

Chapter 6 – Phenomenological approaches

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Introduction

In the developing discipline of coaching, researchers are spoilt for choice in terms of the focus of projects: the field is full of under-researched phenomena which are ripe for exploration. Researchers can choose many topics of interest, use different methodologies and aim to generate different kinds of knowledge and at first glance, phenomenology seems like just one amongst many other approaches. We, however, would like to make a case for a special role of phenomenology in coaching research. First of all, along with Spinelli (1989), we see phenomenology as an essential and rewarding starting point for *any* research. Even when the ambition of the researchers is to develop a generalisable account of events and processes, to design an experiment or to test a particular theory, they need to start from a research base of exploratory studies which offer understanding and appropriate description of the phenomenon they are interested in.

Secondly, we believe that phenomenology has a particular affinity with the coaching process. Coaching is about human action and interaction and the important features of what is happening in coaching are available for understanding mainly from the first-person perspective – through inquiry into the experiences that people have. Direct observation of the coaching process offers a limited perspective on what is going on in coaching and even observations in many ways are experiences affected by the perceptual frames of the observers. Therefore, phenomenology, being interested in the world as experienced by human beings, with all the complexity involved in real life situations and with all the nuances of the contexts in which they occur, is inevitably in close relationship with the core of coaching. Furthermore, it might be said that the methods employed by coaches and phenomenological researchers are also not too far apart. Coaches pay close attention to the subjective experiences of clients and the meaning they make of these experiences are the main source of information for supporting clients. At the same time, coaches keep in mind how tinted such perceptions can be because of their clients' and their own frames of reference. Phenomenologists also are engaged in enquires seeing experiences as essential, but using various means 'of clearing the lens' for deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The theoretical origin and main principles of this approach to research can be attributed to phenomenology as a branch of philosophy (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). Although not a single homogeneous body of thought, this philosophical perspective, as argued by Kvale (1996, pp. 38-39) upholds in most instances "a focus on the life world, an openness to the experiences of the subject, [and] a primacy of precise description". Two important variations in phenomenological philosophy are important to recognise. Husserlian phenomenology, emphasises attempts to "bracket" – to put aside - foreknowledge, and to uncover the essential nature of what is experienced through unprejudiced reflection on its manifestation in individual instances. Heideggerian phenomenology largely rejects the possibility of bracketing and the notion of the essential on the grounds that our understanding of phenomena is invariably bound up in our interpretation of them – we are "thrown into [a] pre-existing world of people and objects, language and culture and cannot be meaningfully detached from it" (Smith et al., 2013 p17). This critical difference between an approach which attempts to describe the essential nature of what is given in experiencing and one which attempts to interpret it

meaningfully will govern the researcher's choice of methodology within the wider phenomenological field. French phenomenologists Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were also important for development of phenomenology as philosophy. For example, Merleau-Ponty's contribution, highly relevant to recent developments in coaching research and theory, is concerned with giving due importance to the body along with the mind. According to him "the body lives the world well before the mind can reason or make sense of what is being lived" (Vagle, 2018, p. 10).

Variations in the philosophy of phenomenology give rise to phenomenological approaches to research also being plural (Vagle, 2018). Husserlian phenomenology is mostly represented in the 'pure' phenomenological psychology method (PPM) or descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2013). Other approaches, associated more closely with Heideggerian phenomenology, include the well-known Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2013) and Heuristic Research (HR) (Moustakas, 1994) methodologies and the lesser known Conceptual Encounter (CE) (de Rivera, 1981). Alongside important similarities in each of these methodologies there are nuances that differentiate each of them, indicating specific strengths and limitations for different questions and directions of coaching research. In this chapter we will explore how some important aspects of phenomenological research play out in the context of coaching research. Then we will use as examples the experiences of two doctoral researchers using IPA and Conceptual Encounter in their projects to share their challenges and learning with the future coaching researchers.

Distinctive general features of this research strategy for coaching research

We believe that those who wish to use a phenomenological approach for researching coaching would benefit from considering the following aspects. Each of these aspects will be described together with discussion points from the critics of phenomenological approaches to research (e.g. Willig, 2006; Paley, 2018).

