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Allen-Collinson, J and Evans, AB (2019) To be or not to be phenomenology? That is the question, *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 16 (4): 295-300.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2019.1693148>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/16138171.2019.1693148>

To be or not to be phenomenology? That is the question

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To be or not to be phenomenology? That is the question

Recent years have seen a burgeoning in phenomenological research on sport, physical cultures and exercise. As editors and reviewers, however, we frequently and consistently see social science articles that claim to be ‘phenomenological’ or to use phenomenology, but the reasons for such claims are not always evident. Indeed, on closer reading, many such claims can often turn out to be highly problematic. At this point, we should clarify that our ‘terrain de sport’ constitutes what has been termed ‘empirical phenomenology’ (Martínková & Parry, 2011) and more specifically from our own ‘home’ discipline, a phenomenologically inspired form of sociology. This latter tradition was developed in North America by Alfred Schütz (1972). By this, we do not mean philosophical phenomenology in all its rich and varied strands, the modern form of which was inspired by Edmund Husserl’s (1913/2002) descriptive and/or transcendental phenomenology. The term itself is derived from the Greek *phainomenon*, from the root *phôs*, meaning ‘light’, thus referring to something that is placed in the light, made apparent or shown. Phenomenology is therefore the study of phenomena, things as they present themselves to, and are perceived in consciousness. Importantly, it is *not* just another form of qualitative research; a point which we discuss later.

It is perhaps worth (re)stating that what is often termed ‘modern’ phenomenology (Embree & Mohanty, 1997) was developed from the work of Edmund Husserl (1913/2002) in his quest to question and unsettle traditional, scientific habits of thought that often left fundamental assumptions regarding a phenomenon or phenomena unquestioned and unproblematized. Several consistent, recurrent characteristics arose from Husserl's work, which many still consider as core assumptions of the 'phenomenological' approach. Although it is important to note that Husserl’s (1913/2002) phenomenological thinking underwent substantial reworking and revision

throughout his lifetime, one of his key and consistent assertions was the insight that human consciousness is *intentional*; that is, it is always directed at something. Furthermore, Husserl's notion of the phenomenological reduction lies at the heart of his work, as a methodical means of cutting through the layers of taken-for-grantedness that envelop a phenomenon, via the *epochē* – sometimes termed *bracketing* – allowing us to arrive at the *eidos* or core, essential characteristics of a phenomenon. Husserl advocated bracketing (standing back or aside from) our extant beliefs and presuppositions about a phenomenon as a central condition of phenomenological work, in order to return 'to the things themselves' (*zu den Sachen selbst*). In his later writings, Husserl's (1931/1988) focus shifted towards a consideration of the relationality of existence, with his focus on the *Lebenswelt*, or our commonsense 'lifeworld' of everyday immediate experience. This lifeworld is subjectively experienced and intersubjectively constructed. For Husserl, accessing the *Lebenswelt* was rendered possible via the phenomenological method, which sought to bracket our *natural attitude*, or everyday, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and being.

For many sociologists, however, the idea that we can actually stand outside of our own cultural and social-structural (and historical) location, is of course highly problematic, and has been questioned by subsequent authors within the 'existentialist' phenomenological tradition, as we discuss below. To this end, existential phenomenology is helpful because although it draws on Husserl's work, writers within this tradition, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2001), signal the impossibility of achieving full *epochē*. Of key interest to Merleau-Ponty (2001) was the investigation of the corporeal dimension of the body-world-consciousness nexus. Of particular relevance to the sociology of sport and physical culture, therefore, Merleau-Ponty (2001) considers the role of our own body (*le corps propre*) as the standpoint of our perception, from which we view and otherwise sense the world. In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty (1969) argues

for humans' existential unity with the very fabric, the French *chair* (flesh), of the world, thus challenging any neat distinction between the interior and the exterior world.

