Research Design:

Searching for an Appropriate Research Design: A Personal Journey

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Abstract

This article describes in candour, the journey of a novice researcher deciding which methodological approach to apply to her doctoral research. Eager to commence fieldwork, she considers five options: ethnography, phenomenology, biography, grounded theory, and case study. Upon discovering however, that none of the described alternatives satisfactorily fits with her envisaged mode of research, she embarks on an unplanned journey into more creative possibilities and solutions. It is a process that requires critical analysis both of methodological options and the self, culminating in a mixed yet considered combination of phenomenology, grounded theory, and feminist research approaches. The journey ultimately proves to be a lesson for the student, not only in terms of research design but also how such decisions are inextricably linked with individual passions, fears, insecurities, and values.

Keywords: grounded theory; phenomenology; feminist research; mixed methodology

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1. Introduction

The instinctive desire as an aspiring researcher is to enthusiastically delve into the research setting as soon as possible to keenly dissect and discover. Life is a wondrous haven of unanswered questions, new possibilities, and untold stories, which we cannot wait to explore. The concept of pausing to contemplate one's approach thus comes as a surprise or, in Creswell's (1998) experience, is frequently met with "blank stares" (p. 3). As the purpose of my research is to explore the relationships between identities and experiences of competitive bodybuilders, including subtleties such as age, ethnicity, and gender, I naturally assumed that a qualitative form of inquiry entailing interviewing was a logical and sufficient basis upon which to proceed, unaware of the deeper philosophical considerations, which needed to be addressed. However, having now worked through the process, which proved more complex and soul-searching than initially anticipated, my research is better engaged with the research traditions. A more reasoned perspective underpins its inquiry approach and proposed method, reflecting an improvement upon its initial simplistic and intuitive frame. The following account details the steps and thought processes I engaged in my journey of understanding and deciding upon my research approach.

2. My Situatedness

To frame my study ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically, I revisited my research purpose, investigated research approaches, considered my worldview, and struggled with the placement of self in my research process. Creswell's (1998) book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions,* proved quite insightful. It explained the research approaches of ethnography, phenomenology, biography, grounded theory, and case study, with examples and a glossary. Although his aim was not to advocate "purity" in approach (p. 229), he advised the novice researcher to stay within one tradition (p. 21). Thus, in relation to my study, I felt compelled to choose from among the five options. As my story unfolds however, it will become apparent that I deviated from this advice.

As a researcher, competitive bodybuilder, and academic (with multi-disciplinary roots), my focus is not value-free. Experiences, passions, judgments, and beliefs have already infiltrated and influenced the focus of my topic and my methodological predisposition. The world, in my mind, consists of multiple and changing realities. I also believe that *bodies*, including those of competitive bodybuilders, do not exist as vessels separate from the mind, but as embodied and interconnected states, which encompass the physical, mental, spiritual, and social. In other words, our bodies are the lived realities through which we view and experience life. They are both socially inscribed and also reflect insights of who we are (or think we are)--our *identity*. Although competitive bodybuilding can be viewed in relation to its technical processes, its reality to individual participants comprises unique journeys, experiences, and meanings.

My desire to research the relationship between competitive bodybuilding experiences and identities stems from my own journey in this respect, an interest and appreciation in the journeys (and realities) of others, and an identified theory-research gap on this subject. In recent years, I have transformed my white, female, unfit, middle-class, and academically qualified self into a competitive bodybuilder. In the process of re-crafting my body and embracing this subculture, I have reshaped my mind, spirit, and multiple identities, often in unexpected ways. Academic studies of this *marginalised activity* have tended to adopt a homogenous portrayal of bodybuilders. I therefore pondered whether a research design aiming at engaging the voices and stories of participants themselves could expose more complex and heterogeneous identities. Such curiosity forged the basis of my doctoral study.

3. The Phenomenological Paradigm

Upon reading Creswell, I was immediately attracted to a phenomenological approach as it acknowledged the subjective nature of reality (Jasper, 1994) and reflected my intent to explore the experiences and identities of competitive bodybuilders from their perspectives. Phenomenology is attributed to the founding thoughts of Edmund Husserl, although it was later modified by philosophers and writers, such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Richardson, 1999). It embraces the notion that reality is subjective as people inextricably connect objects with their consciousness of them (Creswell, 1998, p. 53). "There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means" (Michael Quinn Patton, 1990, quoted in Kivel & Kleiber, 2000, p. 219).

