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The event-focused interview: what is it, why is it useful, and how is it used?

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ABSTRACT

There has been longstanding interest in understanding how people think, feel, and behave in sport and exercise activities. Although naturalistic recordings, momentary assessments, and post-event questionnaires have been employed to capture information on people's experiences, these methods can have some shortcomings for researchers interested in advancing knowledge of certain social-psychological phenomena, especially in natural settings. The purpose of this paper is to describe the event-focused interview method and outline its utility for researchers who are interested in capturing rich, in-depth information on episodic phenomena, such as particular moments, events, psychological states, and experiences. First, we describe the event-focused interview method and the background to its development. Second, we highlight the limitations of naturalistic recordings, existing momentary assessment methods, and post-event questionnaires for certain types of research, before explaining why event-focused interviews can add to the suite of methods researchers use to obtain information on episodic phenomena in specific sport and exercise activities. Third, we provide guidance on how the event-focused interview method can be implemented, using illustrative examples from several recent event-focused interview studies. Fourth, to guide researchers in future, we identify some methodological dilemmas and considerations for applying this method. We conclude by outlining several methodological avenues that could be employed in future event-focused interview studies. Overall, we propose that the event-focused interview method may be a promising addition to the collection of methods available to researchers interested in generating new theoretical and practical knowledge about episodic phenomena in sport and exercise.

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Generating insights into how people think, feel, and act in sport and exercise activities is often a primary objective for research that seeks to advance understanding of specific social-psychological phenomena. To contribute to the qualitative methodological literature in sport and exercise psychology, the purpose of this paper is to present the event-focused interview as a qualitative method that can be useful for researchers who seek to obtain rich, in-depth, chronological information on specific moments, events, psychological states, and experiences. First, we define and describe the event-focused interview method. Second, we outline why event-focused interviews may be a useful

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addition to the range of methods available to researchers interested in acquiring rich and detailed information on people's experiences in sport and exercise activities. Third, we provide guidance on how the event-focused interview method can be implemented, using illustrative examples from published studies conducted by the research team. Fourth, to aid researchers in future, we outline some methodological considerations for applying this method. We finish by outlining several methodological avenues that might enhance and/or complement event-focused interviews, which could subsequently yield further insights into specific moments, events, psychological states, and experiences in sport and exercise.

What is an event-focused interview?

An event-focused interview is a method that can capture rich, in-depth information about specific moments, events, psychological states, and experiences of limited duration (e.g. within a single sport or exercise activity), which are collectively referred to hereafter as 'episodic phenomena'. Specifically, the event-focused interview method involves interviewing participants in relation to an episode of a target phenomenon (i.e. the 'event') soon after it has occurred. Event-focused interviews contrast with what we term the 'career-based' interview method, which involves participants reflecting on experiences that could have occurred at any point in time (e.g. weeks, months, or years previously; Swann et al. 2016). First used to explore psychological states underlying exceptional performance in professional golfers (Swann et al. 2016), the event-focused interview method has since been used in a series of studies on experiences related to exceptional performance in sport and rewarding experiences in exercise, specifically flow, clutch performance, and clutch states¹ (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2017, 2020; Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021; Swann et al. 2017a, 2017b, 2019).

Event-focused interviews have three defining features. First, participants are sampled based on specific criteria designed to identify the occurrence of a specific phenomenon (i.e. the event). By interviewing participants soon after an event that matches predefined criteria for the target phenomenon, the sampling protocol for the event-focused interview method follows the principle of event-contingent recording (Reis and Gable 2000; Wheeler and Reis 1991), which requires participants to provide a report as soon as possible after the occurrence of an event that meets a pre-determined definition (Wheeler and Reis 1991). Second, event-focused interviews obtain qualitative data through interviews that take place soon after an event (and we return to the issue of timeframe in the final section of this paper). While event-contingent recording studies typically collect quantitative data through questionnaires (see Arigo et al. 2020; Liu, Xie, and Lou 2019 for reviews), event-focused interviews capture qualitative data through in-depth interviews soon after the occurrence of the target phenomenon. The final feature of the event-focused interview is that the interviews intend to generate rich and detailed chronological accounts of people's experience in their recent activity. Overall, an interview can be considered event-focused if: (i) participants are sampled based on pre-determined criteria for the occurrence of an event; (ii) it takes places soon after the activity; and (iii) it seeks to elicit rich, detailed, and chronological descriptions of that event.

