

## Qualitative Research in Sport Sciences—An Introduction

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**Abstract:** Qualitative research has its own particular strengths and therefore is able to grasp the multidimensionality of meanings, contexts, unanticipated phenomena, processes and explanations which can be found in the world of sport, games and physical activity. The article gives an overview over the different subject fields and articles covered by this special issue of the *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* on sport science(s).

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### 1. Grasping the Multidimensionality of Sport, Games and Physical Activity

The term "Sport Sciences" suggests plurality. Accordingly, the domain of sport sciences is a multi- and interdisciplinary research area that includes a number of disciplines, ranging from the psychology and sociology of sports to the physiology of sports performance. Early in its development, the sports sciences were dominated by a quantitative approach to understanding that drew its inspiration from the natural sciences. However, as the field matured in the late 1980s, debates began in scholarly journals regarding an alternative approach to inquiry. Since then, these debates have intensified and grown in sophistication as *qualitative research*, in the hands of a small group of scholars, has emerged to make a valuable contribution to sport sciences. This approach to understanding draws on an ontology, epistemology and methodology that shapes both its process and products in such a way as to make qualitative research *different*, and sometimes very different, from quantitative research (SPARKES, 2002). These differences in process and products provide qualitative research with its own particular strengths. For example, MAXWELL (1996, pp.17-20) points to five particular purposes for which qualitative research is especially suited. These are as follows:

1. Understanding the *meaning*, for the participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences;
2. understanding the particular *context* within which participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions;

3. identifying *unanticipated* phenomena and influences, and generating new grounded theories about the latter;
4. understanding the *process* in which events and actions take place;
5. developing *causal explanations*. [1]

Having stated that qualitative research has specific strengths and is different from quantitative research, we do not wish to suggest that the former is characterised by uniformity. In sharp contrast to quantitative research, which despite its internal technical debates seems to be relatively stable and unidimensional with regard to methodology, prevailing feature of present day qualitative research is its diversity. As DENZIN and LINCOLN (2000) point out that the field of qualitative research is defined primarily by a series of essential tensions, contradictions, and hesitations, that work back and forth between *competing definitions* and conceptions of the field. That is, qualitative research can mean different things to different people.

"The open-ended nature of the qualitative research project leads to a perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single, umbrella like paradigm over the entire project. There are multiple interpretive projects, including performance ethnographies; standpoint epistemologies; critical race theory; materialist, feminist ethnographies; projects connected to the British cultural studies and Frankfurt schools; grounded theories of several varieties; multiple strands of ethnomethodology; African American, prophetic, postmodern, and neopragmatic Marxism; an American-based critical cultural studies model; and transactional cultural studies projects". (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2000, p.xv) [2]

It is against this backdrop of difference, diversity, and strength that we are delighted to introduce this special issue of *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. Given its specific focus on qualitative research in sport sciences we see this as an excellent opportunity to not only add to the debate regarding this approach to inquiry, but also to provide examples of qualitative studies in action. Of course, given the limitations of space and time not all the possible traditions that inform qualitative research in the sport sciences are included in this special edition of the journal. Likewise, it has not been possible to provide extensive coverage of a number of important issues that have been discussed in recent years, such as, new forms of representation and judgement criteria in sport and physical activity (SPARKES, 2002). This said, we feel that the contributors to this special edition provide a taste of what qualitative research can offer the sport sciences. In so doing, they stimulate a number of issues for further debate and provide a source of encouragement for those who wish to engage with this form of inquiry in the future. [3]

Of course, this special edition of *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* would not have been possible without the hard work of the authors who contributed abstracts and eventually papers. Thus, following the call for abstracts over fifty were submitted. From these, as editors we selected twenty one, and asked the authors to provide an article that would be subjected to anonymous peer review. Following this process, twelve articles were

finally selected for inclusion in this special edition. This selection process has not been easy for us. We would like to express our gratitude to the following scholars who kindly acted as reviewers, and whose comments have guided our thinking: Franz BREUER, Jim DENISON, Knut DIETRICH, Guy FAULKNER, Sarah Jane FINLAY, Ejgil JESPERSEN, Ronald HITZLER, Andreas HOHMANN, Ina HUNGER, Philip MAYRING, Günter MEY, Jörn MUNZERT, Gertrud PFISTER, Margrit SCHREIER, Brett SMITH, Andrew SPARKES, Reinhard STELTER, Oliver STOLL, Jörg THIELE, and Jaan VALSINER. [4]

## 2. The Sport Psychological Perspective

A number of themes are contained within this special edition. The first group of articles take a psychological perspective as their starting point for exploring the personal and contextual dimensions of experience in sport performance.

