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Intention and epochē in tension: Autophenomenography, bracketing and a novel approach to researching sporting embodiment

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Intention and epochē in tension: autophenomenography, bracketing and a novel approach to researching sporting embodiment

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This article considers a novel approach to researching sporting embodiment via what has been termed 'autophenomenography'. Whilst having some similarities with autoethnography, autophenomenography provides a distinctive research form, located within phenomenology as theoretical and methodological tradition. Its focus is upon the researcher's own lived experience of a phenomenon or phenomena. This article examines some of the key elements of a sociological phenomenological approach to studying sporting embodiment in general before portraying how autophenomenography was utilised specifically within two recent research projects on distance running. The thorny issues of epochē and bracketing within phenomenological and autophenomenographical research are addressed and some practical suggestions tentatively posited.

Keywords: sociological phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty; autophenomenography; sporting embodiment; epochē/bracketing.

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Introduction

The term phenomenology is derived from the Greek *phainomenon*, taken from *phaino*, from the root *phôs*, or light. *Phainomenon* thus means that which is shown, placed in the light. From this, we derive *phenomenon*: an appearance, observable occurrence, or perceived event or circumstance. Phenomenology devotes itself to the study of how things appear to consciousness (Giorgi 1986). As a theoretical perspective, phenomenology has only relatively recently been taken up by sociological and psychological researchers in sport and exercise (Dale 1996, 2000; Kerry and Armour 2000; Nesti 2004; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007, Allen-Collinson 2009), often in order to address issues of embodiment within sports and physical cultures. For Williams and Bendelow (1998), an ‘embodied sociology’, rather than being based upon abstract, ‘disembodied’ theorisations of the body, shifts the emphasis to perspectives that theorise *from* lived bodies. Phenomenology, and existential phenomenology in particular, provide a potent means of generating such theorisations from the lived body, based upon first person accounts of perception and experience. In recent times, forms of phenomenology have been utilised in order to address sporting and physical activity experiences within a range of physical cultures, particularly using insights derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2001) existential phenomenology (see Allen-Collinson, 2009 for an overview). Although sports studies in general have only recently begun to explore the rich possibilities generated by phenomenology, it should be remembered that there exist earlier examples of how productive this particular approach can be, for example in relation to movement, sport and physical education (Arnold 1979) and to female sporting embodiment, motility and spatiality analysed via a feminist phenomenological lens (Young 1980), drawing upon the work of the existentialist-phenomenological writer, Simone de Beauvoir (1972).

Phenomenology offers a ‘third way’ epistemologically and ontologically, in positing that the ‘external’ world, body and consciousness are all fundamentally intertwined, inter-relating and mutually influencing. As Schwartz (2002, p. 53) notes, whilst a familiar phenomenological prescription might be that ‘all existents[1] must be transformed into, and treated only as, phenomena’ (i.e. things as they appear in our consciousness), the existence of any ‘objective’ or ‘real’ external world is not denied, only construed as problematic. Phenomena are thus not merely abstract things out there in the world, separate from human consciousness and experience, but are part of our incarnate subjectivity. For the later Merleau-Ponty (1962), we have existential unity with the *chair*

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[1] Defined by Schwartz (2002, p. 53) as ‘any physical, social, abstract, emotional object – which has content, meaning, characteristics, features – which coheres in our experience as an enduring object, and which somehow presents itself to us as existing’.

(flesh) of the world, mind and body are firmly embedded within the world. As Francesconi (2009) reminds us in his discussions of consciousness and embodied mind, the relationship between mind, body and environment is not optional and discretionary, but necessary and circular.

Despite existential phenomenology's insistence upon the situatedness of mind and body, phenomenology in general has sometimes found itself subject to mordant criticism for insufficient theoretical attentiveness to the social-structural aspects of experience and embodiment. This *may* be one of the reasons for the relative dearth of phenomenologically inspired analyses within the sociology of sport. Such criticism is nowadays somewhat dated, however, certainly in relation to attacks on phenomenology for insufficient analytic attention to 'difference,' including gender, and the social-structural influences and constraints upon individuals. Certainly, forms of more sociologised or 'cultural phenomenology' (Csordas 1994), including feminist phenomenology (Fisher and Embree 2000) explicitly recognise and theorise the structurally-influenced, historically-specific and culturally-situated nature of human experience. For phenomenology is a rich, complex, contested and multi-stranded theoretical tradition, a veritable 'tangled web' (Ehrich 1999) of different philosophical perspectives.