Why are event-focused interviews useful?

In this section, we briefly describe several methods that have been used to study episodic phenomena in sport and exercise. We highlight some potential challenges associated with using these methods and explain why event-focused interviews could be a useful alternative for studying episodic phenomena in athletes and exercisers.

Naturalistic recordings

Naturalistic data are records of events that actually happened and would have occurred independent of researcher intervention (Potter and Shaw 2018). Recordings of participant talk during daily life are an important source of naturalistic data for researchers with an interest in conversation analysis (Potter and Hepburn 2005). Although conversation analysis has not been widely used to study participant talk during sport and exercise activities, the utility of this method has been demonstrated in research on communication and interaction in competitive sport (LeCouteur and Feo 2011). While such forms of naturalistic data can be valuable for generating novel, real-time insights into social interactions (see LeCouteur and Cosh 2016), this approach, if used in isolation, will be less suitable for gaining information about episodic phenomena that are not 'evident' in participant talk in sport and exercise activities, or those that are unlikely to be attended to without direction from a researcher. Therefore, researchers who seek to understand people's perception of their experience in sport and exercise activities will necessitate methods that allow introspection and ask people to report on their experiences.

Momentary assessment methods

A variety of self-report methods have been designed to capture moment-to-moment information about people's experiences (Trull and Ebner-Priemer 2014). Momentary assessments are methods that require a person to report on their immediate thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviours at a specific moment (Stone and Shiffman 2002). The Experience Sampling Method (ESM; Larson and Csikszentmihalyi 1983) and Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA; Stone and Shiffman 1994) are widely used momentary, self-report assessments to study people's experiences in their daily lives. Although originating in different research traditions (see Trull and Ebner-Priemer 2014), the ESM and EMA both: collect data in natural settings; assess people's thoughts, feelings, and or behaviours at specific intervals (e.g. time-based, signal-based); and acquire data at multiple time points. The descriptive experience sampling method (DES) is considered an extension of the ESM/EMA as it requires participants to write notes on what, if anything, was in their mind at a randomly signalled moment, before a discussion with the researcher within 24 hours about the sampled moments (Hurlbert, Kock, and Heavey 2002). Finally, another method used to capture momentary, self-report data is the think aloud (TA) method (Ericsson and Simon 1993), which requires participants to verbalise their thoughts out loud while they are performing, or immediately after completing, a task (Eccles and Arsal 2017).

Despite the potential utility of capturing momentary, self-report data, there are difficulties with using the ESM, EMA, DES, and TA in many sport and exercise activities. The very nature of collecting self-report data while participants take part in sport and exercise presents challenges, especially in natural settings. The impractical nature of disrupting athletes in a competition, for example, limits the practical viability of momentary assessments *during* sport activities (Jackson and Kimiecik 2008). Similarly, TA is often not a practical option for researchers or participants as the method can increase task completion times (e.g. golf putt – Arsal, Eccles, and Ericsson 2016), thus making it difficult to apply in many situations, including those that can be of primary interest from an applied perspective, such as competitive events (Eccles and Arsal 2017). Furthermore, athletes have reported difficulties with verbalising their cognitions, particularly when exerting high levels of physical effort (Whitehead et al. 2018). Additionally, as momentary assessments involve the direction of unusual levels of attention towards one's internal state and/or behaviours, this may lead to reactivity, whereby the phenomenon under study might alter as a result of someone gaining new, or different, insights through participation in a study (Scollon, Kim-Prieto, and Scollon 2003). A final potential issue with momentary, self-report methods is that such methods are not well-suited to phenomena that occur less frequently or can be quite brief, thus increasing the potential for research wastage and missing relevant information.

