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The promise of 'sporting bodies' in phenomenological thinking – how exceptional cases of practice can contribute to develop foundational phenomenological concepts

Susanne Ravn and Simon Høffding

ABSTRACT

For decades, qualitative researchers have used phenomenological thinking to advance reflections on particular kinds of lifeworlds. As emphasised by Allen-Collinson phenomenology offers a continuing promise of 'bringing the body back in' to theories on sport and physical activity. Turning to philosophy, traditionally, phenomenologists have not paid much attention to qualitative research. Nevertheless, phenomenology does contain a strong emphasis on using 'data' or experiences from daily life and on drawing on data from medical pathology. In other words while qualitative researchers employ phenomenology to empirically investigate the domain of sport and exercise, phenomenologists employ empirical data to substantiate their claims concerning foundational conditions of our being-in-the-world. In this article, we suggest a way to enhance the collaboration between the two fields by pointing out and giving examples of the resource of 'the factual variation.' Coined by Shaun Gallagher and developed from the Husserlian eidetic variation, the factual variation uses exceptional cases, normally from pathology, to shed new light on foundational phenomenological concepts. Drawing on our research of sports dancers and expert musicians, we indicate how qualitative researchers across the board, through the factual variation, can contribute to phenomenological thinking and thereby also strengthen their own theoretical foundation.

For decades, qualitative researchers have used phenomenological thinking to advance reflections on particular kinds of lifeworlds (Giorgi 1975, 1997, 2008, van Manen 1990, 2007, Kerry and Armour 2000, Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007, Finlay 2009, 2012). Quoting the title of one of Allen-Collinson's (2009) articles, phenomenology offers the '(continuing) promise' of a powerful framework for "'bringing the body back in" to theories on sport and physical activity' (Ibid., p. 279). Accordingly, within the field of sport, exercise, and health, qualitative researchers have turned to phenomenology to advance

knowledge of experiences as embodied. In sports- and exercise-related research, one finds thorough descriptions of, for example, how haptic experiences are central to understand the practitioner's engagement in running and scuba diving (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010), how self-compassion can be applied to 'the physical self' in the case of women adult exercisers (Berry *et al.* 2010), how auditory attunement is used to make immediate adjustments by practitioners suffering from asthma (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014) and what characterises the essential features of experience in community sports coaching (Cronin and Armour 2015). In health-related research, the focus of the description centres on, for example, descriptions and explorations of the experienced world of meaning of the patients (e.g. Todres *et al.* 2007, Todd *et al.* 2016) while arguing for a 'humanisation of healthcare practice' (Todres *et al.* 2007, p. 53).

Turning to philosophy, traditionally, phenomenologists have not paid much attention to qualitative research. Nevertheless, phenomenology does contain a strong emphasis on using 'data' or experiences from daily life and on occasion draws substantially on data from medical pathology (Merleau-pony 1962). It is important to bear in mind that the phenomenological exploration, within the domain of philosophy, is focused on accounting for subjective experiences and, in that sense, on accounting for our embodied 'capacity for being consciousness' (Varela 1996, p. 336) or, in the words of Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, for the structure of consciousness (2008). Accordingly, when turning to empirical data, these are used to strengthen and further develop phenomenological concepts and descriptions (Ibid.). To put it simply, qualitative researchers *employ phenomenology* to empirically investigate *particular kinds* of lifeworlds, while phenomenologists *employ empirical data* to substantiate their claims and argumentation concerning foundational conditions of our being-in-the-world. These constellations have yielded many valuable results for both qualitative research and phenomenology, but – as already indicated in this brief presentation – we find there is an interdisciplinary challenge to be taken up concerning how qualitative research can contribute to advance

phenomenological thinking in a more substantial way. In other words, we want to offer a future prospect in which these two engage in a new partnership promising to advance the knowledge of both. We are aware that, within the field of qualitative research, one will find descriptions of the applied methods as 'phenomenological methods'. This is of course confusing, especially when we want to indicate how qualitative methodologies can be used for phenomenological analysis. To clarify the interdisciplinary challenges with which we deal in this article, we would like to emphasise that we use the term 'phenomenological methods' to refer to analytical 'tools' as discussed within phenomenology as a philosophical practice.