Whilst fully recognising the power of phenomenology as theoretical perspective (see Author, for examples) in addressing sporting embodiment, this article focuses more squarely upon phenomenology as *methodological* approach. For, as Schwartz (2002) notes, we construe phenomenology as epistemological theory only, at the risk of grave misunderstanding. Here, I consider an innovative form of the phenomenological method: autophenomenography (described below), which appears to be a completely novel approach within sports studies (Author 2010). For many, 'the phenomenological method' constitutes the very heart and spirit of the phenomenological enterprise itself, although 'method' is perhaps rather a reductionist misnomer at least in the sense of reduction to a mere research technique or set of techniques. For the phenomenological method is considerably more encompassing than traditional conceptualisations of method. It constitutes a whole orientation to the world, an attitude of openness and wonderment, requiring, as van Manen (2000) advocates, a certain attentive awareness to the things of the world as we live them rather than as we conceptualize or theorize them in more abstract terms. We might describe the phenomenological attitude as one of enchantment, an attempt to suspend our 'adult' knowledge and preconceptions in order to view the world through the fresh, excited, 'naive' eyes of childhood. As Robert Rinehart (2010) questioned in his Presidential Address to the *North American Society for the Sociology of Sport*: 'Are our ways of writing and disseminating knowledge and understanding merely replicating a Science model of knowledge acquisition? Might there be other, more proactive, ways to recapture the wonder of discovery and the excitement of novel understandings?' (p. 187). Whilst Rinehart was calling for the use of more innovative and poetic representational forms within the sociology of sport, taking a phenomenological approach can, I contend, generate the wonder and excitement he craves, although it is not always the easiest research perspective to adopt particularly for a sociologist, as discussed below.

It might be argued that any research strategy capable of producing the in-depth, first-person, rich and descriptively detailed accounts of concrete experience necessary for phenomenological analysis, is capable of generating the primary data for such analysis. And lively debates flourish amongst phenomenologists as to the best ways in which to conduct phenomenological research (see Finlay 2009 for example). Any tight prescription of method(s) would certainly run counter to the very openness of the phenomenological spirit. As Mortari and Tarozzi (2010) note, phenomenology is highly complex and never dogmatic, it stays away from defining grids and rejects oversimplification: 'There is no place for phenomenological orthodoxy, or for so-called "purism"' (p. 9). Such openness applies to phenomenology both as theoretical perspective and methodological stance undergirding the choice of specific methods of data collection and analysis. Semi-structured qualitative interviews have proved a favoured method for phenomenologically-inspired researchers (e.g. Levesque Lopman 2000), particularly those employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith and Osborn 2003), including within sports studies (e.g. Nicholls *et al*. 2005; Shepherd *et al*. 2006; Warriner and Lavallee 2008; Gillison *et al*. 2009). This article focuses upon the use of an innovative research approach within phenomenology: autophenomenography (Grupetta 2004; Allen-Collinson 2009), which is described below.

This approach was utilised in two research projects in which I recently engaged: 1) a collaborative autoethnographic/autophenomenographic project on injury and rehabilitation experiences in distance running; 2) a feminist phenomenological[2] autophenomenographic study (still ongoing) of female distance running. The focus of the article is therefore methodological and whilst there is not the scope here to consider the rich complexities of feminist phenomenology itself, its insights have been applied perceptively and effectively within studies of female sporting embodiment (see Author 2010 for an overview). To give two contrasting examples, Young (1980, 1998) addresses female bodily comportment in ‘Throwing like a Girl’, and analyzes the ways in which feminine motility and spatiality are constrained and constructed within a patriarchal social structure. Revisiting ‘Throwing’ nearly twenty years subsequent to initial publication, Young (1998) adopts a critical stance toward her earlier work for its overemphasis on the negative aspects of female embodiment, seeking to provide a greater balance between the power of structural constraints and that of female social agency. Similarly employing feminist phenomenology to strong effect, but applied to women’s mountaineering, Chisholm (2008)

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[2] It should be emphasised that I adopt a sociological feminist-phenomenological perspective, rather than a more philosophical feminist-phenomenological approach.

emphasises women's agentic potential for transcending (to some extent) the constraints of the gender system via active cultivation of the body's motility.

To provide contextualisation, I now turn to consider the phenomenological method generally together with autophenomenography specifically, before focussing upon the two research projects on distance running, in order to address some of the challenges confronting the autophenomenographic researcher, in this instance in relation to the thorny issue of epochē or bracketing in 'insider'[3] research. For some of the actual structures of experience emergent from the feminist phenomenological project data, the reader can find examples in Author (2010).