The prime means of accessing and subsequently understanding phenomenon is through descriptions of it, in the person's own words "thus [Husserl] talks of lived experiences" (Jasper, 1994, p. 310). Correspondingly, the personal accounts and journeys of bodybuilders, as elicited through in-depth interviewing, will provide the basis for my insights and understanding of participants' identities, experiences and the meanings they attach to them.

The fundamental principles of phenomenology (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992) include:

- *Intentionality:* the concept that the "reality" of an object is interwoven with one's consciousness of it
- *Description:* the way to understand the reality of an object is thus through its description, as articulated in the participants' own words
- *Reduction* or *Epoche:* the researcher must "suspend all judgments about what is real" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52)
- *Essence:* data are coded into themes, then analysed to uncover the central meaning or "essence" of the phenomenon

3.1. Limitations of Phenomenology in Relation to my Study

Whilst phenomenology captured the fundamental spirit of my approach as it embraced the subjective realities and lived experiences of participants, it proved problematic in relation to my research specifics, including the process-oriented nature of my topic and my proposed placement of self as an *insider* within the research setting.

Competitive bodybuilding is conceptualised within my research as more like a *process* rather than a *phenomenon*. A phenomenon is a concept, event, or state-of-being, such as feeling empathy, being gay, or hitting the wall. Whereas bodybuilding and its association with identity is a journey that is experienced by participants over time, in stages, and entails a multiplicity of elements. Such complexity makes it less amenable to a phenomenological analysis. Furthermore, whilst I seek to understand participants' experiences and their meanings, my ultimate aim is not to unveil its underlying *essence* (as in the phenomenological approach). Additionally, such meanings are components in a broader analysis of contextual factors and conditions to be explored, culminating in a framework of connected themes.

The notion of *epoche*, which is fundamental to phenomenology, also proved troublesome in my study. As a researcher, I acknowledge it is important to engage techniques which reduce personal bias and preconceived notions. However I struggled with the seeming incommensurability which existed between epoche and my envisaged role as an insider within the research setting. To explore the marginalised subculture of competitive bodybuilding (Klein, 1993; Roussel & Griffet, 2000), I envisaged that capitalising on my prior experiences with this activity would enhance access to the participants, their trust, and rapport. It would acknowledge comprehension of its regimes, rituals, language, and dress, and help forge understanding, appreciation, and thus connectivity with the researched. The inclusion of self was important academically and personally, and I envisaged my study would lack authenticity without it. Although phenomenology provided rich accounts (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992), ironically I found myself querying whether this approach would leave mine unacceptably "thin."

4. Mixed Methodology

Thus after a promising start towards defining my research approach, I began feeling conflicted and confused regarding its fit with my study and even contemplated changing my proposed research purpose to resolve the dilemma. Phenomenology embraced my desire to explore the "lived realities" of participants and served as an apt overarching paradigm, however its practical application in a pure form proved problematic. As a consequence, I began entertaining the prospect of combining phenomenology with another approach--an idea known as mixing. As previously alluded, Creswell discourages novice researchers from combining traditions and indeed such practices (intentional or not) have been criticised for philosophical compatibility and methodological sloppiness (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Hopwood, 2004; Johnson, 2001; Maggs-Rapport, 2000; Skodal-Wilson & Ambler, 1996; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997).

However, resolving to stay faithfully within one tradition for purity's sake appeared to be no guarantee of rigour if the method was used inappropriately (Johnson, 2001) and pointless if it ill-fitted a research purpose.

5. Grounded Theory

The concept of including grounded theory appeared rational on the basis that it considered the processes underpinning human behaviour as relevant to a particular situation (Creswell, 1998) and thus incorporated the contextual complexities which phenomenology had struggled to accommodate. It was also appropriate for my study because, as my literature review indicated, little theory existed on the subject.

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss as an alternative to the more deductive scientific methodology of the day and, in the absence of well-defined theory, provided a systematic means of discovering "what is going on" (Barney G. Glaser, 1978, as cited in Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992, p. 1357).

The fundamental elements of grounded theory include:

- entering the research setting without a pre-conceived hypothesis
- collecting and analysing data concurrently
- constantly comparative the emerging data with the data already collected, to identify similarities or differences
- theoretical sampling to fine-tune data collection procedures
- the use of coding, categorising, and "memoing" (i.e., notes written for the researcher's own use) in order to document the emerging "themes" (i.e., key variables and patterns in the data), interrelationships, and theoretical propositions
- using a review of literature as one element of data collation
- formation of a "theory" (i.e., a conceptual model which explains the findings in an abstracted format, thus offering a broader theoretical understanding of the phenomena)

With its roots in sociology, grounded theory embraces the notion of *symbolic interaction,* which focuses on the social actions and interactions of humans, their *shared symbols* and thus understandings of each other. This is relevant for my study of competitive bodybuilders, as in order to understand and appreciate their varying experiences and self-perceptions, their meanings should not be read in isolation but also viewed in context as products which are continually shaped and reshaped as a result of social participation. "The researcher needs to understand behavior as the participants understand it, learn about their world, learn their interpretation of self in the interaction, and share their definitions" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p. 7).