In this article, we show how the practices of sporting and artistic bodies present exceptional cases, which can focus and clarify phenomenological descriptions of our bodied being in the world and our 'capacity for being conscious' (Varela 1996, p. 336). We argue that the deliberate practices, which characterise athletes as well as artists such as dancers and musicians, can contribute to advance phenomenological insights and, further, that this insight will at the same time be of foundational value for future analysis in qualitative research within areas such as the sociology of sport, physical culture, sport coaching, as well as sport, exercise, health, and performance. Practitioners as different as athletes and artists serve the same purpose in this article, namely to provide a variation with which to question our everyday assumptions about body and consciousness. That our proposal functionally can encompass such different kinds of practitioners holds the implicit promise that almost all qualitative researchers of sport, exercise, health, and performance will be able to learn from and contribute to the approach we present in the following.

To pursue the methodological endeavour of this article, we begin by briefly reminding of the 'state of the art' of phenomenological research within the field of philosophy. This is important because the use of sporting and artistic bodies as exceptional cases presupposes engagement with current discussions in phenomenology. In the

succeeding section, we portray how phenomenology has been applied in qualitative research. These first two sections form the background for the third section specifying how the different cases of sporting and artistic bodies can be understood as real-life deviations or 'factual variations.' Finally, we present two studies, based on sports dance and expert musicianship, to exemplify the kinds of insight that can be generated by using practices and experiences of sporting and artistic bodies to develop phenomenological concepts and basic assumptions. We conclude by indicating how the new modus operandi also, ultimately, contribute to the field of qualitative research.

Phenomenological thinking of today

As philosophical practice, phenomenology draws on a heterogeneous tradition and can currently be found in a variety of forms. Indeed, philosophers such as Husserl, Sartre, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who identified with the practice of phenomenology, had different interests in phenomenology and different opinions on its method (Moran 2000, ch. 1). Bearing the heterogeneity of the phenomenological movement in mind, Husserl's work can hardly be referred to as an absolute reference for phenomenological method. Nevertheless, many contemporary phenomenologists have a basic reference to, and philosophical inheritance from Husserl's work (Schmicking 2010). Phenomenology is an innovative and active field of philosophical studies that includes discussions on its own methodology and application. The field of phenomenological thinking of today should not be misunderstood as limited to a historical project of philosophers discussing how to understand and reinterpret phenomenological themes in Husserl's or Merleau-Ponty's work, although it certainly also includes such important conceptual and historical work. Rather, to deal with phenomenology as a way of practicing philosophy *still* invites for continued entrepreneurship and innovation in terms of how we are to develop phenomenological thinking (Ibid.) and how phenomenology can constructively contribute to other research domains (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, Gallagher 2012).

It should be emphasised that we do not conceive of phenomenology as primarily a historical endeavour. However, one important historical fact deserves to be mentioned as it relates to the way in which phenomenological thinking has influenced empirical work within psychology and qualitative research. Ever since WWII, when Husserl's notes and manuscripts were smuggled out of Nazi Germany to Leuven, archivists and phenomenologists have worked to order, publish and translate his works. Over the past 20 years or so, Husserl scholarship has undergone something of a renaissance and a much more complex picture of Husserl as a thinker has emerged.¹ One of the most exciting scientific developments following this archival effort can be seen in, especially, Zahavi's work, which roughly speaking re-contextualises Husserl from being the last German idealist to being the initiator of an entirely new way of thinking (Zahavi 2003, conclusion). From Zahavi's reading, central facets of Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's work are anticipated by Husserl. Bringing his Husserlian reading of phenomenology to bear on current discussions in, for example, cognitive science and social cognition, he has contributed to qualify and challenge our understanding of mirror neurons (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, Chap. 9), empathy (2014), and group, or 'we-modes', of consciousness (2014). From this brief overview, it should hopefully be clear that we think of 'phenomenology' as a philosophical discipline in a specific modern interpretation that has proven particularly fruitful for interdisciplinary work. It is within this line of phenomenological thinking that we wish to advocate for a close collaboration with qualitative research.

From the above-mentioned interpretation of phenomenology, it appears that the emphasis on foundational methodology, such as the use of the epoché and the reduction,² is different from that found when applied in qualitative research. Before we continue, let us briefly sum up some of the central 'tools'³ of a phenomenological analysis. *The epoché* is often described as a bracketing or suspension of the naïve

prejudice – the natural attitude – that *presupposes* the world's existence as something out there, entirely independent of me (Zahavi 2003, p. 9). Consequently, the epoché concerns any assumptions about the mode and manner of the world's existence and presents a constant challenge to our engrained worldview, of which we must continually remind ourselves throughout all of our phenomenological analyses (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 23). The epoché is a closely woven part of the *reduction*.⁴ To be more precise, the epoché is performed to 'uncover a new transcendental domain of experience' (Moran 2000, p. 147) and this latter step of 'uncovering' is what the reduction aims at. The reduction thereby denotes a thematisation of the world as a correlation that leads from the natural sphere 'back' to its transcendental foundation (Zahavi 2003, p. 46). Furthermore, and as we will return to, *the eidetic variation* is used as a tool to 'key[s] in on the essential or invariant structures' of the correlation described through the process of reduction (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 28). At the same time, it depends on as well as supports an *intersubjective verification* that is 'concerned with replication and the degree to which the discovered structures are universal or at least sharable' (Ibid., p. 28).