The phenomenological method

In general, the aim of existential-phenomenological research is to provide rich, textured, detailed descriptions of phenomena as they are lived and experienced by participants in actual concrete situations, without an overemphasis on accounting for and theorising these. As Nesti (2004, p. 41) notes: 'Phenomenology requires the researcher and the subject [participant] to maintain their penetrating gaze at the phenomenon under consideration, *without* moving off target and starting to try and *account* for its existence…'. Four key themes or qualities, derived originally from Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) work as the 'founding father' of phenomenology, provide a useful starting point in portraying the phenomenologcal method. These elements have been taken up and adapted (or indeed abandoned) in very different ways by researchers working under the rubrics of different phenomenological traditions. Transcendental, existential and hermeneutic phenomenologies, for example, all have distinct ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings (see Allen-Collinson 2009 for an overview) and some of these elements are highly contested within phenomenology itself. The four elements I describe briefly below, as relevant to the autophenomenographic research projects portrayed, are: 1) description; 2) epochē/bracketing and reduction; 3) essences; and 4) intentionality.

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[3] It is fully acknowledged that 'insiderness' is of course relative, fluctuating from moment to moment and context to context.

For phenomenologists, ***description*** is a key element, although the term holds very different meanings according to the particular phenomenological framework adopted. It is perhaps more useful to employ a descriptive-interpretive continuum, although neither ‘pure’ description nor ‘pure’ interpretation would make any sense within many forms of phenomenology. As a heuristic device (in sociological terms), however, it is helpful to imagine this as a continuum, at one end of which lies Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. This has as its aim to ‘go back to the things themselves’ (*zu den Sachen selbst*) to portray structures of experience as they appear to individuals, described without resort to more abstract intellectualisation and theorisation. For phenomenologists working within the hermeneutic tradition, however, the focus is more centrally upon the role of interpretation. Indeed, interpretive activity is viewed as always already an inevitable and inescapable part of human *Dasein* (literally ‘there being’, usually understood in terms of ‘being-in-the-world’; see for example, Heidegger 1962). Of course, as many of us would argue, there can be no fixed, hard and impenetrable boundary between description and interpretation (Finlay 2009; Langdridge 2008); indeed any such dichotomy would be antithetical to the very openness and non-dualistic thinking of phenomenology itself.

For those of a more descriptive phenomenological orientation, following Husserl’s (1983) exhortation to return to the things themselves, it is considered imperative within the research to suspend as far as possible the researcher’s ‘natural attitude’, her/his preconceptions, presuppositions, attitudes toward, and interpretations of the phenomenon, including so-called ‘scientific’ ones. This is undertaken via a process of ***epochē*** and ***reduction*** in order to address the phenomenon/a with a freshness, a ‘naïve’ eye. This particular element of the phenomenological method has been strongly challenged by some phenomenologists working in the existential and hermeneutic traditions (and others), who criticise the idealism inherent in what they take to be Husserl's notion of a transcendental ego – namely, one that is able to bracket out the world, all personal assumptions, preconceptions and interpretation. I shall first consider my (sociological) understanding of the Husserlian version of epochē or bracketing, before moving on to discuss bracketing from my own sociological phenomenological orientation. It should at this juncture be noted that although there are nuances of meaning and underlying differences between the terms epochē, bracketing and reduction, the terms are often used synonymously. Indeed, Stewart and Mickunas (1990, p. 27), contend that Husserl uses the three terms interchangeably to refer to the 'change in attitude necessary for philosophical inquiry'. Following Spiegelberg (1975) and Gearing (2004), and for the purposes of this article, I use the terms epochē and bracketing as synonyms, whilst cognisant that this is by no means accepted practice across phenomenological traditions.

Via the process of ***epochē*** (from the Greek: to abstain or keep a distance from), the researcher aims to set aside her/his tacit assumptions about what is claimed to be 'known' about a phenomenon, in order to approach it freshly, without prejudgment. Husserl (1983) considered that not only preconceptions and assumptions had to be placed in brackets, but so did the 'self' undertaking the bracketing, in order to arrive at the transcendental ego. This latter could then access the 'pure' phenomenal experience, and many subsequent researchers took this to mean experience unencumbered by personal assumptions, interpretations, theories and so on. It is upon this highly contentious element of the phenomenological method that I concentrate later in the article in order to consider some of the challenges and practical responses to the requirement for epochē, particularly from a sociological and existential-phenomenological angle.