Hence, to comprehend participants' accounts, it is important to understand that they are social creatures whose conglomeration of feelings, meanings, and behaviours only make sense when viewed within their broader interpersonal and social setting.

Combining phenomenology with grounded theory thus retained primacy to the lived experiences of the participants, their identities, and meanings, but also incorporated a systematic way of exploring their linkages with the contextual factors including "why, how, where, when, under what circumstances, and with what consequences" (Jeon, 2004, p. 250) such linkages occur.

Correspondingly, my proposed plan would be to enter the research setting without a preconceived hypothesis, select initial candidates in a purposeful manner, collect and then progressively fine-tune data through a process of constant comparison, and adopt theoretical sampling techniques. Field work would, therefore, be undertaken in a series of sessions, punctuated with periods of data analysis. My interview format would begin broadly with initial participants, then as themes and possible theoretical avenues emerge; sampling and data collection would subsequently become more defined, contributing to theory formation.

The timing and application of the literature review have been discussed in the grounded theory literature (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Often, it is avoided in the early stages to reduce bias and enhance the likelihood that "the emergent theory will be grounded in the data" (Cutcliffe, 2000, p. 1480). However, there appear to be distinct phases to this process as I have already undertaken an initial literature review to formulate my research purpose. The prudent yet pragmatic stance thus appears to be "to access relevant literature *as it becomes relevant*" (Dick, 2005, Literature as Emergent subsection, para. 4, emphasis in the original).

Although my basic data would stem from participant interviews, grounded theory also allows the inclusion of other methods. This is advantageous as I envisage combining such accounts with insights from surveys, image-based research, and observation. Furthermore, although some researchers view personal experience as being irrelevant or potentially contaminating objectivity (Reinharz, 1992) "grounded theorists have never considered themselves objective" (Keddy, 1996, p. 451), thus prior knowledge can be included as another form of data. "No effort is made to put aside ideas or assumptions about the situation being studied. On the contrary, the researcher uses these in order to understand better the processes being observed" (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992, p. 1357).

In contrast to phenomenology, grounded theory appeared to present a more inclusive perspective concerning the self and prior knowledge. However, I remained uncertain whether this position was universally shared amongst other academics, including Creswell (1998) who indicated theoretical ideas or notions should be set aside in grounded theory (p. 58). Thus I was left searching for a more definitive resolution of this issue.

6. Feminist Research

Although my research did not intentionally seek to align with feminism or a feminist research perspective, the methods engaged by such scholars offered an insightful

rationale and procedure to guide the placement of self within my study. Feminist researchers generally consider the inclusion of personal experiences to be a "valuable asset" and "distinguishing feature" of their work (Reinharz, 1992, p. 258). They acknowledge the researcher as a person within the process as opposed to an object which is present without involvement. "Hygienic research" is considered an over-simplistic account of reality as "personhood cannot be left behind" and indeed "should be capitalized upon" (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 161). Procedurally, feminist research acknowledges that there is often a connection between the research purpose and the private life of the researcher; hence works are often framed with a preface or postscript highlighting such relevance (Reinharz, 1992, p. 259). Furthermore, when engaging with participants, a more relational style of interface is adopted which frequently includes *self-disclosure* on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 1998) and *self-reflexivity* in the analysis.

Feminist research highlighted why the inclusion of self was not only acceptable, but even desirable in my study. Although the focus of my inquiry was not one of "gender imbalance" or "female emancipation" (Robson, 2002), I found sanctity in the framework and the tools it offered. Not only were these applicable to my study, but these were also instrumental in resolving that lingering sense of incommensurability which existed between the inclusion of self and the principles of phenomenology and grounded theory. Feminist research offered a process through which I could align my prior experience and research purpose and also humanise my encounters with participants, thus culminating in a rich and authentic account of the process.