We now move to address what has been considered a social or 'sociologized' form of phenomenology (Allen-Collinson, 2009), or phenomenologically-informed sociology (depending on the emphasis of the particular project). This approach draws upon the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz (1972), whose insights have inspired many of our own investigations of sporting and physical cultural embodiment and experiences. Schütz was particularly interested in the later Husserlian notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the shared world of everyday life, and the meanings that social actors utilise in everyday interaction with others in the lifeworld. This perspective has been useful in exploring the lived experiences and lifeworlds of specific sports/physical cultures, such as performance swimming (McNarry *et al.*, 2019), distance running (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2017), high-altitude mountaineering (Allen-Collinson *et al.*, 2019), karate, capoeira and mixed martial arts (Telles *et al.*, 2018), and tai chi (Hjortborg & Ravn, 2019) to give just some examples.

Both Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, and existentialist phenomenology, have also inspired researchers in sport and exercise employing an 'empirical phenomenological' (Martínková & Parry, 2011) approach. Such use of, or indeed misappropriation (as some philosophical phenomenologists might argue) of phenomenology in this corpus has generated considerable controversy, including a trenchant critique of the lack of engagement with phenomenological writers and primary sources in some of this work (see for example, Martínková & Parry, 2011, 2013, and Halák *et al.*, 2014, for critical reviews). The mis-labelling of such work as 'phenomenological' is perhaps not helped by a somewhat dubious conceptualisation of the 'phenomenological tradition' evident in some research methods texts, in which phenomenology appears to be situated, puzzlingly, as just another way to do qualitative

research (e.g. Cresswell & Poth 2018). As we have noted previously (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2009, 2011), it can sometimes be difficult to ascertain precisely why research has been described by its authors as ‘phenomenological’.

As we describe above, phenomenology is a very specific philosophical tradition, one that is most definitely not synonymous with ‘qualitative’ research or indeed any research based purely on individual, subjective experience. For phenomenologists, research must move well beyond generating and analysing descriptions of individual, subjective experience of phenomena, however detailed, well-grounded and richly crafted. Such descriptions would constitute phenomenism, and phenomenology is, we emphasize, *not* phenomenism (see also Martínková & Parry, 2011; Halák *et al.*, 2014). Phenomenologists are thus not content with recounting the immediate, subjective experiences of particular individuals. Instead, we must seek fundamentally to question and problematise such accounts, and engage our best efforts in the sustained, disciplined bracketing of the natural attitude. Such work should attempt to look afresh at, and reflect critically upon a phenomenon, to identify its *structure* or core essence(s), the very thing(s) without which it would cease to be the phenomenon itself. It is also, therefore, likely to be characterised by reference to several key methodological processes and foci, including the use of description attuned to a particular form of phenomenology, focus upon intentionality, use of *epochē* and *eidetic reduction*, and characterisation of essences, or core meanings, of a phenomenon (Allen-Collinson 2016). Furthermore, and in line with Gallagher and Zahavi’s (2008) thoughts, we consider that, should research stay true to the core assertions of phenomenological thought, phenomenology in its empirical form can be ‘put to work’ productively in analysing and reflecting on data generated by a range of different methods (Allen-Collinson, 2009).

Given the philosophical, theoretical and methodological specificity of the core branches of phenomenological inquiry, why use phenomenological sociology? What can it offer the sociologist of sport and/or physical cultures? For us, there are strengths in engaging with this sometimes uneasy combination of philosophical tradition and sociological enterprise. Whilst departing from its original, philosophical roots, empirical forms of phenomenology, such as phenomenological sociology, provide a powerful theoretical and methodological perspective that requires us as researchers fundamentally and systematically to identify and challenge the everyday and often taken-for-granted assumptions, interpretations and meanings of the natural attitude. In this respect, this form of phenomenology coheres strongly with a sociological enterprise that also seeks to challenge and contest everyday common-sense understandings and ways of thinking. Whilst acknowledging the impossibility of full bracketing, phenomenological sociology nevertheless highlights the need for heightened and sustained researcher reflexivity (Allen-Collinson, 2011; McNarry *et al.*, 2019) in seeking to identify the everyday assumptions that can cloak and obscure the understanding of a phenomenon. Phenomenologists pursue a rich and complex theoretical tradition in addressing the mind-body-world nexus, with existential phenomenology in particular enriching the sociology of the body in investigating embodiment issues, including in sporting and physical-cultural contexts.