- The view on viable knowledge and role of the researcher
- The type of questions suitable for this research
- The focus of the inquiry, role of language and sampling issues
- Description vs explication and the role of theory in phenomenology
- Variations of phenomenological methodologies

The view on viable knowledge and role of the researcher

To provide a rationale for a methodological approach to a study, researchers describe what kind of knowledge they hope to produce and what philosophical assumptions about knowledge underpin their choices. This is not a straightforward task if their chosen methodology is phenomenology, which does not fit neatly into either the realist or relativist camps. To start with, phenomenologists do not deny the existence of the world (Husserl, 1931; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). However, they are against a naïve and dogmatic version of a scientific attitude that assumes that reality is 'mind-, experience-, and theory-independent' (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Vagle, 2018) with inevitable consequences for their epistemological stance being constructivist. In this regard the ontological and epistemological positions of phenomenology are not dissimilar to critical realism or pragmatism, in contrast to some postmodernist versions of the interpretivist paradigm.

To deal with the challenge of ontological realism and epistemological relativism, phenomenologists following Husserl's tradition introduce *epoche* or *phenomenological reduction* – a procedure that does not exclude reality from consideration but aims for "suspending the judgment of the existence and pre-understanding of things outside of human

mind, so that phenomena can be studied in their givenness to consciousness” (Vagle, 2018, p 14). “*Bracketing*” is the way to practice phenomenological reduction: identifying and setting on one side judgments, prejudices and assumptions. This allows for a description of reality as it is *given* to us, how it appears (Husserl, 1931). In this branch of phenomenology, focusing on appearance is the only way to learn about the essential reality. Bracketing is always applied in descriptive phenomenological research but less so in other variations. *Imaginative variation* is used by phenomenologists to explore how the experience is made possible – attempting to uncover the *invariant structure* of the phenomena beyond individual instances and across contexts (Moustakas, 1994; Willig, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

In this regard it is important to clarify a typical misunderstanding about the main intention of phenomenology. It is not about exploring the idiosyncratic experiences of individuals or nuances of their internal world, as coaches and therapists might in their practice. The underlying aim of phenomenology as a philosophy and research orientation is to capture the structures of experiences which can be intersubjectively accessible and therefore capable of being understood in relation to other experiences. Such structures, for Husserlian phenomenologists, may prove to have an essential quality which transcends context and captures the “true” nature of the world as it appears to us.

So, phenomenological researchers are not against the intention of science to extend our knowledge of the world. Focusing on the phenomenal world of the individual does not mean ignoring the constraints of the physical and social worlds (Harre, 1983; Willig, 2016). In fact, their aim is compatible with science. Phenomenological researchers are extending knowledge from the first-person perspective with recognition that pure third-person science is impossible: as impossible as a view from nowhere (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). Phenomenology is about examining the world through our experiences and is therefore a viable approach to researching coaching.

The type of questions suitable for this research

The philosophical foundation of phenomenological inquiry has inevitable implications for what researchers choose as their focus of interest. Phenomenological study is typically considered when researchers are curious about questions that imply the need to engage with people’s lived experiences. These experiences are usually about something that is important to researchers themselves, involving their sense making about the experience, which may have implications as to how these researchers see themselves in relation to the objects of interest. The example of such questions in relation to coaching could be:

- What is the experience of flow in coaching relationship?
- What is the experience of coaching those who are not ready for coaching?
- What it is like to coach for gravitas?
- What is the experience of working on the boundary between coaching and counselling?

It is clear that these types of questions imply the involvement of research participants who have had those experiences, with an aim to understand what is shared in them. The typical method of this research is interview, with a recent tendency to include sources other than language (e.g. photographs, drawings, objects, etc.) and any other means in order to generate a richer analysis of feelings and embodied experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Cromby, 2015). It could be said that “the phenomenon calls for how it should be studied” (Vagle, 2018, p. 17), however, descriptive phenomenological research would be less likely to include observation and experiment. What is important in formulating a research question is that phenomenologists see the world as inseparable from individuals’ mental orientations (e.g. desires, emotions, drives), what is called *intentionality* (Moustakas, 1994; Willig, 2006). This means that when researchers plan to study something phenomenologically they will be

studying both the phenomenon of interest and the wide-ranging intentional relations that appear in connection with it, for example confusion, respect, hope, etc (Vagle, 2018).