7. Deciding on Approach: "The Real Journey"

The resulting pluralistic approach--borrowing from the overarching perspective of phenomenology, but still availing of grounded theory procedures and feminist research instruments--gelled rationally, pragmatically, and emotionally with my research ambitions (see Figure 1). However such a blend alluded to a smooth fairy tale ending which, ironically, had not been the case at all.
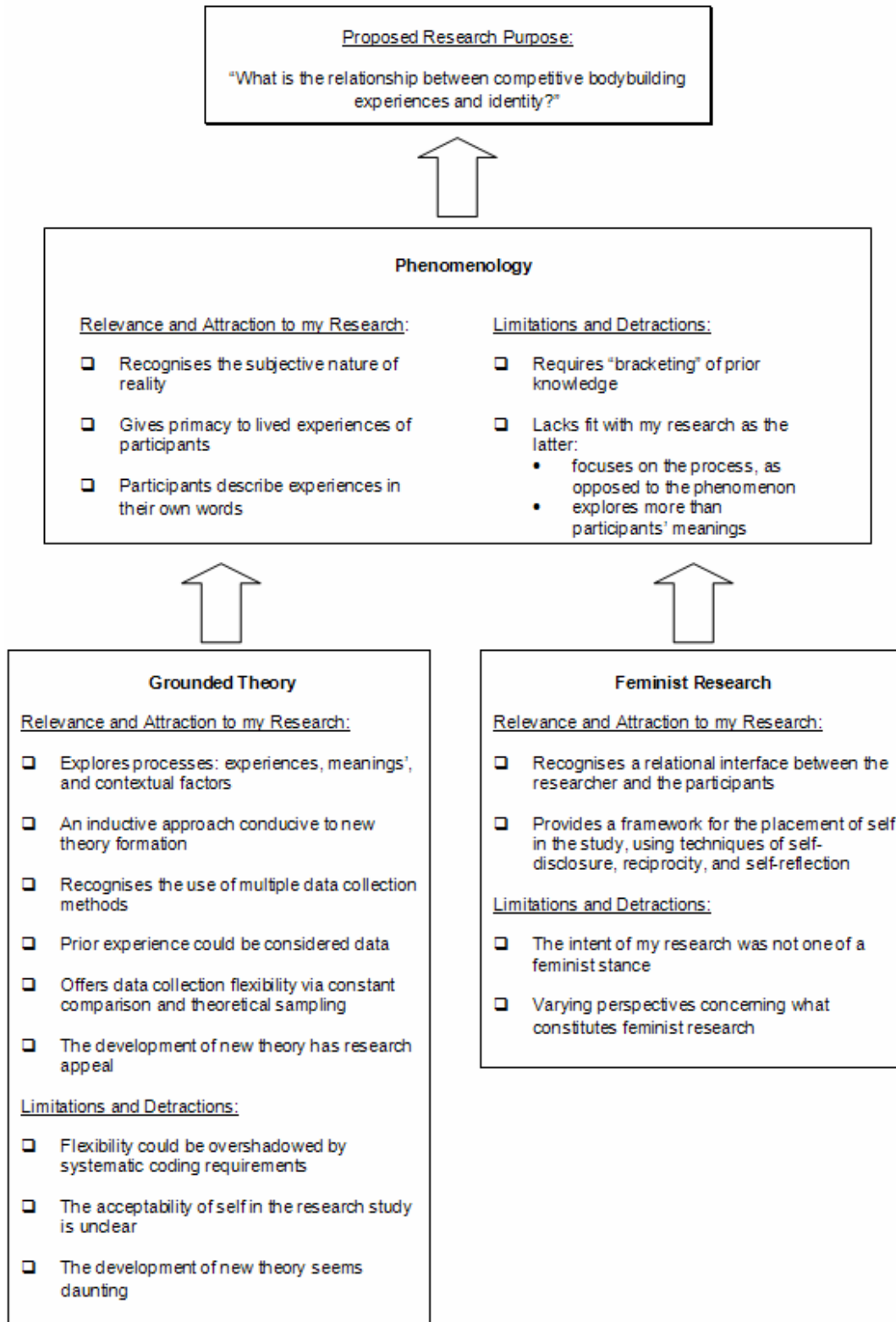
Proposed Research Purpose:

"What is the relationship between competitive bodybuilding experiences and identity?"