Overall, momentary assessment methods can provide important information on people's experiences as they occur and are, therefore, well-suited to many research questions. The practical

difficulties and limitations of collecting data during sport and exercise activities, however, means that such methods might not be viable for studies in many sport and exercise settings. Although a common assumption in the cognitivist paradigm is that capturing data in 'real-time' or 'close-in-time' can help to overcome what some researchers view as 'problems' with retrospective self-report methods (see Schwarz 2012), momentary assessments and traditional retrospective methods (e.g. questionnaires) are not analogous in their aims. Specifically, momentary assessments tap into people's ongoing experiences, whereas retrospective methods seek to understand people's reconstructions of those experiences (Reis 2012). Therefore, developing methods that do not disrupt participants (especially during competition) and that help participants to reconstruct their experiences, whilst also generating rich, in-depth data, could be valuable for researchers interested in studying episodic phenomena in sport and exercise.

Post-event questionnaires

Within sport and exercise psychology, post-event questionnaires are widely used to retrospectively capture information about episodic phenomena in specific activities. For example, the Flow State Scale-2 (FSS-2; Jackson and Eklund 2002) and Physical Activity Enjoyment Scale (PACES; Kendzierski and DeCarlo 1991) are multi-item measures designed to be completed soon after a physical activity to assess the level of flow and enjoyment in that activity, respectively. Although post-event questionnaires are a relatively convenient method for capturing data on episodic phenomena, there are several limitations associated with adopting this approach. First, using a single, retrospective measure can offer a very limited insight into a participant's experience during that activity. Most measures will only generate a single score for a scale, or series of subscales, across an activity, which will not shed light on important questions, such as why did the subjective experience of a participant produce that score in an activity? Second, retrospective, post-event questionnaires are usually designed to provide a single, aggregate rating of an individual's experience across the entirety of an activity. This approach is problematic, however, as the dynamic experiential changes that often occur during sport or exercise activities can be masked and go undetected, thus offering little insight into temporal trends or intraindividual variability in people's experiences. For example, exercisers and athletes have previously reported experiencing different psychological states that contain contrasting characteristics within the same performance (e.g. Swann et al. 2017b, 2019). Indeed, this limitation could also be levelled at studies that only undertake assessments before and after tasks (e.g. pre-to-post comparisons) on the basis that such an approach assumes that experiences between these measurement points occur in a linear, monotonic fashion.

Furthermore, experiential phenomena are difficult to quantify using psychometrics (Jackson and Kimiecik 2008). Indeed, it is difficult to deduce whether or not such quantitative tools can distinguish those who experience a specific phenomenon from those who do not. Likewise, it is also conceivable that an individual could experience the episodic phenomenon of interest during an activity, but as their experience might have contrasted drastically to that phenomenon for the remainder of the activity, the aggregate score may suggest that a specific episodic phenomenon (e.g. mental state) did not occur during that activity. Furthermore, if questionnaires are only administered after a single event, it implicitly assumes that the phenomenon of interest will occur during that event, which will be problematic for rare episodic phenomena. Taken together, these limitations with post-event questionnaires suggest that this method alone might not be the most suitable for research that seeks to generate rich, detailed descriptions of episodic phenomena that occur in sport and exercise activities.