The observation of inseparability of individuals and the world is equally applicable to the researchers themselves. Even when trying to *bracket* their presuppositions and avoid inherent biases, researchers recognise the fallibility of acquired knowledge and engage in critical examination of their customary ways of relating to the world through the process of *reflexivity* (Spinelli, 1989; Willig, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

The focus of inquiry, role of language and sampling issues

Significant and valid critique of phenomenological research is concentrated on the issue of the unit of analysis which is associated with sampling, and the use of language in naming the phenomenon of interest. For example, Willig (2007) describes how in her research on the experiences of those involved in extreme sports she chose to group together different sports which had not previously been seen as part of the same group. This could be seen as leading to an artificial integration of a range of possibly quite different activities in different contexts. A similar concern is expressed by Payne (2017) in his critique of a study by van Manen (1990) in which he argued that the phenomenon of children 'being left behind' included too dissimilar a range of experiences of the participants in unrelated contexts. Linking significantly different instances of this phenomenon without sufficient justification built a misleading picture of it, not helpful for real life understanding and for helping practices.

As Willig (2007) suggests "... the researcher's choice of label for the phenomena of interest is not merely a descriptive act but a constitutive one" (2007, p. 216). The choice of the unit of analysis is therefore very important and requires careful consideration whether the project is about examination of a pre-existing phenomenon or creating a new category of meaning. It is important then to be clear what is meant by "a phenomenon". If a coaching researcher is planning a phenomenological inquiry they would be advised to make sure that it is about an experience which is recognisable to participants even if it can be experienced in one or another way. For example, the experience of coaching an uncommitted client may vary because of the reasons for non-commitment, however, the experience of being involved in such an assignment should 'ring the bell' for participant coaches and be meaningful for exploration.

The issue of language presents another challenge and influences the task of selection of the participants. Phenomenology expects a rich and fresh description of the phenomenon, but not every potential participant can provide this, only those (probably rare) individuals who have a high level of awareness and sufficient vocabulary to express their experiences. In coaching research, this challenge is particularly important when clients are chosen as participants with an expectation to provide their perspective on the coaching process. However, in the normal course of events, clients are not expected to be familiar with the terminology used in describing elements of the coaching process. In addition, clients' attention is unsurprisingly occupied by the *content* of coaching engagement and not focused on the coaching process. It would be unwise in such research to rely on linguistically rich input from the clients, unless more creative methods of data collection are developed.

Quite an opposite challenge for phenomenological study might present itself when clients or, more often coaches, with sophisticated linguistic abilities are chosen as participants. They might tend to theorise by shifting the description of phenomena to an abstract level thus losing the raw and immediate nuances that are most important in phenomenology. Another aspect of this challenge relates to coaches as participants who overuse so called 'coaching speak' and are seemingly unable to separate their immediate and authentic feeling from accepted labels used in their craft. It is probably reasonable in this case to have a pre-interview with potential participants to gauge their suitability for the project, particularly if the time line for it

is tight and the sample is small. Sample selection is therefore not random, but part of the researcher’s active shaping of the research process and outcomes.

Description vs explanation and the role of theory in phenomenology

One of the most significant debates in relation to phenomenology is concerned with description vs explanation as an outcome of phenomenological research. In the early work of Husserl (1931) phenomenology was intended as a descriptive enterprise and accordingly, the main purpose of phenomenological research has been seen as creating integrated *description* of the phenomena in question (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This is of course, of value in itself, because a worthwhile understanding of a phenomenon has to start from a faithful and rich description. However, this does not mean simply summarising the participants’ accounts of experience. An expectation is to extract wider meaning, bring to light what is not obvious (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), to move from the content to the structure of the experience and from appearances to the conditions that bring them about (Willig, 2007). Some phenomenologists also believe that it is possible to link identified themes conceptually and produce theoretical formulations that may explicate them (Vagle, 2018). This requires the further interpretative work that is, for example, more explicitly expected in phenomenological approaches such as IPA (Smith et al., 2013) and CE (de Rivera, 1981).

Variations of phenomenological methodologies

The issues that phenomenological researchers face can be addressed in different ways, keeping at the same time an integrity of approach and consistency with the various branches of the philosophy. As we have seen, there are different versions of phenomenological approaches to research and Table 1 describes how the most recognisable approaches are different in relation to some important dimensions. In the table the main purpose of the approach is presented in as close way as possible to the descriptions by their main proponents.