We take the presentation above to be in line with Merleau-Ponty, who famously declared that a 'complete reduction is impossible' (1962, p. xiv), which we take to mean for both the epoché and the reduction that they are not epistemological tools that can be absolutely applied in one sweep, but rather that they are critical processes of thinking that underlie all good phenomenological work. This is evident from most phenomenological literature. Look to Heidegger (1996), Sartre (1991), Merleau-Ponty (except for the programmatic introduction) (1962), or to the more recent works of Zahavi (2005, 2014) or Gallagher (2005). Here, you find no chapter or extensive part that outlines the specific phases in which the epoché and reduction are used to elucidate the topic under discussion. To stress our point, for the most part, the

phenomenological, methodological tools are engrained processes of an ideal nature, never fully realisable or 'complete.' In other words, an explicit method that tells us where and when to 'apply' these tools is no guarantee of solid phenomenological work.

Phenomenology within the context of qualitative research

Several qualitative researchers related to the academic domains of pedagogy (e.g. van Manen 1990, 2007, Kerry and Armour 2000), psychology (e.g. Giorgi 1975, 1997, Dale 1996, Finlay 2009, 2012), and sociology (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2009, 2011) have considered how methodological challenges can be handled when phenomenological thinking is used as a framework for the generation and analysis of empirical data. Inevitably, the heterogeneity of the phenomenological movement can be traced when looking at the various ways in which phenomenology is applied in the analysis of different kinds of physical practices. In that sense, there is not one 'correct' or strict method of how to combine the two methodological approaches. When performing a phenomenological analysis of recreational activities and expert performances in sport and dance, the researcher is requested to involve herself in an open-ended, though phenomenologically informed way of exploring our experiences as these are lived (Allen-Collinson 2009, 2011, Ravn and Hansen 2013, Ravn and Christensen 2014).

The first-person perspective of experience is, for obvious reasons, well suited to illuminate the practice from a lived perspective. However, as also strongly emphasised by phenomenologists and qualitative researchers alike, first-person accounts of *what* something feels like and *how* something is experienced does not per se define a study as phenomenological (Giorgi 2008, Allen-Collinson 2009, Finlay 2009). Similarly, nor is any thorough analysis of first-person accounts *ipso facto* phenomenological. Sensual ethnographies and auto-ethnographic studies, from each their point of interest, constructively deal with personal accounts of what it feels like to be a particular kind of,

for example, sporting body. While sensual ethnography is focused on bringing sensorial experiences to the fore to indicate and discuss how sensations constitute a fundamental domain of cultural expression (Pink 2009, Sparkes 2009), auto-ethnographical studies aim at indicating how a sense of self is structured by various narrative forms over time (Smith and Sparkes 2009, Sparkes and Stewart 2016). By comparison, a phenomenological analysis of, for example, sporting bodies specifically aims at indicating how experiences and meanings are structured *within* the lifeworld of the practitioners while actively drawing on phenomenological thinking (Dale 1996, Allen-Collinson 2009, Finlay 2009).⁵ In short, in a phenomenological analysis, the researcher is expected to use a 'certain attentive awareness' to explore 'the things of the worlds as we live them' (van Manen according to Allen-Collinson 2011, pp. 49–50), while sensual ethnographical and auto-ethnographical studies are directed at analysing how our experiences in a sensual and embodied sense are to be considered part of a cultural repertoire.