With regard to the third quality of the phenomenological method, ***essences***, Husserl's pursuit of these essential structures of experience was, as Todres (2007) notes, an almost mathematical quest to ascertain what is most invariant across examples of phenomena. Here Husserl's aim was to distil the phenomenon to its essential structures of experience, an ***essence*** or *eidos* of an object of consciousness, something without which the phenomenon would cease to be recognisable to the perceiver as that particular phenomenon. For many more sociological phenomenologists, however, the essence is more about recognition of generalities in the phenomenon, rather than making a definitive, 'finalising' (c.f. Smith *et al.*, 2009) statement about its invariance. The final quality or element I consider here is ***intentionality***, again derived from Husserlian phenomenology, but taken on and adapted by subsequent generations of phenomenologists. Intentionality delineates how consciousness is always consciousness of *something*; it is intentional, directed or orientated towards something or someone, including the imaginary. Intentionality allows objects to appear as phenomena (Willig 2008) to the perceiver. To give an example, if I see a vague dark shadow when out running in the woods and perceive this to be a bear, I experience a bear, along with all the emotional and corporeal reactions to 'bearness'. If my running companion perceives the same shadow to be a deer, s/he experiences a deer. Intentionality thus explains why different people perceive and experience ostensibly the 'same' phenomenon in radically different ways; a concept of salience in the analysis of gendered and also subcultural perceptions and experiences - of sporting environments, for example.

So, how might a phenomenologist approach the investigation of sporting activity and experience? And how would this contrast with other approaches within sports studies? In order to illustrate the distinctiveness of the phenomenological approach, Kerry and Armour (2000, pp. 3-4) consider the experience of glycogen depletion or 'hitting the wall' in distance running. This they contrast with a physiologist's approach. The latter, they contend, would most likely focus upon holding constant certain variables whilst manipulating others in order to ascertain whether some distinctive, ‘objective’ process is occurring in the body. Phenomenologists, on the other hand, taking a very different ontological and epistemological perspective, would endeavour to ‘capture’ as far as possible (but always inevitably partially) and to understand the lived meaning of hitting the wall for the participant(s), how it actually feels to experience this phenomenon, irrespective of whether ‘the wall’ exists in any physiological, cellular sense.

In order to investigate in-depth one particular sporting activity, training for distance running, two research studies were undertaken, one of which was in conjunction with a fellow runner and co-researcher. Before portraying these studies, I first describe the autophenomenographic approach in general.

Autophenomenography

Maree Gruppetta (2004), it would seem, is the author who first makes reference to the term ‘autophenomenography’ in a conference paper, where she argues that if an autoethnographic researcher analyses her/his own experiences of a phenomenon rather than of a ‘cultural place’ (as would be the case in an autoethnographic study), then the appropriate term would be ‘autophenomenography’. Autophenomenography is thus an autobiographical genre in which the phenomenological researcher is both researcher and participant in her/study of a particular phenomenon or phenomena, rather than of a particular *ethnós* (social group that shares a common culture) subjecting her/his own lived experience to sustained and rigorous phenomenological analysis. As Gruppetta notes, phenomenological researchers (in the social sciences) have been criticised by some because, unlike auto/ethnographers, they rarely actually participate in the processes under study, relying instead upon second-hand accounts. Whilst this need not *necessarily* be construed as a weakness of the phenomenological method, or indeed any method, autophenomenography does provide a means of addressing such criticism (Gruppetta 2004; Allen-Collinson 2009). It should be emphasised that even full participation in a physical activity cannot of course guarantee accurate and in-depth description, for as Samudra (2008) argues, the researcher-participant is still left with the problem of how to portray in analytic discourse those sporting bodily practices and experiences not usually expressed verbally. Such practices may be extremely difficult to represent textually and/or visually. As Stewart (2005) notes in relation to the process of writing qualitative research, there exists a powerful tension between what can be known and told and what remains obscure or unspeakable but is nonetheless 'real'. As phenomenology readily acknowledges, some experiences are indeed without - or beyond - language.