There are, not surprisingly, significant challenges in seeking to combine two very different disciplinary traditions (sociology and philosophy) and some compromise is perhaps inevitable. In relation to philosophical phenomenology, for example, the quest to identify universal experiences is, from a sociological perspective, questionable. Here, the lack of acknowledgement of, and analytic attention to, the specificities of embodiment and the lifeworld in relation to, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, dis/ability, etc, are highly problematic, particularly for sociologists and others who highlight the considerable impact of cultural and social-structural forces upon embodied experience. Yet, we argue that social forms of phenomenology are well-

positioned to tackle such limitations head on, via the incorporation of analytic insights drawn from other disciplines and theoretical traditions. Examples of such innovations include the combination of phenomenology with: critical sociology (Hughson and Inglis, 2002) feminist theory (Young, 1980, 1998; Fisher & Embree, 2000; Allen-Collinson, 2012), and queer theory (e.g. Ahmed, 2007). In our own particular form of phenomenological sociology, we are highly cognizant of the potential effects of gender, age, ability, social-structural location, and physical-cultural emplacement, rather than seeking to identify universal experience. In phenomenological sociology, embodiment and lived experiences are thus acknowledged to be specifically human, but also gendered, socio-economically classed, aged, ethnicised, and so on, and lived via differing degrees of physical and mental dis/ability.

Hence, in considering why a phenomenologically-sensitive sociology might be of relevance to those researching sport, exercise and physical cultures, we can see how phenomenology has the potential to generate grounded insights into embodied experiences in these domains, including the sensory dimension (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2015). It also, and importantly, provides a powerful means of examining intersubjectivity and intercorporeality in sport, exercise and physical-cultural contexts. This highlights the ways in which our minds and bodies share the world, socially interact, interconnect and mutually influence each other in these contexts. As has been found, finely attuned intercorporeality is often necessary to accomplish sporting and physical cultural enaction (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2017). A corpus of work is beginning to develop in this field (Meyer & van Wedelstaedt, 2017), for example, in relation to running (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2017), swimming (McNarry et al., 2019), and mixed martial arts (Spencer, 2012; Vaitinen, 2016), but at present, there is a relative lacuna in terms of research that synthesizes the phenomenological and the interactional.

In addition, with regard to interaction, the role of human-object and human-environment interaction is salient in many sports and physical cultures, where participants often become highly skilled in the use of objects (for example, golf clubs, tennis racquets, hockey sticks, cricket bats and balls) and highly attuned to properties of the elements, such as ground, water, or air. Such somatic learning often requires the development and refinement of a wide spectrum of sensory skills and ways of knowing, needed to execute skilful performance. These corporeal ways of knowing develop gradually, over time and with experience and repeated practice, so that they eventually become embodied and incorporated into the self. Highly developed sports and physical-cultural skills are, however, not usually completely and fully learnt once and for all, but rather they require ongoing and (in many cases) frequent practice and refinement. Furthermore, from a phenomenological perspective, phenomenology the mind-body-world connection and context are constantly changing. This is particularly germane to many sports and physical cultures, where practitioners have to make constant improvisational adjustments and readjustments, for example in relation to weather conditions (Allen-Collinson *et al.* 2019), to changes in terrain (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2015), or to opponents on the field of play (Hughson & Inglis, 2002), in the ring or fighting cage (Spencer, 2014; Vaittinen, 2016).

In sum, we suggest that there is and remains the potential for phenomenologically-inspired inquiry to provide a significant contribution to the sociology of sport in relation to myriad research contexts. At the same time, 'phenomenology' continues to be a misused term, seemingly applied as frequently to qualitative research with a focus upon subjective experience, as it is to work that is more firmly grounded in the substantial corpus of phenomenological writing in the transcendental, hermeneutic and existential traditions. As scholars, reviewers and editors, we continue to be concerned by the number of studies we receive, which claim to be phenomenological, yet fail to pay reference or consideration to the principal phenomenological tenets, to key phenomenological theorists and writers, to phenomenological concepts, or to

phenomenological methodology, process or rigour (see Allen-Collinson 2016). Yet, when such factors are considered, and phenomenological research is situated appropriately within its field, the continuing ‘promise’ of phenomenological inquiry (Kerry & Armour, 2000) for the sociology of sport remains considerable.

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