The methodological tools from the phenomenological tradition, the epoché, the reduction, and the eidetic variation, are applied to the qualitative research in various ways. Depending on the researcher's allegiance to, for example, Giorgi's (e.g. 1975, 1997, 2008) or van Manen's (e.g. 1990, 2007) work, these 'tools' are used as 'descriptive' or 'interpretative,' respectively. In the descriptive approach, the analysis proceeds from generating rich descriptions to identifying meaning units within these descriptions (e.g. Berry *et al.* 2010, Hill and Hemmings 2015), while in the interpretative approach the analysis is described as directed towards constructing interpretative descriptions of central aspects of the practitioners' lifeworld (e.g. Cronin and Armour 2015, Nielsen 2009). When Giorgi outlines that the meaning units do not exist in the descriptions, but are determined by using criteria that are consistent with the scientific discipline of the researcher, he implicitly indicates that the definitions of meaning units involves a certain kind of interpretation because the analysis ultimately has to be of interest to, for

example, the psychological domain, which is the scientific discipline of Giorgi himself. In the same way, within the domain of pedagogy and relational practices, van Manen specifies that practices are to be considered a unique kind of knowledge. Experiences are 'experiences-as-we-live-through-it in our actions, relations and situations' (2007, p. 16) and we can use the phenomenological analysis to form a certain sensitivity to our practice (as teachers, nurses, etc.). Despite the claimed differences, when focusing on how qualitative researchers work, it can be difficult to distinguish between these two applied phenomenological methods. Following Finlay's considerations, it might be constructive to think of the division between descriptive and interpretative variants of psychological phenomenology as parts of a continuum (2009).

If we look closer at how the phenomenological method is applied, the epoché is often presented as an initial change in attitude that the researcher is supposed to accomplish towards the object of inquiry (e.g. Dale 1996, Finlay 2009). Some qualitative researchers also specify that the researcher has to become conscious of her presuppositions and that the goal of using the epoché is to stay at 'the level of the lived experience of the participants' (Dale 1996, p. 315). As indicated in the former section, the epoché and the reduction are closely interlinked and often difficult to separate. The latter, when applied in qualitative research, appears to address the outcome of having performed the epoché – that is, the reduction denotes that the researcher addresses 'the phenomenon with a freshness, a "naïve" eye' (Allen-Collinson 2011, p. 51).

The imaginative variation, which in phenomenology is known as the 'eidetic variation' (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008), is an analytical grip through which the researcher imagines the phenomenon under inquiry in its potential variations. Cronin and Armour (2015, p. 964) explicate that performing the imaginative variation means figuring out what is incidental rather than what is essential to the phenomenon. With reference to the contextual premises of sociology, Allen-Collinson emphasises that 'the essence is more about recognition of generalities in the phenomenon, rather than making a definitive,

"finalising" (cf. Smith *et al.* 2009) statement about its invariance' (2011, p. 52).

It is characteristic for most of these various approaches that qualitative researchers employ phenomenology as described by its 'founders' in the beginning and middle of the last century. As we have pointed out earlier, however, many interesting advances have taken place within phenomenological research over the past twenty years that deserve to be used as a source of inspiration for qualitative researchers.

A recent take on the variation

Although some qualitative studies address the applied method in use as an 'empirical' phenomenological analysis (Allen-Collinson 2016), such kind of emphasis within the field of qualitative studies should not give reason to think that phenomenologists, like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre as well as contemporary phenomenological thinkers like Zahavi (2005, 2014), Gallagher (2005), Ratcliffe (2008), Thompson (2007, 2014), or Krueger (2012) and Krueger and Michael (2012), do not relate to or involve empirical data in their analyses. Quite the contrary. We see this in at least two distinct ways:

Firstly, when Sartre (1991) turns to the incident of peeping through a keyhole, when Merleau-Ponty (1962) analyses how we experience a mountain as a 'big mountain', even when we are far away and it actually appears small, or when Zahavi (2015) draws on the experience of seeing a hedgehog together with his son to explore how an experience can be shared, these philosophers turn to everyday recognisable incidents as a kind of empirical 'data' to be used for their phenomenological analysis.

Secondly, when Merleau-Ponty (1962) analyses the bodily and perceptual capacities of the patient Schneider, when Gallagher (2005) makes a similar investigation of Ian Waterman, who suffers from a rare neurological condition, to discern various systems of bodily consciousness, or when Krueger (2012) examines the Moebius syndrome to understand the importance of facial expressivity as foundational for empathy, these

phenomenological thinkers employ data from pathological cases to put our own normal experiences into perspective. Inspired by Gallagher, we identify this way of working as an efficient phenomenological tool called 'a factual variation' (Froese and Gallagher 2010, p. 86).