	Phenomenological Psychology Method	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	Heuristic Research)	Conceptual Encounter
Main proponents/ Dimensions of differences	Giorgi & Giorgi (e.g. 2013)	Smith, Flower & Larkin (e.g. 2013)	Moustakas (e.g. 1990)	de Rivera (e.g. 1981)
Theoretical underpinning/ Associations	Transcendental phenomenology, Idiography	Idiography, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Symbolic Interactionism	Phenomenology, Idiography, Humanism, Constructivism	Phenomenological psychology, Humanism, Idiography, Interactionism
Role of the researcher	Bracketing foreknowledge, comparing accounts, establishing a general structure of the phenomenon	Micro-analysing and interpreting with reflexivity the convergence and divergence in accounts to interpret the meaning of experiences	Researcher as an instrument for data collection, self-inquiry as well as the inquiry into the phenomenon	Gatekeeper of concept development, foreknowledge of researcher is included in the dialogue and analysis

Main purpose	The integrated picture (essence) of the phenomenon	A picture of similarity and variability of human experience	Personal change of the researcher and essence of the phenomenon	Elucidation of the structure that exist within psychological events
Role of theory	Theoretical assumptions bracketed Only description is offered	Theoretical propositions are explored and compared with existing literature alongside emerged themes at the final stage	Theoretical propositions are secondary to creating synthesis that could be seen as theory	Concept is gradually developed and can be seen as a theoretical proposition
Balance of text and visual means	Analysis of the observations or text	Analysis of text and own memos – other data collection methods are encouraged but not often used	Any means of data collection, creative approach to final synthesis	Concept can appear as a map or an ‘elegant’ model

Table 1 Comparison of typical phenomenological research methodologies

It is not surprising to see the differences between these approaches, because they are influenced by variations in the theoretical perspectives behind them and the tasks they were aiming to accomplish. The proponents of these theories were also trying to address some of the challenges that we described in this chapter. Coaching researchers accordingly may choose these approaches because of the particular focus of their study or personal resonance with their principles.

To bring some of these approaches to life in the context of coaching research in the following section we share specific experiences and challenges that might be relevant to researchers of coaching using IPA and Conceptual Encounter.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and practical issues in coaching research (Alison Rose)

My research question was “What are the experiences of coaching as part of high potential development programmes, from the perspective of participants and coaches?” IPA’s emphasis on lived experience, first-hand accounts, particularity, and researcher-participant co-construction of meaning, suggested that it was well-suited for exploration of this question.

In working with this variant of the phenomenological method, the IPA researcher commits to deep interpretation and reflection on data from single cases, ultimately moving to higher order analysis and comparison between cases to form a tentative theoretical exegesis. Ultimately researcher and reader are expected to connect the findings of an IPA study to existing literature, so as to shed light on existing research (Smith et al., 2013). In light of recent criticism of IPA (Paley, 2018), it is worth noting that this should be the maximum extent of the claims of an IPA study. Existing theory is never the starting point, so the method is not appropriate for testing hypotheses. Each idiographic account is considered to add to our corpus of knowledge, but not to be subject to being tested by it. Generalisability is limited to within-study comparison of themes, and relies on the reader making links between the evidence presented, their own experience, and their knowledge of existing literature.

IPA is rooted in the Heideggerian branch of phenomenology, in hermeneutics and in idiography. Contrary to recent challenges about a disconnection between phenomenological philosophy and phenomenological research methods (Paley, 2018) these traditions are not mere background. Given the involved role of the IPA researcher, anyone undertaking an IPA study needs to understand and commit to the ontological and epistemological claims of this system of thought. As Giorgi puts it in relation to phenomenology generally, they need to “think and dwell” within these frameworks (Giorgi, 2017 p. 83). For me, the tenets of philosophical phenomenology resonated with how I understood coaching as a sense-making process, and a phenomenological approach to research therefore became effectively an extension of my reflective coaching practice.

While phenomenology provides the foundation of the approach, and idiography underpins its process, hermeneutics licenses the IPA researcher to attempt to unravel the meaning of experience, and therefore distinguishes IPA from more descriptive methods. Hermeneutic principles justify the IPA researcher in generating a reading of accounts which goes beyond witnessing and description. An IPA-based study allows for an iterative, but broadly chronological process in which the researcher moves through stages of bracketed witnessing, to a hermeneutically-involved, interpretative state of authorship. Interpretation is therefore not simply a faithful rendition of accounts – it is a shaping process which contributes to findings and does not just convey them. Smith et al. suggest that “the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense” of the appearance of phenomena (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). The word “implicated” carries weight; as Willig points out, since it implies that analysis is dependent on the researcher’s own conceptions and standpoint (Willig, 2006).