Returning us to the textual though, analogous to its autoethnographic sibling, autophenomenology is capable of producing the rich and finely textured, 'thick' descriptions of first-person experience, including sporting embodiment, so central to the existential phenomenological quest to bring to life the felt, lived, bodily experience. As an ethnographer drawing upon Geertz's (1973) notion of 'thick description', Samudra (2008) recommends 'thick participation' when researching physical cultures, so that cultural knowledge is felt and recorded first in the researcher's body, only later to be 'externalized' as visual or textual data for analysis. For Samudra (2008), the aim of thick participation is to convey vividly corporeal lived experience, to bring alive physical movements and embodied experiences for the reader, without an over-riding focus on interpretation. In common with autoethnography too, within the autophenomenographic genre there is the scope for a wide spectrum of representational styles, ranging from modified realist tales (c.f. Sparkes 2002) to more evocative genres such as poetic representations and performative, audience-interactive forms (see e.g. Hopper *et al*. 2008; Todres 2008).

At this juncture, it should be explained that I have chosen to use the term 'autophenomenography' here rather than 'autophenomenology', for two reasons. First, as with ethnography and its offspring, autoethnography, ‘graphy’ is taken to delineate the research process as well as the written, recorded or representational product of that process. Second, autophenomenology has specific – and contested - meanings within phenomenology (see for example, Drummond 2007; Marbach 2007) and I wish to avoid becoming embroiled in such debates here, interesting though they are. The autophenomenographic approach was used in two research projects in which I was involved and which are now described, primarily in order to consider some of the challenges and possibilities of undertaking epochē when using the phenomenological method in studying sports, exercise and physical cultures.

The Running Research

Congruent with the spirit of the autophenomenographic genre, I incorporate here some personal information regarding my own running career, in order to situate myself as researcher-participant within the two research projects portrayed, and to explain my ‘insider’ perspective on the lived experience of distance running. A white-British, female, middle/long-distance runner in my early fifties, I have been a ‘veteran’ runner for 15 years under the UK categorisation system. My running biography stretches over 24 years (having been a ‘late-starter’ in my mid-20s), and has involved sustained commitment to running 6-7 days a week, at times twice daily, alongside undertaking strength and flexibility work. Struggling with chronic knee problems since my late 30s, nowadays I generally restrict myself to running on just 5 days a week, and rarely for more than 60 minutes, having found that longer training sessions tend to provoke deleterious consequences for the knees. In order to protect the knees from high-impact road and pavement running, and to strengthen the musculature surrounding the knee joints, I also try to undertake the majority of my running cross-country. Training is primarily undertaken on playing fields, trails through riverside meadows on the outskirts of the small English city where I currently live, along canal towpaths, and over moorland.

Whilst falling firmly within the non-élite category, I remain highly committed, a 'serious runner' whose running encompasses two of Bale's (2004) forms: 1) welfare running, pursued for health and fitness aims; and also 2) performance running, pursued in order to improve and sustain performance (although sadly, performance is not at the level it once was!). Although the term 'performance' is usually employed in relation to élite athletes, some elements are nevertheless applicable to 'serious runners', who: 'regularly [run] further and faster than fitness for health would demand' (Smith 2000, p. 190). My running activity certainly conforms to Bale's (2004) conceptualisation of running as *work* rather than leisure, although it has to take place in the interstices of a demanding full-time job. As Howe and Morris (2009, p. 314) portray, the running 'taskscape' entails disciplined and routinised activity, and is typically experienced in a somewhat functional manner as a means of producing a running body. My choice of running environment is largely dictated by the need to train on the relatively cushioned surfaces described above, but I also plan visually stimulating environments to add variety and interest to the work of the training routines, and I seek rural rather than urban running, whenever possible.

Such is the topical biographical background to the two running research projects. The first of these was primarily a collaborative autoethnographic study (see Author 2001, 2008) but also incorporated strong autophenomenographic elements. The project was initiated when my male running partner and I both incurred relatively severe knee injuries, and decided systematically to document our injury and rehabilitation processes over a time-frame of two years. For data collection purposes, we each constructed individual 'injury logs', whilst a third 'reflective log' was used to examine the research process itself, to interrogate and synthesise our emergent analytic themes and also to exchange at times highly divergent perceptions and experiences. The logs were read and re-read as part of a lengthy process of data-immersion, employing processes of re-memory (Sanders-Bustle and Oliver 2001) in an attempt to capture and record as vividly as possible our subjective, emotionally-charged and very corporeally-grounded lived experiences. The reflective log helped generate new understandings, and to 'attune any dissonances' within what Spiegelberg (1975, p. 24ff.) terms joint or 'cooperative phenomenology'. Long-standing careers in running gave us some confidence of fulfilling Garfinkel's (2002, p. 175) phenomenologically-derived 'unique adequacy requirement' for the researcher to 'be *vulgarly* competent to the local production and reflexively natural accountability of the phenomenon or order he (sic) is "studying"' (italics in original). Such 'competence' and familiarity with the phenomenon being studied, do however generate problems vis-à-vis the need to engage in bracketing, as will be discussed.