The factual variation derives from the aforementioned *eidetic variation*, which (it should be remembered) 'keys in on the essential or invariant structures' of consciousness (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 28). In the phenomenological method originally endorsed by Husserl, the eidetic variation is based on 'free imaginative variation' carried out by the thinker. However, as exemplified by the cases of Merleau-Ponty and Gallagher working with Schneider and Waterman, respectively, eidetic variations should, if possible, go beyond the 'free imaginative variation' and be informed by empirical data – based on results from scientific or qualitative research (Schmicking 2010, Gallagher 2012). As such, phenomenology has made use – and increasingly continues to do so – of exceptional cases to instantiate the eidetic variation as a 'factual variation' (Froese and Gallagher 2010, p. 86). Besides Gallagher's work with Waterman and Krueger's analysis of the Moebius Syndrome, we also see such attempts in current phenomenological research when Zahavi (2005, pp. 132 ff.), and Parnas and Zahavi (2002) pushes his analysis of selfhood through the variation of schizophrenia, or when Ratcliffe (2008) grasps existential feelings through the variation of depression.

The variations above are all pathologies of mind and/or body that reveal subjectivity in altered, fractured or fragile states. These kinds of analyses have helped not only phenomenologists, but also the sciences from which they draw their respective variations, particularly psychiatry (Parnas *et al.* 2005).

The factual variation is obviously not a bulletproof method for establishing new insights about the nature of mind and body. Potential pitfalls concern empirical as well as theoretical issues. The most problematic empirical issue consists in lacking a thorough understanding of the appropriate methods for investigating the variation under question.

Merleau-Ponty's own Schneider case illustrates this well as pointed out by Jensen (2009), among others. From Merleau-Ponty's analysis, it is not entirely evident what Schneider's medical condition is, or what exactly it says about motor intentionality. Part of, if not most of, the explanation for this is probably to be found in the fact that Merleau-Ponty never directly interacted with Schneider, but relies on published medical descriptions from Gelb and Goldstein (Goldstein 1923), leaving much room for misunderstanding and misinterpretation. We believe that securing a proper use of a factual variation requires direct, thorough, and methodologically transparent engagement with the variation under question, in our examples the sports dancers and musicians themselves. A theoretical issue concerns whether one really can learn about the 'normal' from the pathological or abnormal. This is a complex issue, which we cannot fully treat here. Suffice it to say that, where Schneider exemplifies a pathological and radical break from what we consider healthy, working with experts as variations merely exemplify an augmentation or extension of more normal bodily abilities and, further, that generating knowledge about the normal from expertise is not a process of mere adduction or subtraction, but ought to carefully consider the various experiential structures implicated into an 'existential' or 'intentional' analysis (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 123 ff, Martiny 2015, pp. 558–60) as we exemplify below.

Thus far, qualitative research has not been used systematically for the purpose of performing a factual variation within phenomenology. *We think it should*. Based on our work, we suggest that bodily practices and expertise as studied within the field of qualitative research can constitute as a good a basis for a factual variation as pathology can within, for example, the domain of psychiatry.

Deliberate practice and movement expertise potentially present exceptional cases of embodied experience. That is, dancers, musicians, and elite athletes are aware of the physicality of their bodies in ways that are very different from how the physicality of the body is present (or rather absent) to us in everyday activities. In other words, when

climbing the stairs, riding our bike or using the keyboard of our PC, we are not particularly aware of the movement of our body – nor are we really concerned with what our body should feel like. Dancers, musicians, and elite athletes know their daily training routines by heart and would be able to perform them just as if the skills were incorporated habits like, for example, climbing the stairs and riding the bike. However, drawing on Montero's formulations, for the dancer, musician, as well as the elite athlete there is nothing more important than the body at hand (Montero 2010, 2013). When used specifically for a factual variation, practitioners as different as athletes and artists join up as structurally equal to shed new light on the habitual body. It follows from this that practitioners from just about any field of expertise, when used for a factual variation, potentially can enlighten or challenge fundamental phenomenological concepts. We now present two examples of how this can be done.

Two examples – interaction and expertise

In the following two examples based on sports dancers' and musicians' expertise, we draw on our recent research, which is presented in greater detail elsewhere. As we focus on how the practitioners' experiences present specific cases, which can be used as factual variations, we do not present thorough methodological considerations related to how the descriptions were generated. However, in extract, we want to emphasise that epistemologically we understood and handled the interview situation as a specific kind of encounter in which the practitioner 'recalls' experiences on the premises of the interview situation. Experiences are not a specific kind of stockpile hidden inside the head or the body. Rather, as emphasised by Høffding and Martiny (2015), through the encounter of the interview, describing experiences becomes an unfolding process in which descriptions are constituted in loops of memory, reflection, descriptions and questioning. In both examples, different combinations of passive and active participant observations

contextualised the interview situation. As we aimed at performing the interview on the premises of the lived experiences and practices of the dancers and musicians, respectively, an open interview guide was prepared based on the observational notes – and used in a non-directive way in the interview situation (Ravn and Hansen 2013, Høffding 2015).