For my study, I collected data from 12 participants – six coaches and six clients – using recorded semi-structured interviews. I transcribed these interviews and the resulting transcripts were analysed through several iterations using a process of coding to achieve higher levels of abstraction. Ultimately this resulted in the identification of a number of super-ordinate themes, and then cross-case and cross-sample patterns. The process of data analysis is outlined in Figure 1.

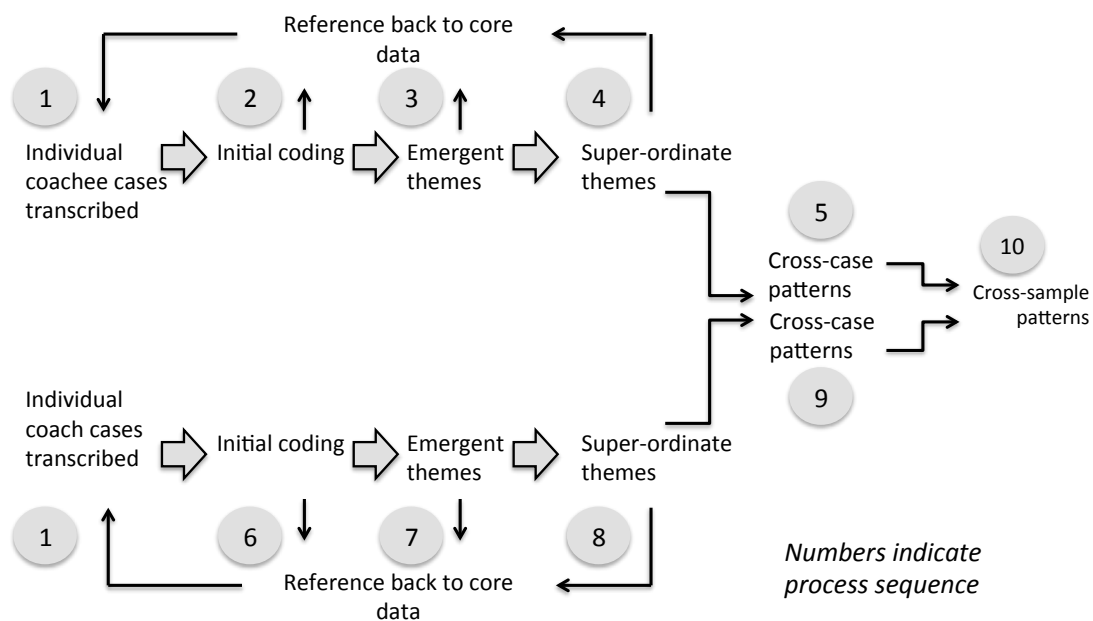


Fig. 1 Process of data analysis in an IPA

Challenges of IPA in researching coaching

I do not agree with those who believe that phenomenological research methodologies are easy (a misconception of those who judge the challenges and value of research by the size of the sample). Here are some aspects of my experience as a researcher that illustrate how challenging this methodology can be.

Firstly, on a practical level, using IPA in my study generated high volumes of data. My sample size was relatively large for an IPA and my research participants provided more than twelve hours of in-depth insight. The lenses through which their accounts might be understood were legion. The practicalities of managing and analysing large amounts of data in an IPA project should not be underestimated and the data interpretation stage of research necessarily involves developing creative ways of ordering, visually capturing and mapping data, as well as multiple coding methods.

Secondly, as noted above, phenomenological methods call for participants to be able articulate their experiences so as to convey their unique experience and the meaning made of it, and IPA is no exception. Over and above the challenge of identifying articulate and self-aware participants, I found that, in a business setting, it could be difficult to facilitate participants to move beyond a cognitively-oriented stance in which they *gave opinions* about their experiences. This meant that it was harder to get at the personal and emotional aspects which might uncover more of their phenomenological intentionality, and the risk was that accounts would be one dimensional. Coaching researchers working with business-based topics will find that they not only have to carefully select participants for articulacy, but also to invest time to build their trust and to normalise “deeper” level conversations.