The event-focused interview

Interviews can, when conducted by a skilled interviewer, acquire deeper explanations about psychological phenomena than questionnaire or survey methods (Brustad 2008). Indeed, a crucial

strength of qualitative interviewing is that people's stories of events can deepen due to the interactions that take place within an interview (Randall and Phoenix 2009). The event-focused interview is proposed as a qualitative method that can capture data on people's experiences soon after, and in relation to, specific events. Interviews can be a valuable source of new knowledge about people's experience, as this method – when done well – has the potential to acquire rich, detailed, temporal, and contextual information about complex phenomena (Smith and Sparkes 2016). While event-focused interviews, like other interviews, cannot provide a 'transparent window into the self and all that it has experienced' (Randall and Phoenix 2009, 127), the event-focused interview can be a valuable addition to the suite of methods used to study episodic phenomena in sport and exercise for many reasons, as this approach: (i) does not intrude on participants during activities, thus making it a more practical option for collecting data in many natural settings (e.g. competition); (ii) offers an opportunity to explore the experience of participants across an entire activity, rather than obtaining repeated or single snapshots of that experience; (iii) can increase the likelihood of collecting relevant data on the phenomenon of interest through the use of event-contingent recording, whereby participants are only interviewed after events that match specific, pre-determined criteria; (iv) presents an avenue to obtain temporal information on people's experiences by acquiring chronological information on the activity under investigation; and (v) can potentially generate novel, unanticipated insights that might be missed by imposing specific questions or instructions on participants (see Smith and Sparkes 2016). We now provide examples of the method 'in action' to showcase how it can be employed.

How should event-focused interviews be implemented?

Collectively, we have conducted over 100 event-focused interviews in multiple published studies (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2017, 2020; Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021; Swann et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Although the basic features of the event-focused interview method employed across our research have been consistent, some subtle differences are evident in how the method has been applied in our work. Therefore, to demonstrate the variety of ways in which the method can be utilised, our description of the method presented in this paper draws on the full range of studies we have conducted. In line with the three defining features of the event-focused interview method outlined previously, we explain how to use the event-focused interview method in terms of: (i) event-focused interview sampling; (ii) procedures; and (iii) conducting event-focused interviews. For more information, readers should also consult the published articles (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2017, 2020; Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021; Swann et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019).

Event-focused interview sampling

To maximise the likelihood that the phenomenon of interest in our studies occurred during activities, we drew on relevant literature and established clearly defined sampling criteria for our event-focused interviews, in line with the principle of event-contingent recording (Wheeler and Reis 1991; Reis and Gable 2000). The use of event-contingent recording is recommended when: an event is rare; there is high susceptibility to retrospective bias; and it is important for researchers to obtain information on a specific type of event (Reis and Gable 2000). While approaches will differ depending on the target phenomenon under study, the event-contingent sampling criteria used to recruit individuals for our event-focused interview studies on flow and clutch performance can be broadly classified into three categories, whereby participants were sampled after sport or exercise activities based on: (i) objective performance indicators (Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021; Swann et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019); (ii) subjective ratings of performance (Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021; Swann et al. 2017a, 2017b, 2019); and/or (iii) self-reports of subjective experiences during an activity (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2017, 2020; Swann et al. 2019). While some studies only adopted one of these criteria (e.g. self-report of subjective experience – Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2020;

objective performance indicators – Swann et al. 2016), our exploration of optimal experiences in 18 exercisers (Swann et al. 2019) employed all three categories, with 13 participants reporting flow and 13 reporting clutch states in their subsequent interviews (eight reported both). Overall, we suggest that researchers can consider using a single criterion or multiple criteria depending on what is most suited to their work.

Procedures

After determining that participants satisfy the event-focused interview criteria, the next step is to conduct the event-focused interview soon after the target phenomenon has occurred. A fundamental assumption of momentary assessment methods is that such approaches can help to overcome proposed limitations associated with retrospective recall (e.g. Schwarz 2012). When such methods are impractical or too burdensome, however, a more practically useful and feasible approach is needed. To aid recall, our event-focused interviews sought to minimise the amount of time that passed before data were captured. In our studies, data were collected less than four days after activities on average ($M = 3.80$ days), with some interviews conducted as little as one hour after an event (Swann et al. 2019). To minimise the recall timeframe for our event-focused interviews and circumvent logistical issues (e.g. participants living in another country), we used a combination of face-to-face, online, and phone interviews. While it was feasible for us to collect interview data through a range of approaches in our studies, researchers should consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of each interview approach in the context of their work, as well as recommendations for conducting face-to-face, online, and/or phone interviews (see Hanna 2012; Holt 2010; Smith and Sparkes 2016).