We acknowledge that the phase of generating rich descriptions of what it feels like to practice the dancing and playing the music also entails some kind of analysis as something is seen, heard, and sensed in preference to something else on the premise of contextualised situations. However, the two examples are deliberately focused on outlining the succeeding phase of the analysis. Consequently, we do not dwell on presenting the lived and embodied experiences related to sports dance and music playing, but focus on exemplifying how we actively use descriptions for the benefit of contributing to phenomenological clarifications.

Example 1: interaction in sports dance

In a larger research project on talent development in elite sports, Ravn focused on describing how elite athletes 'listen to their body' (Lund *et al.* 2012, 2014, Ravn and Christensen 2014). As part of this project, she observed and interviewed two couples within the field of elite sports dance: Martino Zanibellato & Michelle Abildtrup and Bjørn Bitsch & Ashley Williamson.⁶ The two couples competed in the five Latin dances and all ten dances (five Latin dances and five standard dances), respectively. Within the year(s) after the observations and interviews had taken place, both of the couples won the world championships in their respective disciplines.

Obviously, one of the aims of the study was to further explore the specialised sensational awareness of the elite athletes to avail this aspect of their expertise for talent development and elite training. These descriptions are presented elsewhere (Ravn

2016). At the same time, though, the analyses of the sports dancers' expertise are of specific interest from a phenomenological perspective, as they present extreme cases of how one body-subject reach out to embody the other, and vice versa, in order to be able to perform a movement skill optimally. The dancers are not only expected to perform well-coordinated timings of actions and reactions, but to move *together*. They practice a specific kind of face-to-face encounter, which must include reciprocal interaction if they are to succeed in their sport. In that sense, they present a variation of real-life interaction, which might possibly contribute to phenomenological descriptions of how the sense of the other informs our perception and movement.

In large parts of their practice, the dancers focus on training the quality of their movement. They often comment on if they *feel connected* (or not) when dancing together and address two interlinked ways of feeling connected. One way of feeling connected concerns how they sense that movements are coordinated *within* their own body. The other way of feeling connected concerns if they sense that the way in which they move is reflected in and forming part of their partners' movement (and vice versa) (Jing and Ravn forthcoming).

To feel connected in one's own movement relates, for example to, how the dancers in the Latin dances feel that they push towards the floor in a step to initiate a flow of movement up through their body. It also addresses how their sense of centre of the upper body moves in relation to the centre of the lower body. The dancers deliberately train how their sense of the centres and the way movement flows through their body is to change (slightly) between the different Latin dances. Ashli, for example, describes how the dance Samba to her feels 'more heavy' than the Cha Cha Cha, in which 'the body is pulled up more tight' and movement rotates sharper around one axis. Martino emphasises that, in the Samba, he has a predominant pelvic tilt and that he has to create 'a typical bounce action' which is from the knees up to the pelvic and to somewhere 'just under the ribcages.'

During Latin dances, the dancers are rarely interlocked in a stable hold. Rather, they tend to move between a series of handholds, more or less fleeting physical contact or no physical contact at all. However, this should not be taken to mean that the feeling of connection in movement is not equally important in the Latin dances. Martino, for example, describes how it is important that his partner, Michelle, senses 'all the body weight that [he] is using' and that she allows him to feel where she is at all times so that he can 'tune in' with her body weight. His descriptions indicate that his sense of movement is not only framed by, but also includes, the movement of his partner. The perceptions and actions he senses in this kind of connection do not only concern his own body. Rather, in this way of 'feeling connected', perception-action loops extend beyond his body (Ravn 2016).

The blind man, who senses the environment through his stick, is a well-known example in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of how a tool can work as an extension of the body. In relatively recent phenomenological research, De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) and Fuchs and De Jaegher (2009) have argued that we are to understand the micro-levels of embodied interaction in face-to-face encounters as fundamental to the social dimension of our existence. The micro-levels of interaction are based in our capacity to extend perception-action loops beyond the boundaries of our bodies. However, the extended character of the perception-action loop is not unidirectional, as is the case when the stick becomes part of the perception-action loop of the blind man, but entails a co-regulation, which is achieved on interactive premises. Furthermore, they argue that the performance of any skill is thereby always to be considered a mutual affair. Adjustments, atunements and timings in relation to others are not extra dimensions added to our skills. The performance of any skill is always already situated and inter-linked with others in the way the micro-levels of interaction unfold. In their phenomenological analysis De Jaegher and her co-workers explicate how these kinds of perception-action loops extending beyond the body-subject in face-to-face encounters are driven forward by a continuous

fluctuation between synchronised, desynchronised, and in-between states of the acting bodies involved (De Jaegher and Di paolo 2007, Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009).