A further challenge for the IPA researcher is that where there is interpretation, there must be reflexivity, especially in phenomenological methods, which are not well suited to mere assertion. However in my view, IPA has not yet developed a sufficient corpus of studies to provide a roadmap for the researcher in terms of their own reflexive stance and approach. Reflexive capabilities are not even mentioned in Smith et al.'s list of the qualities required by IPA researchers (Smith et al., 2013). I found that I had to turn to other sources (e.g. Schon, in Etherington, 2004) for guidance on how and why to apply a reflexive lens to my analysis. Similarly, cross checking and auditing of interpretation by third parties are only mentioned in passing by the main authorities. While his criticism is too sweeping, being based on only one study, Paley's identification of the risk of deficiencies in IPA researcher's interpretations is a fair challenge. (Paley, 2018). Smith et al acknowledge that transparency of method and plausibility of interpretation are required to generate a good IPA study (Smith, 2011), but in my view, the methodological disciplines which would help researchers to meet these standards, e.g. self-reflection, triangulation and seeking out alternative readings, are not given sufficient weight in the key texts to date. The IPA researcher, while never ceding their own responsibility as an interpreter, would be likely to benefit from feedback which could challenge or confirm their readings of material, and several research groups and online forums exist to facilitate this.

My biggest challenge as an IPA researcher however was in allowing myself to fully enter into the interpretative process. I found that, notwithstanding my conviction that my own thoughts, assumptions and pre-judgements (my fore-structures in Heideggerian terms) were inevitably elements of the process, I was nervous about "imposing" order on the data, for example by identifying the criteria for what constitutes "a theme". The early stages of an IPA rely on an anchoring discipline of textual analysis, and themes emerge, apparently sui generis, from transcriptions. But from the super-ordinate theme stage onwards the IPA researcher has to commit with confidence to their own process of abstractive interpretation. Description gives out, density of data is only partly useful and there is no theoretical framework to rely on. Stepping fully into a condition of authorship was my biggest challenge, and successfully grappling with it was a turning point in my sense of myself as a researcher. From that point on, I felt able to work creatively with the methodology and was no longer constrained by it. In the end, and consistently with IPA's hermeneutic principles, themes at all levels emerged through my own engagement with the material – from the ways in which I noticed participants' accounts converging, diverging and constellating around an issue, from the ways in which material resonated with me and surprised me and from how it generated connecting patterns in my own sense-making across cases and samples.

Coaching researchers, particularly practitioners like myself who work in psychological modalities, are typically interested both in their clients' meaning-making and in their own role in the creation of the coaching relationship. Notwithstanding some limitations, with its phenomenological underpinnings and its requirement that the researcher be a co-creator of meaning, it is not hard to see why IPA is an attractive methodology in this field of research.

Conceptual Encounter (CE) and practical issues in coaching research (Roger Noon)

Conceptual Encounter (CE) (de Rivera, 1981) was selected as a suitable methodology to explore the research question: "What is presence and how is it experienced by coaches and clients during the executive coaching conversation?" (Noon, 2018). The study was approached from a constructivist epistemological stance, which acknowledges multiple perspectives of reality, an appreciation that meaning is created through dialogue, and that an individual's interpretation of their reality can change (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In common with other phenomenological methods, 'social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of that social reality' (Crotty, 1998, p. 24). However, what is unique for CE is that its procedure involves the researcher first developing an initial concept resulting from their

experience and a review of the literature. This then 'encounters a research partners' recalled experiences of the phenomenon during a series of semi-structured interviews. These meetings of the abstraction with the lived experience of successive research partners allows the concept to evolve.

The alignment of this approach to the phenomenological tradition may be summarised in two ways. As an accent of description (Husserlian school of phenomenology) the concept is grounded in the lived experience of the research partners. If there is no 'meeting' of an abstract construct with lived experience, there is no justification for its inclusion. As an accent of interpretation (Heideggerian school of phenomenology) the researcher is 'in' the research through a sensitizing process, the development of an initial concept and due to the collaborative nature of the interviews. The concept develops iteratively from interview to interview, and the researcher acts as a gatekeeper of concept development, which necessarily involves interpretation.

The research question intentionally involved both the client and coach voice and a fundamental requirement from the outset was to design a procedure which ensured that both sides of the conversation were equally represented during data collection. This suggested performing two parallel conceptual encounters, one investigating the client's perspective and the other, the coach's. An outline is shown in figure 2. In step 1, the researcher uses a literature review and personal experience to develop an initial concept. This process served to sensitize me to the phenomena and to the research question I had framed to explore it and allowed a starting point for use in the interviews. Following the left hand (client) path in the diagram, the first half of the first interview (step 2) focused on the research partner recounting a detailed narrative of their experience of presence. My stance during this stage was to bracket assumptions, suspend judgement and to draw out as rich a description of this experience as possible. In the second half of the interview, the initial concept was presented to the research partner and discussed in light of this description. As a result of this discussion and subsequent data analysis, the concept evolved and a modified map emerged (step 3). This transition version was used in the next interview.