In the second study, an autophenomenographic approach was used in order to examine my experiences as a female middle/long-distance runner, training in public (and gendered) spaces. From the outset, my method adhered quite closely to Giorgi's (1985, 1997) and Giorgi and Giorgi's (2003) guidelines for undertaking phenomenological research, but using myself as both researcher and participant. I documented in detail my engagement with training for middle/long-distance running via a research log maintained over a period of 2.5 years (and still ongoing). This involves drafting notes of training sessions, not only in terms of timings, terrain, forms of training undertaken, weather conditions (as is familiar practice to many a runner), but also recording in detail specific, concrete, subjective and corporeal experiences and feeling states.

Following Giorgi's (1985) guidelines for undertaking phenomenological research, both of the above studies incorporate the following elements: i) the collection of concrete descriptions of phenomena from an 'insider' perspective; ii) the adoption of the phenomenological attitude (efforts to be open to the phenomenon and to suspend as far as possible preconceptions and assumptions surrounding it); iii) initial impressionistic readings of the descriptions in order to gain a feel for the whole; iv) in-depth re-reading of these descriptions as part of a lengthy process of data-immersion, to identify themes and sub-themes; v) free imaginative variation - where I/we search for the most fundamental elements and meanings of a phenomenon, its ‘essential’ characteristics. This also involves imaginatively varying elements of the phenomenon initially identified to ascertain whether it remains identifiable after such imagined changes and so to identify and draw out the ‘essences’; those elements which deemed necessary for the phenomenon to be the phenomenon.

Given the ideographic nature of the research projects, exploring my own lifeworld (and that of my running partner in Study 1), I depart from Giorgi’s method with regard to constructing general descriptions applicable to a range of participants. Instead, the focus is upon an individual’s experiences of a phenomenon; an in-depth approach which has been used to great effect by other phenomenological researchers, for example in relation to experiences of multiple sclerosis (Finlay 2003), including the researcher’s powerful account of her own lived experience of the condition (Toombs 2001). Whilst I found the autoephenomenographic approach highly productive in research terms, for me as a sociologist, one of the most difficult and challenging elements of the process was the phenomenological requirement for epochē, and I give below a brief description of how I approached – and still struggle to resolve - this thorny issue.

Autophenomenography and the challenges of epochē

As noted above, familiarity with the lived world of the distance runner gives me some confidence of fulfilling Garfinkel’s (2002) ‘unique adequacy requirement’ for familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation. This requirement does, however, render problematic another key and contentious element of the phenomenological method: epochē, the suspension of the ‘natural attitude’ of our everyday (and disciplinary-based) assumptions about a phenomenon. The existential and hermeneutic phenomenologists (not to mention sociological phenomenologists) who followed in the footsteps of Husserl, critiqued heavily what they took to be his notion of a transcendental ego - somewhat akin to a state of Buddhist enlightenment, as LeVasseur (2003, p. 413) comments - thought to be able to engage in ‘pure’ reflection, and standing outside all historical and cultural location, experience, and indeed language. Such transcendentalism has subsequently been seen as an idealist, unattainable and untenable position. Indeed, bracketing understood in this way would seem to sit in irresolvable tension with another of Husserl’s key concepts, intentionality. For Husserl (1999) consciousness is always directed toward something, it is unified with that object and cannot be separated from it, the *cogito* bears within itself its *cogitatum* (the thought, idea) (p.33). As Heidegger (1962) further emphasises in his notion of *Dasein*, we are always already in and of the world, we cannot separate ourselves from the world, we are inextricably enmeshed; we are ‘thrown’ into the world and find ourselves situated there. Pure reflection, ‘untainted’ by context is therefore impossible.

Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 178)), too, problematises the notion of (full) epochē and reduction, warning us that the central lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction, but that this very incompleteness ‘is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself’. Debates still rage between phenomenologists as to whether Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of epochē entirely or accepts it as methodological principle whilst rejecting Husserl’s transcendental idealist version of bracketing and the phenomenological reduction (see for example, Smith 2005). For the purposes of this article, however, and from the perspective of a phenomenologically-inspired sociologist, standing outside of our socio-cultural and historical frame is clearly an impossibility. Theories, concepts and interpretations are always inevitably there right from the very inception of our research, and in our observations, which can never be ‘neutral’ or valuefree. As Maso (2001) notes in relation to such theories and interpretations, even if we were somehow able to bracket our preconceptions – at least in the sense of eliminating them completely - this would make perception, and therefore experience, impossible.