As factual variation, the sports dancers come to further question how perception-action loops unfold as extended in these micro-levels of physical interaction. As briefly presented, in their practices, the dancers focus their awareness during training on feeling connected in two ways. These shifts in focus do not unfold randomly, but constitute a central aspect of their deliberate practice. Each of the ways they can feel connected is worked strategically throughout their training with the tacit intention of optimising the performance of their own movement and the shared dance at the same time. The practices of the sports dancers thereby indicate that the shaping of reciprocal interaction is not about perception-action loops extending – or not.⁷ Rather, the body can be experienced as an individual boundary and as extended at the same time and, to a certain extent, the dancers are able to control the fluctuation between synchronised and desynchronised states of perception-action loops (Ravn 2016). Accordingly, the case of the sports dancers indicates how De Jaegher's and her co-workers' descriptions of interaction do not exclude experiences and descriptions of what it feels like to be an individual body moving. In other words, we do not have to be either part of a system of interactions or a singular body-subject. We can be both at the same time.

Example 2: expertise in the music performance

Høffding has worked with 'The Danish String Quartet' (DSQ) to understand the relation between thinking and skilled coping in expert musicianship. The study involved following the DSQ on tours in England and Denmark, observing them practice and perform as well as engaging in several semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. The DSQ is now internationally recognised as being among the best string quartets in the world and tours the globe half the year. The study was designed for

several analytical purposes of which we present just one here.

Part of the theoretical background and motivation of the study derives from several discussions of mindedness and expertise in phenomenology and philosophy of mind (Scheer 2013). A prominent figure here is Hubert Dreyfus, who argues for an optimal, expert kind of performance in which one is 'skilfully coping' rather than 'thinking' (Dreyfus 2005, 2007).⁸ Dreyfus' own work, however, is not based on observations of, or interviews with, experts, so it was pertinent to examine how his theories would fare when confronted with a thorough qualitative study. In other words, the study challenged Dreyfus by asking whether there is such a thing as skilled coping and, if so, whether thinking really degrades it.

The study did not confirm Dreyfus' theory. For instance, in an interview, the violinist Rune Sørensen⁹ relates sometimes thinking rather carefully about how he looks to the audience while playing: 'Am I expressive enough? How is my page-turning?' Rune asks these questions because he is concerned about whether he is interesting enough to look at as a performer and whether he should intentionally work on his body language and facial expression to better captivate the audience. This is a rather sophisticated act of reflecting or of meta-cognition, namely imagining oneself from the perspective of the other. Such reflective acts do not degrade Rune's playing.¹⁰

Another example comes from the other violinist, Frederik Øland, who when feeling at ease with playing is able to consciously focus on how to improve his playing or on imagining alternative interpretations of the score. He can 'place lines of thought on top of the playing' and seemingly maintain several simultaneous perspectives on his playing and the music, a phenomenon described by psychologist Russel Hurlburt as 'Autonomous Multiplicity' (2011, pp. 265–6). Again, when playing and enjoying a performance, Frederik also describes that sometimes 'it is almost as if you are watching yourself play'. Seeing oneself from the outside or imagining alternative interpretations alongside one's playing

points to mastery of a highly reflective stance that in no way degrades Frederik's coping.¹¹

As described in Høffding 2014, these examples expose Dreyfus' theory as overly dualistic and, in line with findings of for instance Sutton *et al.* (2011) and Montero (2010), show that thinking and coping are not polar opposites. Quite to the contrary, expertise just might consist in a training of the appropriate connections between the two such that one's thinking boosts, rather than degrades, one's performance.

The study constitutes a factual variation over the topic of thinking vs. skilled coping. Dreyfus employs a form of variation relying on expertise to say something general about thinking vs. coping. However, in our opinion, without the requisite methods for data collection this variation does not qualify as 'factual'. Using the DSQ as a factual variation over phenomenological takes on consciousness has availed new theory and new avenues of thinking. For instance, the study shows that the dichotomy between thinking and acting is false. As Sutton writes:

[E]xpertise is in part the training up of the right indirect links between thought and action, not the evacuation of thought from action. We do not need to oppose mindfulness to 'attractive and repulsive forces', for mindfulness is itself a complex and dynamic field of embodied forces. (Sutton *et al.* 2011, p. 93)

To add to Sutton's claim, the present study also shows the entire category of 'coping' to be misconstrued, as the DSQ lends a new perspective to our own mental lives in which absorption or coping can be many different things.