- Sara-Jane FINLAY and Guy FAULKNER focus on the personal perspective by outlining the parameters of a discursive approach to attributions in sport psychology. On the basis of athletes' discussions of their sporting performance, the authors consider the management of attributions as talk-in-action, rather than a series of discrete cognitive elements and dimensions. [5]

Three further articles consider the personal dimensions of sport involvement in an attempt to understand better the ways in which specific contexts shape the emotional investments made by the athlete.

- Yuri HANIN introduces the IZOF-model and its potential to contribute to qualitative understanding. His article illuminates the metaphorical and narrative dimensions of emotional expression, and illustrates how emotions can be adaptive or maladaptive for specific athletes in specific contexts.
- Helen HOOPER in co-operation with Les BURWITZ and Phil HODKINSON extend our understanding of emotional dimensions in sport via their case study of one athlete, who regarded himself as an "*unemotional*" performer. The analysis provided, however, suggests that self-definition is open to question.
- Abigail LOCKE is also focused on emotions in relation to athletic performance. For her, discourses of emotion form part of a larger accounting systems that are embedded within certain narrative structures. Accordingly, when they talk about their emotional experiences, athletes construct and fit them into cultural and normative frames of accountability. [6]

Two more articles in this special edition draw upon a psychological orientation:

- Jens KLEINERT provides insight in the meaning of self-talk in relation the experience of pain and emotionally related psychological states. He illustrates that self-talk has regulative functions in the pain management process, and suggests that task-oriented self-talk is important for coping with pain.

- Andreas MARLOVITS focuses on the material world of the athlete by utilising an approach described as "psychological object analysis". This approach is illustrated via an interview based study that provides a psychological description and analysis of *sports equipment*. [7]

### 3. Educational and Coaching Contexts

Three articles are included that have a sport pedagogical perspective and/or are oriented towards the educational or coaching context. Here, the analyses are directed towards understanding the setting and the interaction of the different protagonists in specific contexts:

- Peter FREI and Ilka LÜSEBRINK focus on the triad of describing, understanding and consulting in relation to national female gymnastics. They suggest an approach that is sensitive to the possible stresses and risks of the triad as they identify problematic action patterns used by the gymnasts. Here, the subject is understood as being located within a *culture of discourse* that establishes and defines the form, and content, of the knowledge required by different people in a settings as they seek integration.
- Peter KUHN explores the life-world of children, their wishes, and ideas with regard to sport, games and movement activities. Drawing on a variety of data resources, including, children's drawings, he presents a novel approach to qualitative analysis.
- Katja SCHMITT and Udo HANKE broaden our knowledge in regard to feedback in motor learning and the coach-athlete interaction. They supplement the observable processes of feedback interaction through the reconstruction of the cognitive processes, and so develop insights into the subjective theories of coaches and their athletes. [8]

Originally, the editors hoped for a number of articles that focused on gender issues in sport. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, this special edition contains just the following article that deals with this issue:

- Håkan LARSSON presents data that reveals the social construction of manliness and womanliness in Swedish sport. Differences in self-perceptions of boys and girls are used to explore issues relating to gender equity policy in sport as a new way of creating sexual/gender difference. [9]

### 4. Ethics and Ethnography

Finally, the collection of articles contains two contributions which take a more general perspective on the status of qualitative research in sport science:

- Steve OLIVIER and Lesley FISHWICK focus on ethical questions in relation to a qualitative research design. They highlight the problems for qualitative researchers who have to fit their proposals into the framework provided by the biomedical ethics model that remains dominant. Some strategies for

overcoming these problems are suggested. It is concluded that qualitative researchers need to recognise and plan for ethical issues in their work.

Likewise, ethics committees need to recognise that qualitative work poses unique problems, but that these need not necessarily be insurmountable obstacles to project approval

- Jörg THIELE focuses on the significance, importance, and possibility of the ethnographic approaches within the German-speaking sports sciences. He calls for the meaning of the term "ethnography" to be widened so that it includes many different and "strange" sporting activities and contexts. The benefit of an explicit and systematic integration of ethnographic research into sport sciences is discussed. [10]

Finally, it remains for us to invite you, the readers, to engage with the articles that appear in this special edition of *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. We have been honoured to act as guest editors and we sincerely hope that you both enjoy and gain something from the end product. [11]

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