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# The Essence of Sporting Embodiment: Phenomenological Analyses of the Sporting Body

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## Abstract

Whilst in recent years the sociology of sport has taken to heart vociferous calls 'to bring the body back in' to analyses of sporting activity, the 'promise of phenomenology' signalled by Kerry and Armour (2000), remains under-realised with regard to sporting embodiment. Surprisingly, given the focus of study, relatively few accounts are truly grounded in the corporeal realities of the lived, sensuous sporting body. Phenomenology offers us a powerful framework for such analysis and has been adopted and utilised in very different ways by different social science disciplines. The purpose of this paper is to consider how existential phenomenology in particular might be utilised in the study of sport and physical activity, and we draw upon data from a collaborative autoethnographic project on distance running to illustrate this. The use of existential phenomenology and autophenomenography offers, we contend, fresh insights in portraying the 'essences', sensuousity, corporeal immediacy and richly-textured experiences of sporting embodiment.



**Keywords:** Existential Phenomenology, Sporting Embodiment, Merleau-Ponty, Autophenomenography, Autoethnography

## **The Essence of Sporting Embodiment: Phenomenological Analyses of the Sporting Body**

Whilst in recent years sport studies have addressed calls 'to bring the body back in' to analyses of sporting activity, surprisingly, the 'promise of phenomenology' (Kerry and Armour, 2000), remains under-realised with regard to sporting embodiment. The sporting body has been studied in a myriad of different ways over the past twenty-five years within the social sciences, from reflections on the place of the sporting body generally (Theberge, 1991), through an array of feminist analyses (Hall, 1996; Markula, 2003; George, 2005) and accounts of the gendered sporting body (Markula, 2005; Shilling and Bunsell, 2009), the 'impaired' sporting body (Smith, 2008; Sparkes and Smith, 2009), bodies in specific sports and physical activities (Markula, 1995; Aoki, 1996; Lewis, 2000; Allen Ness, 2004), and 'ethnicised' bodies in sport and exercise (Hargreaves, 2007), to accounts of the injured and suffering sporting body (Howe, 2004; Allen-Collinson, 2005; Hockey 2005), and on to the maturing sporting body (Tulle, 2003; Wainright and Turner, 2006; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009).

It can still be argued, however, that despite this growing corpus, the body has primarily been addressed at somewhat of an abstract, and, ironically, a disembodied level. Little of the research literature appears to be firmly grounded in the carnal realities of the lived, breathing, sweating sporting body, as has been noted (Wainwright and Turner, 2003; Ford and Brown, 2005; Hargreaves and Vertinsky, 2007). We are still, it seems, lacking a more 'enfleshed' epistemology and ontology (Spry, 2001). Phenomenology offers one means, amongs others, of providing a lived-body, corporeal, highly textured and sensuously grounded analysis of sport. Social scientific studies of the sporting body using the theoretical resources of phenomenology remain relatively scant, however, as Kerry and Armour (2000) found when reviewing the literature.

Nevertheless, there exists a small but developing literature, including for example, Young's (1980, 1998) existentialist-phenomenological account of 'throwing like a girl',

Rail's (1992) study of women's basketball, Fahlberg *et al* (1992) on exercise behaviour, Dale (1996) on the athlete's experience, together with elements of Wacquant's (2004) study of boxing, and of Shilling and Bunsen's (2009) analysis of female bodybuilding. Masciotra *et al* (2001) provide a phenomenologically-grounded account of spatio-temporal 'distancing' and co-ordination in Karate. The dialectical relationship between 'player-body-subject' and the lived-space of the playing field has been portrayed in relation to football (soccer), and the 'silky touch' aesthetics of star players (Hughson and Inglis, 2002; Hemphill, 2005). Studies of mind-body practices and physical cultures using a Merleau-Pontian perspective include Morley's (2001) interpretation of yoga practice and breath control. McDonald (2007) examines kalarippayattu, a traditional martial art requiring spiritual as well as physical training, drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of embodied consciousness and being-in-the-world. Addressing sports and physical activity more generally, Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) consider the role of sense perceptions in participants' experiences of sport and exercise utilising insights from Merleau-Ponty's work on the body as subject of perception.