Conclusion

As initially mentioned, a lot of interesting results have been produced by qualitative researchers *employing phenomenology* to empirically investigate the domain of sport and exercise and by phenomenologists *employing empirical data* to substantiate their claims within theoretical discussions. We have showed how sporting bodies present real-life deviations of particular interest to the development of current

phenomenological concepts. If up to date on current discussions in phenomenology, and if deliberately employing the factual variation, qualitative researchers can augment the collaboration with phenomenologists by contributing to the development of a more precise, correct, and refined vocabulary. The cases of practice which qualitative research can illuminate and describe go beyond what pathological cases and dysfunctional bodies might indicate. Ultimately, this refined vocabulary feeds back to the advantage of qualitative research by providing a more precise and applicable starting point for the qualitative inquiry at hand.

We have provided two examples to support our claim:

The sports dancers' ways of handling and optimising their dancing as shared strongly indicates that the interactive setting goes beyond and 'is more' than the sum of several first-person perspectives. My sense of my body moving is also part of a sense of our bodies moving in connected ways – and vice versa. Accordingly, the sports dancers to a certain extent confirm De Jaegher's and her co-workers' descriptions, thereby contributing to illuminate how we are generally to recognise the interactional premises of any kind of performance. The sports dancers specify how reciprocity is (also) movement-based and might unfold in the practical setting of two physical bodies moving in connected ways. However, this does not mean that the sports dancers, or any subject for that matter, are fundamentally trapped in a system of interactions. On the premises of the interactive setting, it is still possible deliberately to decide to focus primarily on sensing how my body moves (Jing and Ravn forthcoming).

When it comes to thinking and coping in expertise, as Montero (2016) demonstrates, the myth that the former degrades the latter is prevalent, not only in Dreyfus' thinking, but in sports and folk psychology alike. The DSQ study shows that if we work from this presupposition when trying to understand experts, musicians and athletes alike, we are starting in the wrong place, equipped with inconsistent, overly general and dualistic concepts that will ultimately be unable to advance our knowledge in any significant way.

We are convinced that researchers in almost all fields of qualitative inquiry of sport, exercise, health, and art, through the method described in this article, will be able to make significant advances in phenomenology as well as their own field of research. We hope to see new results emerge in this way in the future.

Notes

1. Because of this development in Husserl scholarship, it becomes all the more important to note which of Husserl's works – including their year of publication and translation – are used when laying claim to using a phenomenological approach. It is our view that qualitative research will gain the most from a thorough engagement with phenomenology that draws on several of the traditional phenomenologists in their most recent presentation, as well as on the work and interpretations of recent phenomenologists.
2. See Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, chap. 2.
3. Following Schmicking (2010) argumentation concerning the methods in use in phenomenology, we use the term 'tools' in preference to 'steps'. The term tool better conveys that these might be used to a greater or lesser extent in different phases of the research depending on the phenomenon studied.
4. For a good analysis on the nature and difference between epoché and reduction, see Luft 2011.
5. We find that Allen-Collinson (2009) has already problematised whether studies can be characterised as phenomenological without phenomenological thinking somehow used in the research process. Studies using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in many cases exemplify this. In our brief presentation of phenomenology in the context of qualitative research, we have chosen to focus on qualitative studies in which the researcher visibly applies specified methods and/or concepts from phenomenological thinking into her analysis.
6. All four dancers agreed to participate in this study. As both couples are internationally known for their achievements, anonymity was not possible without missing valuable descriptions of their experiences. The dancers therefore gave their consent for their names to be used in the presentation of their experiences and expertise in sports dance.
7. In this presentation, the complexity of De Jaegher's and her co-workers' research is simplified in order to present how the dancers' practices work as factual variation as clearly as possible. We want to emphasise that the question of how the micro-levels of interaction relates to the reciprocity of interaction invites for further phenomenological discussions of the role of kinaesthesia and affectivity. Please find a deeper analysis of how movement is central to reciprocity in Jing and Ravn (2018).
8. Another reference to Dreyfus' work is the movie 'Being in the World'. See: <http://beingintheworldmovie.com/>
9. All DSQ members gave their consent for their names to be used in the presentation and publication of their experiences and expertise.
10. This example is taken from Høffding (2015, p. 111), where a more comprehensive description can be found.
11. This example is taken from Høffding (2015, p. 105). See pp. 105–9 for a more thorough presentation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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