So, how might a sociological phenomenologist approach the contested and thorny issue of bracketing, at least at the practical level? As Ahern (1999) notes, in many qualitative publications, researchers indicate having attempted the bracketing process but then fail to give an indication of how this was actually undertaken. Similarly, Gearing (2004) warns that although the term ‘bracketing‘ proliferates in research, its application and operationalisation often remain vague and superficial. He argues, further, that the growing disconnection of bracketing as a research practice from its origins in phenomenology can unfortunately result in its reduction to a formless technique or ‘black-box term‘ (p. 1429). Although there is not the scope here to delve more deeply into philosophical debates about the nature of bracketing, suffice it to say that for me, bracketing involves making a determined effort ‘to set aside theories, research propositions, ready-made interpretations, etc., in order to reveal engaged, lived experiences’, as Ashworth (1999, p. 708) recommends. It is about approaching the phenomenon, as far as possible, with an open, enquiring, questioning attitude of mind and being reflexive and self-critical vis-à-vis my own preconceptions. This may accord well with Husserl’s original notion of seeking freedom from presuppositions, which does not mean eliminating them, but rather seeing these for what they are and then ‘testing‘ them against the ‘evidence‘ of lived experiences. This would allow us as researchers to attempt both to set aside ready-made, tacit interpretations and also to reveal how those attitudes and assumptions, which are subsequently revealed to be integral to the phenomenon, do indeed shape it in important ways.

Whilst acknowledging the impossibility of complete epochē, nevertheless, to take matters at the practical research level, attempting to identify and temporarily suspend preconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions can prove very valuable in encouraging the adoption of a highly reflexive and self-critical approach to the research and, importantly, in re/discovering the magic and wonderment of everyday life. In order to demonstrate just some ways in which this form of ‘reflexive bracketing’ (Ahern 1999), was attempted in the research projects portrayed above, I now describe briefly two bracketing practices utilised. Via these efforts, I attempted to heighten reflexivity and subject to critical analysis my own ‘insider’ assumptions regarding distance running and female distance running in particular. I also hoped to render, strange, puzzling, magical and problematic the familiar world of everyday life, the distance runner’s *Lebenswelt*. I should stress that here I am discussing my attempts to suspend what Gearing (2004, p. 1443) terms ‘internal (researcher) suppositions’: my own personal, insider subcultural knowledge of distance running, my academic knowledge (such as sociological theories) and my personal history and experiences of being a female distance runner;

I should stress too that the following are not of course the only ways, or even the best ways of approaching bracketing, but are provided purely as exemplars for illustrative purposes and to address the need to be explicit about how we actually attempt epochē. For other practical suggestions regarding developing the skill of reflexive bracketing in research generally (not only in relation to phenomenological studies), see Ahern (1999). As noted above, during the collaborative autoethnographic project on distance running, my male co-researcher and I engaged in what Spiegelberg (1975, p. 33) terms ’group’ or ‘cooperative’ phenomenology, which involved the bracketing practice of using a ‘reflective log’ to examine the research process itself, to challenge and question between us the prior assumptions, preconceptions and tacit knowledge we held about distance running, to interrogate our emergent analytic themes and also to exchange at times highly divergent perceptions and experiences of distance running and training.

In the second, solo project, I engaged in two additional bracketing practices: 1) discussions with both insiders and non-insiders to the distance-running subculture, female and male; and 2) the reading and analysis of ethnographic and autoethnographic accounts of a range of other sporting and physical activities. This latter was undertaken in order to compare and contrast other sports with my running experience, including the gendered dimension where this was explicitly analysed, for example in accounts of women's triathlon (Granskog 2003; Cronan and Scott 2008) and mountain climbing (Chisholm 2008). To illustrate how discussions with others (running and non-running, sporting and non-sporting friends and family) specifically helped to heighten reflexivity, I give below two examples, one relating to my assumptions as a female runner, and one relating to distance running practices more generally.