This procedure was repeated for each of the six client interviews so that the map evolved each time in an iterative fashion, with each subsequent iteration incorporating the experiences of the previous research participants. The conceptual encounter from the coach perspective followed the same approach (the right-hand side of figure 2) with an overarching map emerging in step 4 that encompassed both perspectives.

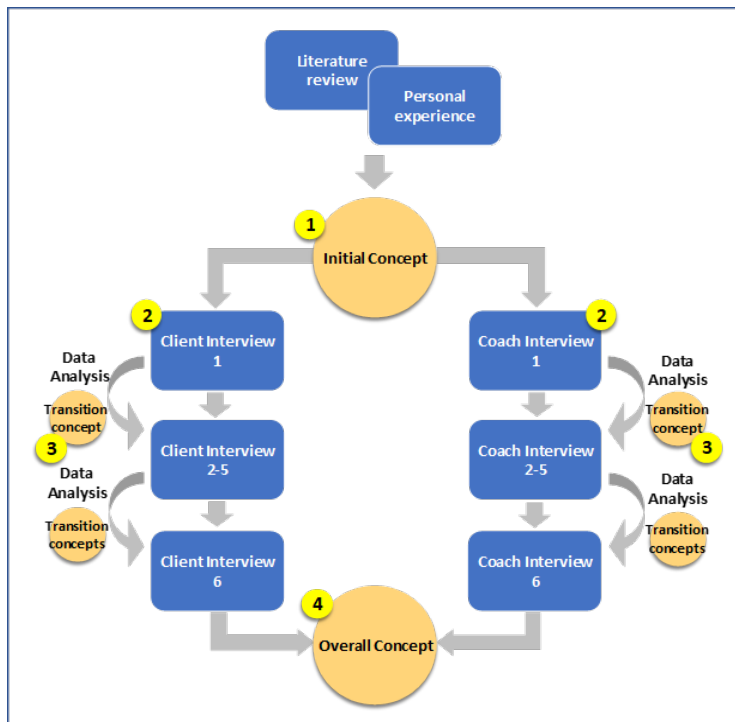


Fig. 2 The Parallel Conceptual Encounter Process

The sources of data were therefore client and coach research partners, me as the researcher, and the literature. Data collection occurred through the transcription of interviews, and by means of a reflexive researcher diary. The diary became an invaluable sense-making and experimental tool and a constant companion throughout the indwelling process. Data analysis was performed iteratively after each interview, allowing the concept to continuously evolve as the interviews progressed. It involved identifying common characteristics, qualities and patterns in the data that provided insight into the underlying structure of the phenomenon. This creative, immersive process and the integration that the researcher brings to its performance is a key differentiator for quality.

Subsequent to the CE, a focus group was also convened (involving two clients and two coaches) to further explore the concept. The rationale here was an intent to leverage the creative potential of group dynamics to generate ‘interaction data’ (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). During the focus group, the Q-sort technique was employed (Stainton Rogers, 1995) which asked participants to force rank statements about presence which had emerged from the CE. This enabled the output from CE to be discussed in the group and levels of consensus to be explored. So the overall research design was something of a bricolage with conceptual encounter and a commitment to a phenomenological stance at its heart.

Challenges of Conceptual Encounter in researching coaching

One of the challenges of researching coaching using CE as a phenomenological approach is that there is a lack of clarity around procedure, especially concerning data analysis. Whilst this ambiguity can be unsettling, it also allows flexibility and customization. The methodology as described by de Rivera (1981) is rich in the spirit of how it should be approached but relatively non-prescriptive in terms of procedural detail. So for instance, the parallel conceptual encounter approach described here was novel, and thematic analysis was selected as a flexible means of developing a conceptual structure.

A second challenge centres on the role of the researcher, who is a collaborative investigator of the lived experience of others whilst being knowledgeable in the subject area and responsible for iterating a model of the phenomenon. This tension can test one's ability to maintain a phenomenological stance throughout the research. At the outset, developing an initial concept will generate a set of assumptions which, however lightly held, will naturally influence how the researcher interprets the experience recounted by the partner or vice versa.. A different initial concept may suggest a different set of assumptions and consequently it may evolve in a different direction. The researcher needs to be aware of these assumptions, their origins and practical implications. Reflexive practice is the means to achieve this.