This paper contributes to a small but growing literature on phenomenological analyses of sport. Here, our purpose is primarily to sketch out some of the distinctive features of a phenomenology of sporting embodiment. In order to give a flavour of what phenomenological perspectives might offer we give examples of data drawn from an autoethnographic research project on distance running. The account is structured as follows. First we tease out from the 'tangled web' (Ehrich, 1999) of phenomenology the specific strand of existentialist phenomenology, focusing on the work of one of its key proponents, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. We describe the research project from which the illustrative data are drawn. Subsequently, we examine the phenomenological method, including some of its key characteristics, and how it might contribute new perspectives to sporting analysis, illustrating this with data drawn from the project. The potential of autophenomenography as a research approach is also considered.

## **Phenomenology: philosophical groundings**

Phenomenology, derived from the Greek 'phainomenon', is the study of phenomena, things as they present themselves to, and are perceived in consciousness. Kvale (1996: 53) describes it as an approach: 'interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects' perspectives of their world; their essential meanings'. The concern with subjectivity and first-person accounts has at times, however, resulted in the conflation of phenomenology with qualitative research in general, as discussed below. Such conflation fails to acknowledge the distinctive philosophical roots and ethos of phenomenology, described by some as the major philosophical movement of the twentieth century (Embree and Mohanty, 1997: 1). Emerging from the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), modern phenomenology now spans a wide-ranging, multi-stranded perspective, and forms of phenomenology have been taken up and utilised in a myriad of ways by different disciplines and subjects. It was originally developed as a philosophical stance by Husserl (2002, 1931) in an attempt to remedy the inadequacies of 'scientific', 'objective' approaches to studying the nature of human existence by addressing the subjectivity of human experience. Embree and Mohanty (1997) posit four specific tendencies within the phenomenology movement: realist, constitutive, existentialist and hermeneutic; it is primarily existentialist phenomenology that will be considered here in addressing sporting embodiment.

In general, phenomenology seeks highly detailed and textured, in-depth, first-person descriptions of human experiences in specific contexts, and aspires to reveal their 'essences' (described below); the essential, but always situated, structures of experience as they appear to consciousness. With its transcendence of Cartesian dualism and an emphasis on the mind-body-world nexus, phenomenology examines 'the here and now of bodily existence and presence' (Münch, 1994: 151). Existentialist forms in particular acknowledge the centrality of the body in the relationship between our consciousness, self and world. Whilst departing from its original 'pure' Husserlian form, more contemporary 'sociologised' or forms of phenomenology incorporate and develop insights

from other theoretical frameworks such as feminism (e.g. Butler, 1997) and critical sociology (Hughson and Inglis, 2002). ??????

### **Existentialist phenomenology**

At a general level, existentialist philosophies centre upon the quest for understanding of human existence, posing questions such as what it means to be human, and whether such a thing as 'human nature' exists. Offering a 'third way' epistemologically and ontologically, existentialist phenomenology starts out not from the assumption of an 'objective' world outside of us, nor from a pure constituting consciousness, but from a dialogic relationship where world, body and consciousness are all fundamentally intertwined, inter-relating and mutually influencing. For key writers such as de Beauvoir (1972) and Merleau-Ponty (2001), our own body (*le corps propre*) is, the subject of perception, the standpoint from which all things are perceived and experienced; this is clearly an apposite concept within studies of sporting embodiment, where sense perception is often so critical.

For Merleau-Ponty (1963: 125) our 'being-in-the-world' is based on the union of the 'psychic' and the 'physiological'. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty (1969) recasts the 'lived body' of his earlier writings as '*chair*' (flesh) in order better 'to capture its primordial or elemental character' (Morley, 2001: 75), and to overcome what he perceived as his earlier imprisonment in mind/body dualism. 'Being in the world' thus becomes 'flesh-of-the-world', to convey the fundamental continuity and inter-relatedness of body-mind-world. Existentialist phenomenology also highlights the 'situatedness' of human experience, including gendered experience and behaviour (Young, 1980). Although some existential phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty can be accused of tacitly taking the male (white) body as norm, other more 'social' forms, such as de Beauvoir's (1972), and contemporary feminist phenomenology (Fisher, 2000) explicitly acknowledge human experience to be structurally, culturally and historically-located.