In relation to the gendered dimension of running in public space, my male co-researcher from the collaborative autoethnography proved an excellent sounding board. At times he expressed shock and outrage at the sexist behaviour and physical harrassment and threats, which I recounted as forming a routine feature of the social landscape of many women runners' training (and general being) in public places (see Gimlin 2010). His surprise encouraged me to reflect more deeply on what was occurring in such inter-gender encounters and the ways in which I coped with both routine verbal harrassment and (thankfully) rarer physical assaults (see Author 2008, 2010 for details of such encounters; and Smith 1997 for runners‘ dis/engagement with such harrassment). An assumption that was challenged by some female running friends was that less confident or experienced women runners would feel safer running in daylight and in busy areas, given the construction of women's particular vulnerability in dark, secluded areas. Several women, however, indicated that they much *preferred* running under the cover of darkness, where they felt less exposed to intrusive male gaze and lewd ‘street remarks‘ (Brooks Gardner 1980). Similarly non-running friends and family challenged some of my runner’s tacit assumptions and taken-for-granted practices. Two friends involved in therapeutic work - one a Buddhist practitioner of Chinese acupuncture, and the other a reflexologist, expressed surprise/shock and at times horror at some routine training practices for middle/long distance running, and particularly their corporeal consequences. Both were at times horrified by my callused, battered, bruised and blistered feet (c.f. Spencer 2009 on the impact of undertaking embodied ethnography) and the effect of such ‘injuries‘ upon my wellbeing. In common with many runners, I had never thought of these bodily markings as anything other than ‘normal wear and tear‘. Other family and friends questioned whether my ’obsession with’ (for which I always read ‘commitment to‘) running in all weather and conditions was actually healthy. Whilst I had grown accustomed to such wonderings and indeed trenchant criticisms over the years, including - in former more athletic days - accusations of being ‘too thin‘, I did try during the autophenomenographic research, temporarily to bracket my ’insider’ ways of bodily knowing, and to analyse my body, behaviour and attitude to running through the ’unknowing’ eyes of an outsider to the subculture.

Concluding thoughts

This article has considered the use of autophenomenography, an innovative form of phenomenological approach, as applicable to the study of sporting embodiment. Whilst autoethnography in general entails the detailed analysis of the researcher her/himself *qua* member of a social group or category as, for example, a distance runner (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2001; Denison 2002), in autophenomenography the researcher subjects to rigorous analysis her/his own experiences of a phenomenon rather than of a sub/cultural ‘place’. Autophenomenography is thus an autobiographical genre in which the phenomenological researcher is both researcher and participant in her/his study of a particular phenomenon or phenomena, subjecting her/his own lived experience to sustained and rigorous phenomenological analysis, whilst keeping firmly in mind existential phenomenology's exhortation to bear in mind that such lived experiences are firmly embedded within the world, including the social world. Autophenomenography thus offers an approach which addresses the personal, subjective, idiographic experience whilst also acknowledging its situatedness in the general, structural and ethnographic. Rich, 'thick', detailed autophenomenographical descriptions combined with phenomenological theoretical analysis can promote a re/consideration of the essential structures of lived sporting experience (cognitive, corporeal, emotional and so on) as situated within social structure and sub/cultural context.

Analogous to its autoethnographic counterpart, autophenomenography may well find itself obliged to confront accusations of self-indulgence and navel-gazing (see for example, Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2005; Sparkes 2000, who address such criticisms vis-à-vis autoethnography), given that phenomenology itself has sometimes been charged with 'irresponsible subjectivism' (Spiegelberg 1975, p. 32). We await the fallout! Here I am proposing its use to complement the pantheon of other forms of research into sporting experience embodiment, including more 'traditional' phenomenologically-inspired approaches, employing more tried and tested methods such as in-depth interviewing, to access sporting minds. This article has addressed some of the challenges facing the phenomenological and particularly the autophenomenographic researcher who undertakes insider research into an everyday phenomenon with whose local production s/he is '*vulgarly* competent' (Garfinkel 2002). Certainly, the difficulties of engagement with epochē are exacerbated for the insider researcher, who is consequently required to heighten her/his degree of reflexivity in examining the familiar sporting *Lebenswelt*. But the insider researcher perspective has great advantages too, for as Rintala (1991, pp. 271–272) notes in relation to my own sporting milieu:

> The runner may not know her or his percent body fat and may have no data on hand to assert that the running mechanics are efficient. The computer printout that lists all of the known variables about that individual may be meaningless to the runner, but she or he *can discuss what it is like to run* . . . feeling one's feet strike the ground, or knowing the experience of one's heart pounding. [Emphasis added.]

This kind of embodied, somatic knowledge allows us to describe experience and to theorise '*from* the body' as well as about the body (Williams and Bendelow 1998), thus beginning to remedy the long-standing imbalance between abstract accounts and theorisations about the sporting body and more grounded, 'bodyful' accounts and analyses of sport and exercise as lived experience.

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