Phenomenology

Relevance and Attraction to my Research:

- Recognises the subjective nature of reality
- Gives primacy to lived experiences of participants
- Participants describe experiences in their own words

Limitations and Detractions:

- Requires "bracketing" of prior knowledge
- Lacks fit with my research as the latter:
  - focuses on the process, as opposed to the phenomenon
  - explores more than participants' meanings

Grounded Theory

Relevance and Attraction to my Research:

- Explores processes: experiences, meanings', and contextual factors
- An inductive approach conducive to new theory formation
- Recognises the use of multiple data collection methods
- Prior experience could be considered data
- Offers data collection flexibility via constant comparison and theoretical sampling
- The development of new theory has research appeal

Limitations and Detractions:

- Flexibility could be overshadowed by systematic coding requirements
- The acceptability of self in the research study is unclear
- The development of new theory seems daunting

Feminist Research

Relevance and Attraction to my Research:

- Recognises a relational interface between the researcher and the participants
- Provides a framework for the placement of self in the study, using techniques of self-disclosure, reciprocity, and self-reflection

Limitations and Detractions:

- The intent of my research was not one of a feminist stance
- Varying perspectives concerning what constitutes feminist research

Figure 1. Elements of the pluralistic approach in my doctoral research.

I acknowledge, with some embarrassment, that initially I skipped Creswell's section on feminist research, assuming that it lacked relevance because I did not seek a feminist stance. In fact, it was only during the course of investigating broader solutions concerning researcher objectivity that I was inadvertently directed to such readings. In the process, I learnt a valuable lesson concerning how pre-conceived notions can infiltrate the process, cloud judgements, and limit options before I had even commenced my research.

Furthermore, Creswell's description of grounded theory, which emphasised its rigorous and intricate coding formula (evolved by Strauss), made it appear overly systematic, rigid, and humanly insensitive. Coupled with its focus on new theory formulation, the prospect of grounded theory appeared positively daunting. Thus initially I dismissed it as an option. After eliminating Creswell's remaining three methodological options, I reluctantly revisited grounded theory and perused a variety of studies on the subject. As my familiarity increased, so did my confidence and I began conceiving it in a new light-- a more open, flexible, and achievable approach than first envisaged. In fact, after reading the inspirational work of Charmaz (1990) who viewed grounded theory as enabling the researcher to embark on a voyage of discovery, following a trail of "interests, leads and hunches" (p. 1162), I was virtually at risk of becoming a fan.

There were times, when I questioned whether there were other methodological options, such as action research, which I could have considered more openly and in greater depth. Yet as a novice, already confronted, struggling, and undoubtedly fixated on Creswell's five options, my tunnel-vision either failed to consider or prematurely dismissed such alternatives on the basis that they did not fit the intent of my research. Whilst such discrepancies haunt my sense of perfectionism, equally my pragmatic self is conscious that research is never simple, perfect, or finite. Furthermore, I am at peace with the methodological decision I have made. My phenomenological, grounded theory, feminist research concoction melds my aspiration to embrace the voices and meanings of bodybuilders themselves, explore new theoretical dimensions concerning their identity, and capitalise on my own sense of place within this subculture.

For those who walk in similar shoes, I can only describe it as a decision reached having;

- considered not only my research topic but equally my capabilities, potential, and desire to see the world differently,
- embraced a range of methodological possibilities with creativity, honesty, and self-reflection,
- read widely, including the methodological approaches used in vastly different fields,
- challenged the notions of others, but most importantly those of my own, and
- connected (rationally and emotionally) with an approach that not only frames my study, but fuels my on-going passion for discovery.

8. My Conclusion and Beginning

This is a journey of research I have only just begun. At this stage, I have merely decided upon an approach, and have begun to experience the realities, enormities, and consequences of its implementation with the first stage of data collection. I envisage, with both enthusiasm and trepidation, that more lessons are inevitable. However, I believe that Creswell (1998) would be heartened to find that instead of a blank stare, my eyes are now wide-open and my mind conscious of the rationale underpinning my research approach. Admittedly, my knee-jerk reaction to the process was to initially conceive it as an unwelcome bureaucratic interruption to the pragmatic endeavours of getting on with real life discovery. However, I have come to comprehend the need for establishing a defensible research approach in order to produce a study which would be valued in the scholarly-community. Nevertheless, despite Creswell's insightful read, the selection process was far from simplistic or rational; it was messy. I made mistakes and it also proved to be personal.

When my research ambitions failed to fit with the purity of methodological options, I found myself searching for alternatives. It made me apprehensive. It required that I progress beyond my comfort zone to consider more creative alternatives. It necessitated a more critical analysis of readings and the consideration of a possible reformulation of my research purpose. I had to confront myself as both researcher and human, in terms of my values, fears, insecurities, and passions. Thus what essentially began as a simple read of Creswell's book as a pragmatic means to resolve the issue of approach, it evolved into a journey in which I realised that the process of pursing research is inextricably linked to the process of discovering oneself.

Acknowledgement

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