In relation to studies of sporting embodiment, existentialist phenomenology's focus upon inter-embodiment, in Merleau-Ponty's (1969) terminology, 'intercorporeality', is also important. For it is argued that the experience of embodiment is 'never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and non-human bodies' (Weiss, 1999: 5). Merleau-Ponty's (1969) focus upon the sensory dimensions of embodiment and his concept of reversibility also have high applicability to the domain of sporting experience (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007). Reversibility refers to the notion that our sense perceptions are reversible: we both touch and are touched, see and are seen, and so on. So Merleau-Ponty (2001: 93) suggests that the experience of touching, for example, cannot be understood without reference to the possibility of situational reversal. Our embodied subjectivity inheres in our touching and our tangibility. In relation to sporting embodiment, this haptic relationship pertains to the player's contact with sports equipment and kit, plus the general physical terrain and environment (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007), as well as including other people, animals and the social environment. Before portraying the phenomenological method in general, we now give details of the autoethnographic project from which our illustrative data are extracted.

### **The running research**

The approach adopted for this project on injured runners was autoethnographic (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). In this case it was a collaborative autoethnography, undertaken by the authors as two experienced, veteran (masters) long-distance runners during a period of two years when we were both rehabilitating from long-term knee injuries. Defined as an autobiographical genre of writing and research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739), autoethnography examines the dialectics of subjectivity and culture, and in general entails the detailed analysis of the researcher(s) *qua* member(s) of a social group or category, in this case the distance-running subculture. A primary aim of the project was to construct an account which was personal, evocative, highly reflexive, but also aimed at giving analytical purchase to the autobiographical, so as

evocatively to portray the ethnographic field. Each of us constructed a personal log, and a third collective log synthesised the salient, emergent themes, together with any differences in our individual perceptions and adaptation to the injury processes. The recording of our experiences was done via note books and micro-tape recording, subsequently transcribed. Creating the joint log, within which analytical themes and concepts were generated, was undertaken via a process somewhat akin to the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), although to a less formalized degree.

### **The phenomenological method**

Whilst all the different strands of phenomenology have their own distinctive elements, four key themes or qualities, derived from Husserlian phenomenology, can be identified as central to 'the phenomenological method'. This it should be remembered constitutes not merely a set of methods or techniques, but rather a distinctive and encompassing worldview (*Weltanschauung*), the phenomenological *attitude* itself. We now briefly sketch out four key phenomenological elements: description, epochē and reduction, essence, and intentionality.

For phenomenologists, it should be emphasized, **description** is never merely the abstract writing or recording of things without reference to the researcher. Husserlian forms of descriptive phenomenology have as their aim to 'go back to the things themselves' (*zu den sachen selbst*), to describe a phenomenon by suspending as far as possible prior knowledge, beliefs, presuppositions and interpretations. This is in order to arrive at its essential core characteristics and meanings, via a process of **epochē and reduction**. 'Epochē' (from the Greek 'to abstain, stop, or keep a distance from') is a term used to denote the bracketing of taken-for-granted assumptions about a phenomenon, or at least researchers' best attempts to do so. The intention here is to reduce the phenomenon to its essential structures of experience, an **essence** or 'eidos' of an object of consciousness. The concepts of epochē, reduction and essence should all be treated with caution, for as Merleau-Ponty (2001) warns, departing from Husserl's

teachings, the central lesson that the reduction teaches is the impossibility of a complete reduction. Although standing outside of our socio-cultural frame to achieve complete bracketing is acknowledged to be an impossibility, nevertheless in practical research terms the concept of epochē is useful in encouraging the adoption of a more self-critical, reflexive research approach.

Within Husserlian phenomenology, **intentionality** is a key feature of consciousness. Further developed by Merleau-Ponty, the concept of intentionality highlights that consciousness is always consciousness of *something*. It is thus *intentional*, directed or orientated towards something or someone: 'Intentionality allows objects to appear as phenomena' (Willig, 2008: 52). This explains why different people perceive and experience the 'same' environment in radically different ways. Intentionality is highly applicable when studying for example gendered perceptions of environments, or sportspeople's 'occupational' perceptions of the sporting terrain upon which they perform, as illustrated by a fieldnote from the Running Project:

Negotiating the gates a slope unfolds before me, and I head up it, taking a line between two fir trees, selecting where the grass is most even and thus better for maintaining momentum. Leaning forward, shortening my stride, arms working. Just before the top I cut left between two bushes and my eyes focus directly on my feet as I point my toes so as to minimize the contact of my feet with the ground. Intently scanning what is around me, looking to avoid the cast-off needles routinely left by local narcotic addicts. Down the slope and I avoid the central path as I know and can see the usual heaps of dog crap decoration.