The emphasis on collaborative, meaning-making sits well with the interpretive phenomenological tradition. In the study into presence, an example of such co-creation was an instance during an interview when I spontaneously introduced a metaphor to illustrate my interpretation of an experience that the research partner was narrating. The partner then built on this, accentuated a particular aspect and extended it, again in a spontaneous manner. This experience of co-created meaning was common and shows how both partners move collaboratively back and forth between description and interpretation.

There are also implications that arise from the power dynamics between researcher and partners, which may affect how the partners see the concept 'fitting' their experience. The issue of researcher influence also arises during the development of the model and de Rivera (1981) emphasizes that there is considerable skill involved in intuiting, 'an abstract form that succeeds in capturing the essential relationships involved in all of the concrete experiences' (p.6). There is therefore significant power, trust and analytical expertise in the hands of the researcher to arrive at a final, elegant conceptualization.

A further potentially significant consideration concerns language. This study was conducted in English, yet a minority of research partners did not speak English as their first language. This presented challenges when attempting to relate and interpret nuanced and complex experiences, leaving again the researcher some important decisions to be made.

Managing these challenges largely depends on the experience, reflexivity and integrity of the researcher and the transparency of the audit trail throughout the research process. For these reasons, as a novice research-practitioner, I felt a level of intimidation when embarking on my study. A phenomenological stance asks the researcher to commit to its tenets in every moment. It is in itself a deep reflexive practice – a philosophy in action - and confidence comes from practice. Yet this stance is common to many coaching processes. CE's appeal was its recognition that the researcher was 'in' the research. It emphasized a similar dialectic, collaborative construction of meaning that coach's value and it grounded the conceptual understanding in the real experience of the research partners. This affinity between the spirit of the research method and the coaching process has been addressed in the introduction to this chapter and was a reassuring touchstone throughout the research.

In summary, CE uses collaborative meaning-making to develop new structures of experience within a phenomenological inquiry. The goal is to explicate structure rather than to explain how or why the phenomena occurs. As a coach my motivation was to use the research to understand presence in the coaching process more deeply, to apply the learning in my own practice and to make it available to others.

Evaluation

Overall the value of phenomenological approaches to coaching research cannot be overestimated. They allow the researcher an intimate engagement with a object of interest with full appreciation of the nuances of the phenomenon in its natural context. They particularly appeal to coaches who see the reductionist and oversimplified messages from some

quantitative studies as dry and removed from the realities of their practice. Phenomenological studies are designed for investigating the tacit aspects of meaningful but elusive experience for the accurate understanding of phenomena which are difficult to describe in words. As a result, new meanings and nuances are revealed which might otherwise have remained hidden and which contribute to the emergence of a richer descriptive language for what we wish to understand.

It is interesting therefore that one of the most serious critiques of phenomenology is that language precedes and therefore shapes experience and, in some way, prescribes what we can think and feel (Willig, 2006). According to this view believing that language can express actual experiences may not be justified. However, use of language is inevitable in coaching and in researching coaching. Phenomenological research therefore makes an attempt to engage with the limitations that the use of language presents in an explicit and collaborative way and thus pave the way for other types of research.

A superficial understanding of phenomenological approaches might suggest that they are an easy option. They require no theoretical “proof”. They deal with the intangible and ambiguous. They licence the researcher to freely interpret what is before them. The reality is that these apparent freedoms are precisely what make these methods far from easy. They demand of the phenomenological researcher that they exert both self- and methodological disciplines to a very high degree if the outcome is to be a rigorous, credible and persuasive research project.

Suggested further reading with annotation

De Rivera, J. (1981). *Conceptual Encounter: A Method for the Exploration of Human Experience*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.

This text is out of print, however the extracts from it are available through Google Scholar. Edited by the originator of the approach it also contains very good examples of how these type of studies can be conducted.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2013) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

This book is written by the originators of the approach. It provides extensive coverage of the theoretical underpinning and a detailed guidance to carrying out research project. An obvious resource for anyone who wish to utilise this approach.

Discussion Questions

- Do you feel more comfortable thinking about yourself as the author of your research, as a co-researcher or as a witness to your research participants' experience? What are the implications of this choice for your research?
- Does your research question imply an intention to prove a hypothesis? If so, how does this align with the ontological and epistemological claims of phenomenological methods?
- Is describing experience useful research?
- Is research useful if it is not generalisable?

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