Issues of Qualitative Research Methods and Presentation

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Current trends in the publication of sport psychology research suggest that there is a limiting philosophical perspective influencing the evaluation of qualitative research. We wish to expand that perspective and continue a dialogue about qualitative methods in sport psychology. Our contention is that there is not a single acceptable method for conducting qualitative analyses; different epistemological perspectives will provide different qualitative methods. For example, hermeneutics, ethnographies, and grounded theory approaches all require different methods, analyses, and reporting. This is evident in the different perspectives taken among our own writings. As many other sport psychology researchers recently espoused, we need to be open to and accepting of new and diverse methodologies to help us advance our understanding of psychological phenomena in sport (Dewar & Horn, 1992; Martens, 1987; Strean & Roberts, 1992). Platt (1964) warned many years ago that we need to be wary of the “frozen method” approach to data analysis, for this will only “shackle” researchers and restrict advances in knowledge. The primary concerns on which we will focus include (a) description of data-analysis procedures, (b) method of conducting qualitative analysis, (c) a priori knowledge versus a priori hypotheses (or emergent vs. a priori data categories), and (d) presentation of the data.

Description of Data Analysis

It seems that an unfortunate precedent has been set in the sport psychology literature. Individuals who conduct large qualitative studies describe their data analysis procedures in a separate manuscript from their presentation and discussion of the data. That is not to say that these types of manuscripts do not offer
important and helpful information. Certainly, Scanlan, Ravizza, and Stein (1989) paved the way for greater acceptability of qualitative studies in sport psychology with their thorough description of the qualitative methodology they employed. However, this has been translated into an expectation that qualitative researchers should provide detail similar to that of Scanlan and her colleagues. For example, Côté, Salmela, and Russell (1995) also wrote an article that described their data-analysis procedures. Although Scanlan, Côté, and their colleagues most likely were attempting to make a substantive contribution to the literature (which was accomplished), the inadvertent outcome of their work was the establishment of a different set of criteria for qualitative versus quantitative researchers. Rarely are researchers who conduct experimental or quasi-experimental quantitative studies required to provide such a depth of discussion explaining why and how they employed their data analysis techniques. Additionally, as one looks to qualitative research in other disciplines, researchers do not justify their methodology, as seems to occur in sport psychology.

Certainly, compared to quantitative methods, there are additional considerations within qualitative methodologies that should be addressed when describing data-analysis procedures (e.g., development of interview guide, trustworthiness of data, and type of coding implemented). However, there are ample explanations and examples of these procedures by researchers in sport sciences and other disciplines. It should be acceptable to briefly describe data analysis procedures and cite other authors who fully explained these procedures. For example, it should be considered appropriate to note, “During open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) data were tagged consistent with the procedures described by Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993).” This type of statement notes the type of coding employed, and refers readers to where they can find greater explanation of the procedures. The expectation that the open coding and tagging procedures be described in depth leads to redundancy in our literature, and takes valuable space away from rich description of the study results. As journal publishers, editors, and reviewers are becoming more and more concerned about the length of manuscripts and additional costs of protracted manuscripts, such brevity should be acceptable and even required.

Method of Conducting Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research is actually a collection of methods with differing epistemologies and methodologies. As Eisner and Peshkin (1990a) stated, “in quantitative research, the good may be found in fidelity to design, whereas in qualitative research, relatively lacking in canons and convention, the good is more elusive because its procedures are more idiosyncratic” (pp. 1-2). Thus, the “rules” of qualitative data analysis are less stringent that those of quantitative analyses; there is much room for creativity and flexibility (Locke, 1989). In the best of all scientific worlds, this creativity and flexibility would be acceptable within sport psychology.

Scanlan et al. (1989) provided an unprecedented example of one qualitative technique, yet it must not become the only technique in qualitative sport psychology. Their methodology appears to be a compromise between qualitative and quantitative perspectives and opened the door for subsequent researchers (e.g., Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992; Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Jackson, 1992). Still, other qualitative methods also need recognition and acceptance. Thus, it is not