Orientations shape not only how we inhabit time and space, but, as Ahmed (2007) notes, how we apprehend the world of *shared* inhabitation, to whom or what we direct our energy and attention.

For many phenomenologists, any method capable of producing deep, rich, detailed, textured descriptions of participants' concrete lived experiences of phenomena has the

potential to generate the data for application of distinctive phenomenological analyses. To illustrate the phenomenological approach in relation to sporting experience, Kerry and Armour (2000) provide the example of glycogen depletion or 'hitting the wall' in distance running. Whereas a physiologist would, they argue, focus upon holding constant certain variables whilst manipulating others in order to ascertain whether some distinctive, 'objective' process is occurring in the body, a phenomenologist would endeavour to capture as far as possible from the accounts of participants how it actually feels to experience 'the wall', irrespective of whether it exists in any so-called 'objective', sense. Similarly, the data from the Running Project give some idea of how it feels to undertake 'interval training' (repeated bouts of high intensity exercise with intermittent rest periods) in this case after a long period of injury:

Yesterday started speedwork again and both noticed the difference immediately, not just in terms of the breathing becoming harder – more burning, but in terms of how our bodies' bits moved once more pace was injected: toes push ground hard, plantar fascia moaning at increased effort, extra calf bulking-relaxing, hamstrings getting bigger and smaller rapidly – feel their 'snap', Achilles tendon whipping more. Arms driving. All is whizzing, agitating, humming, drumming. You can feel all of your body buzzing through the effort and extra blood flow... Interestingly, today the areas that can be felt most by both of us are the adductors and hip flexors (inner thighs), they feel sore and tight, having been stretched in that way for the first time for ages. It feels good though, sort of the body remembering, or perhaps awakening itself to something it has done before.

With regard to methods then, phenomenological analysis has been applied to data derived from a wide spectrum of methods, from semi-structured interviews (e.g. Hiskey *et al* 2008) through to autoethnographic data (e.g. Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007). Indeed, there is a burgeoning literature, particularly within psychology (Dale 1996; Willig 2008) centred on operationalising phenomenology as a particular empirical approach.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for example has been extensively applied within psychology, and health-related studies. In IPA, semi-structured interviews and forms of thematic content analysis are often the favoured methods used to examine participants' understandings and perceptions of a phenomenon. These methods, however, have their limitations at least from a 'stronger' phenomenological perspective (see Allen-Collinson, 2009, for a critique).

As Gruppetta (2004) notes, phenomenology has at times been subject to heavy critique because most phenomenological researchers do not themselves participate in the processes under study, relying instead upon second-hand accounts. Garfinkel (2002), whose ground-breaking perspective of ethnomethodology developed from phenomenology, warned that researchers should fulfil the 'unique adequacy requirement'. Hence, the researcher must have some degree of familiarity with the phenomenon s/he is studying and be competent in its 'production' in specific contexts, even though s/he may subsequently seek to bracket such knowledge. The use of second-hand accounts need not necessarily be construed as a weakness of phenomenology or IPA *per se*, or indeed of any research approach. It is, though, particularly incumbent upon phenomenological researchers without substantial 'insider experiential knowledge' of the areas they study, to proceed with great caution in imposing their own meanings and constructs upon the accounts of their 'expert' participants. Given that the phenomenological method seeks above all to understand phenomena from the perspective of those studied (Creswell, 1998: 274), there are clear dangers in a researcher's imposition of meanings upon her/his participants' experiences. Autoethnographic phenomenology or autophenomenography, as it is sometimes known, (Gruppetta, 2004) is just one means of addressing such criticisms, and we conclude with a discussion of the possibilities offered by this particular approach.

