues that a desirable final sample size for a project is at least eight. This will cover the possibility of some interviews being omitted, whilst still allowing for a number of high quality descriptions of the phenomenon. It can also be argued, particularly if each interview is over an hour in duration, that having a much larger sample size may result in the data analysis becoming too large an endeavour to permit the deep meaningful analysis which is the 'raison-d'etre' of phenomenological inquiry (Sandelowski, 1995).

### ***Bracketing***

*The author recommends that bracketing should take place before, during and throughout the data collection process. The author recommends engaging in the bracketing techniques detailed in this section.*

Although there are clear similarities between the phenomenological interview and interviewing in grounded theory, the author argues that there exist clear points where they diverge (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). In grounded theory, although openness is needed in the initial interviews, personal theorising (which opposes bracketing) is an important part of the overall data collection process as the researcher seeks to develop the emerging theory (Crotty, 1996; Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). In fact, in grounded theory, data analysis begins as soon as the initial data is collected (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). This is referred to as theoretical sampling and it directs the next interviews which are often times structured in order to saturate emerging categories (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000, Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

In contrast, a researcher using descriptive phenomenology remains fully focused on illuminating the experience of the participants through the use of bracketing. The aim of bracketing is to obtain rich descriptions of the participant's lived-experience, whilst setting aside one's natural attitude and a priori knowledge, interpretations and assumptions in order to remain fully present to phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness (Husserl, 1913/1983; Giorgi, 2009; Bevan, 2014). It is with this heightened awareness that the researcher can identify times where their own past experiences may interfere with the data collection and analysis. There are a number of effective bracketing techniques that can be used in descriptive phenomenological research (Ashworth, 1999). The points in the following section will highlight and discuss the specific bracketing techniques that I used before, during and throughout my study.

- (i) I wrote reflective memos in which I noted flashes of insight as I engaged with the literature prior to data collection and throughout data analysis. It can be argued this insight indicates an area of bias that might be experienced (Ahern, 1999). Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest delaying the literature review until after data collection and analysis in order to avoid informed

bias during the interviews and data analysis. However, it is argued that doing so may hinder the uncovering of existing assumptions that may have been unaccounted for (Lowes and Prowse, 2001). From my own personal experience, I noted many instances of underlying assumptions and preconceptions when reviewing the literature. For example, I became aware of an existing tendency I had to try to briefly deduce what the findings of studies would be from simply reading the title or part of the abstract. I would argue that these deductions were informed by underlying preconceptions and knowledge of pre-existing theory and therefore needed to be brought to my awareness. By developing my awareness of this tendency and taking the time to reflect on what I was noting I developed a new insight into my intrinsic beliefs and assumptions regarding certain areas of research in sport psychology, most of which I had never thought to challenge. As a result, I argue that the literature review should be incorporated into the researcher's bracketing efforts.

From a more practical point of view, gatekeepers will usually look for a research proposal prior to data collection which will require a literature review (Chan et al., 2013).

(ii) I kept a reflexive journal. Reflexivity is the key thinking activity that helps us to identify the potential influence of our values and interests that may affect or impinge upon the research (Chan et al., 2013; Primeau, 2003). I reflected extensively on my personal experiences within sport, the field of sport psychology and on my core values and personal beliefs. As well as adding to my reflexive journal before, during and throughout the research process, I referred back to this journal and re-read passages that I had written in order to refresh my bracketing attempts. This type of self-examination heightens self-knowledge and self-awareness which facilitates decision making throughout a descriptive phenomenological investigation (Wall et al., 2004). This point will be illustrated in section (iii).

(iii) I engaged in pilot interviews with colleagues who had experience in sport or in other professional environments. I initially did this to strengthen my awareness of the questions that I ask. However, I also began to recognise that there were times where I had to consciously resist

temptation to take control of the interview. In fact, I noticed that this occurred during every interview. I argue that this was mostly due to the participant describing topics that I now had an enhanced awareness of because of my bracketing efforts. I could now reflect upon and use this awareness to remind myself not to 'jump-in' prematurely with a comment or a question as I most likely would have done (without realising) had I not used bracketing. It also acted as a cue to remind myself to strive to remain open to the description of the participant's experience by ensuring to ask open and non-leading questions based on the descriptions provided by the person being interviewed (Crust and Nesti, 2006). It can be argued that the use of these bracketing techniques enabled the researcher-participant relationship to move from 'dialogue' in qualitative research to 'reflective', which is needed in descriptive phenomenological research (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). Therefore, I recommend keeping a reflexive journal and conducting pilot interviews as they help the researcher to break away from their everyday natural attitude and to view things with a fresh perspective (Giorgi, 2009).

- (iv) I engaged in extensive discussions with colleagues/research team including my reasons for undertaking the research. This helped me to become aware of existing thoughts and intrinsic interests I had on the research topic (Tufford and Newman, 2010).

In summary, bracketing enables the researcher to undergo new ways of experiencing and of thinking about a phenomenon meaning that descriptive phenomenological research becomes both original and changing (Bevan, 2014). Although some researchers only engage in these bracketing techniques prior to the study beginning, it can be argued that this may in fact contribute to bias if the bracketing effort is not sustained throughout (Giorgi, 2008). Actively listening to a participant's description of their lived experience during the descriptive phenomenological interview is a very different task to bracketing one's past and existing knowledge prior to engaging in the research. It can be argued that researcher bias, interpretation and assumptions may manifest and exert an undesired influence on the descriptive phenomenological interview if left unchecked throughout the entire process (Giorgi,

2008). Therefore, it is recommended that the researcher engages in the discussed bracketing techniques before, during and throughout the data collection and analysis process.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper has highlighted the potential that the descriptive phenomenological approach holds for researchers and practitioners in the field of sport psychology. The importance of aligning the philosophical underpinnings of the chosen phenomenological approach with the data collection and data analysis process was highlighted in a critique of the existing literature. Future researchers are encouraged to take great care in ensuring that congruence between these areas is achieved, otherwise phenomenological research in the field of sport psychology will continue to be flawed. The guidelines offered in this paper are aimed at those who wish to employ the descriptive phenomenological interview in future research. The purpose of these guidelines is to encourage more researchers to consistently employ the descriptive phenomenological interview for data collection in their studies. This approach is not without its challenges. However, it is argued that by focusing on experience and allowing the athletes to be the expert, the descriptive phenomenological interview may provide an unparalleled rich, unique and in-depth account about the phenomenon and the individual in question which will not only strengthen and diversify the sport psychology literature but also the knowledge of practitioners working within the applied world of professional sport.

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