### **Autophenomenography**

If an autoethnographic researcher studies a phenomenon or phenomena rather than a 'cultural place', Gruppetta (2004) argues that the appropriate term would be

'autophenomenography'. In the study reported here, both phenomena and cultural places were inextricably interwoven in the experience and the analysis. Whilst undertaking the data collection for the Running Project, for example, it transpired that many of the field- and head-notes we recorded were in fact focused upon phenomena, as well as upon cultural/subcultural processes. The autophenomenographic approach can certainly provide the rich, evocative, textured descriptions of first-person experience so central to the phenomenological quest to bring to life and to communicate the textures of the felt, lived embodied experience. Like autoethnography, this genre fuses researcher and researched, with the purpose of using the researcher's personal lived experience to illuminate the phenomenon under study (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). As Sinclair (2005) notes too, autoethnographic approaches 'insist on the value of stepping back from theorizing and finding value in subjective experience — that interpreted by the mind but also *felt in the body*' (p. 93, our emphasis). Thus autoethnography and autophenomenography invite readers into the text or representation, to 'live' the experience rather than merely to analyse it - at least at a certain level, for phenomenology in general is always explicit about the limitations of the approach fully to 'capture' any aspect of lived reality.

Authors using *autoethnography* within sports studies (e.g. Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2001, Sparkes, 2003) often depart from more orthodox, 'author-absent' accounts of sporting embodiment, by constructing forms of narrative that seek to portray in a first-person, evocative-analytic fashion the lived-body sporting experience. Although little of this corpus formally applies phenomenological theory or method to autoethnographic data, the potential for phenomenological analysis is clearly discernible, particularly in relation to highly embodied and situated experiences such as this extract from the Running Project data:

A bad run all over me today. Not enough fluid. Along the back end of the park  
I can tell J. is looking at me anxiously from alongside. Drive the quads up a  
rise, legs tight, everything is getting uncoordinated, boom-boom buzzing in my

ears, vision is getting blurred, oops! Balance going like I'm sea-sick, aaggggggh, bile in mouth. Spit, stumble, swear, dimly J.'s voice – 'you ok?'. 'OK' I say, and to myself 'common John boy, get it together'. Suck in the air, 3 miles to finish, I concentrate on each footfall, it helps ease the wobbling, not exactly the Olympics today....

Autophenomenography offers one possible means of generating the rich, body-ful, fleshy, grounded and evocative descriptions of the body in sport and exercise, encouraging us to bring the sweat 'back in', rather than to exclude it from our analyses (c.f. Connell, 1995). For writing and representation are fundamental concerns within phenomenology. In order to bring to life the essential structures of lived experience for the reader, to engage in 'the breathing of meaning' (Van Manen, 1990: 36), the researcher must convey accurately, powerfully, evocatively and many would advocate aesthetically and poetically the phenomenon, whether via writing or re/presentational forms such as ethnodrama and other less 'conventional' forms (see Hopper *et al*, 2008).

### **Concluding thoughts**

Existentialist phenomenology seeks to provide highly textured, evocative accounts that locate the specifics of individual experience within broader, general structures of human experience. Importantly, these accounts aim to generate a *feeling* of understanding in the reader (Todres, 2007: 9) thus linking the embodiment of researcher, research participant(s) and reader. As Merleau-Ponty (2001) notes in relation to structures of experience, these are 'lived' rather than 'known', and understanding occurs at a pre-reflective and corporeal as well as at a cognitive level. Casey (2000: 66) similarly notes what we might come to know if we listen to the body: 'We may sense knowledges of experiences long forgotten by the mind but always known by the body before language was privileged as the sole representer...'. Conveying such pre- or perhaps *ultra*-linguistic experience will always be a challenge for any research approach, but perhaps phenomenology and autophenomenography can provide useful

approaches, in addition to combining the personal, idiographic and the general, ethnographic. Furthermore, phenomenology is capable, as Todres (2007) notes, of returning texture to structure, and creating rich descriptions that produce a *feeling* of understanding in the reader, of bodily knowing and sense-making as well as cognitive knowledge. An approach that can provide such 'full-bodied', 'fleshful', corporeally-textured and sensuously-detailed descriptions would certainly provide a welcome addition to the pantheon of social science approaches to the study of sporting experience. The use of phenomenology, particularly existential phenomenology can, we contend, furnish fresh insights by portraying vividly and evocatively the sensuousity, corporeal immediacy and richly-textured nature of sports participation, and bringing alive for the reader the very 'essences' of sporting embodiment.

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