Conducting event-focused interviews

The primary purpose of event-focused interviews is to acquire detailed accounts of the recent experiences of participants. In our studies, a semi-structured approach was adopted, which consisted of structured questions that initiated discussion on specific areas of interest in the research, as well as unstructured, probing questions used to elicit more insights into important areas that arose over the course of the interviews (see Sparkes and Smith 2014). While the questions were not uniform across our studies, a number of consistent threads were evident in how the interviews were structured.

Before continuing, it is vital for us to point out that conducting an event-focused interview, like any other interview (see Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), is not a simple task and this method is *much more* than a set of techniques – it is a skilled craft. Thus, although there is the *possibility* that event-focused interviews *can* generate rich, in-depth data, the utility of this method and quality of data that can be attained relies heavily on the researcher's interview skills. In our experiences, developing this craft has taken – and continues to take – a great deal of time, effort, critical reflection, and refinement. With the aim of helping researchers who seek to conduct event-focused interviews in future, we draw on our reflections of implementing the method and outline key features of our event-focused interviews. To illustrate these features, we draw on data from our studies on flow and clutch performance/states to offer tangible examples of the method in action.

Chronological description of the activity

Our event-focused interviews explored the experiences of participants in a single sport or exercise activity. After acquiring an initial description of the activity, we then asked participants to chronologically describe *what* happened across the duration of the activity. The purpose of adopting this approach was to aid each participant's recall of the activity by asking them to reflect back on and articulate how it unfolded, whilst also generating initial insights into potential periods of the performance when flow and/or clutch performance/states might have occurred. The participant responses provided temporally-referenced insights into what happened during the activity, with all

participants identifying points or phases that occurred. For example, a basketball player reported that 'I had a lot of confidence going into the game ... We went into the warm-up and that confidence stayed with me ... I caught the first pass in the game and I shot it from a really tight space' (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2020, 11). Similarly, a golfer described how:

I stepped up ... [to] my first tee shot of the day, and striped it down the middle. That was it; that was my confidence back with driving because I knew if I could do it once I could repeat it again and again. And then ... I made a good up and down ... on my third hole ... so I felt my chipping and short game was good. Then ... I holed the putt on my fifth or sixth hole for birdie. (Swann et al. 2016, 106)

Overall, the chronological descriptions were used as a frame of reference to then explore the experience of participants during the activity.

Experience

A key goal of the event-focused interview method is to capture rich, detailed descriptions of how people think, feel, and act during specific, recent activities. Our event-focused interview studies sought to isolate periods of the activities when flow and/or clutch performance/states were likely to have occurred. While the chronological description of the activity might have provided insights into likely periods for such phenomena, we sought to orientate participants towards such experiences by asking them to identify a period, or periods, in the activity that matched a specific description. In some instances, participants were provided with information on the psychological states of interest and asked to identify if these occurred (Swann et al. 2017b). In others, the question did not impose an experience on the participant and, instead, instructed them to describe their subjective experience across the activity and identify periods when the performance was 'going particularly well' (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2020, 7). Furthermore, Swann et al. (2016) also used performance and observation data captured while watching their participants to develop individualised probes, such as: 'Can you describe how you were thinking and feeling at five under par through seven holes?' (104). Overall, the descriptive accounts provided fine-grained detail on the experiences of participants, with clear references made to cognitive, affective, behavioural, and sensory aspects of these experiences in our interviews:

I had a backwards glance and I couldn't see anyone [behind me, and] ... I'd already had sensations that I was swimming well ... Just how I felt, how was I swimming ... The wetsuit felt great. It felt like my stroke was turning over really quickly ... The first hour or so, it all felt comfortable, controlled, effortless, but I was cracking on really well ... I pretty much pitched it about as perfectly as I could. (Swann et al. 2017b, 386)

The first bit [i.e., flow] was about getting myself into rhythm ... your body moves in perfection, without thinking ... I'm not aware of my breathing ... I was very much within myself and not aware of things that were around me ... it was blissful ... While the last part [i.e., clutch] was all about expending everything that I have until the end ... the time told me that I was close to my personal best ... I really tuned into my breathing. I was aware of who was ahead of me and who was near me ... I gave it everything ... you are pushing everything in your body. (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2017, 118)

The above extracts demonstrate how the event-focused interview can, when well-executed, be a valuable source of information about people's experiences at specific periods during recent activities, whilst also opening up opportunities to generate insights into subtle experiential changes over time.

Context

After identifying the period(s) during which the phenomena of interest occurred, we asked participants to describe the contexts underlying those experiences. Examining how people interact with contextual settings is a valuable way to generate greater understanding of people's experiences, with the potential to shed light, for example, on the *when* (e.g. time), *where* (e.g. space, environment), and *who* (e.g. the body or other social actors) of those experiences (Phoenix and Howe 2010). Event-focused interviews offer an opportunity to explore such contextual details across an activity. For

instance, a golfer reported the stage in the round *when* his performance increased: 'I only had three holes left of the tournament to play ... the three [most] important holes ... This was it, this was my time now. This is where I can win' (Swann et al. 2016, 107). Others also referred to the physical location *where* their experience occurred: 'It wasn't until I came into the home straight where I was aware that I had to really, really battle ... I knew that at that point that I was in contention' (Swann et al. 2017b, 393). Finally, participants also detailed *who* impacted their experiences, with one soccer player explaining how their coach increased feelings of pressure: 'I just think it was the coach, the expectation he put on us ... It was no pressure I'd put on myself. It was all from the coach' (Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021, 6). As such, these examples showcase how the event-focused interview method can shed light on the contextual settings that participants perceive interact with their experience at specific points across recent activities.

Processes

Once the participants identified the contexts in which flow and/or clutch states occurred, they were asked to describe *how* they perceived these experiences happened. Our interview questions sought to elucidate the sequential process (e.g. events or states) involved in moving into and transitioning out of each state. The following quotes offer detailed, sequential information on connections between different events and/or states in the build-up to flow and clutch states, respectively:

Two or three things had went great and I was feeling great and I had this surge of energy, a boost of confidence, that I then ... tried to do things that were a little bit trickier and push it up a level ... You have a lot more space to explore different things. You want to try new things with different players on the team. (Swann et al. 2017b, 386)

It's the end of the round, end of the tournament, I'm leading by two ... so I knew that I had to concentrate and be in the zone ... to finish it off ... That just made me step up the concentration and get me ... more in the zone. (Swann et al. 2016, 108)

Furthermore, participants also articulated how such states ended and what they felt changed their experience: 'I made a mistake ... That knocked me out of it [clutch state]. I suddenly snapped out of being fully concentrated ... I tried to focus on the match, but I had the mistake or two in my head' (Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2020, 21). Together, these examples demonstrate that when conducted by a skilled interviewer, event-focused interviews can be useful for capturing rich, temporally-ordered reconstructions of people's experiences over time in an activity.

Considerations when applying the event-focused interview method

In reflecting on our collective experiences of designing and conducting event-focused interviews, we have identified some common dilemmas that could be faced by researchers seeking to employ this method. To raise awareness of these dilemmas and help researchers who seek to use this method, we share our insights in the following sections.

When should event-focused interviews be used and when should they not?

Ultimately one of the first decisions concerning the use of event-focused interviews is whether or not the method is appropriate for addressing a study's research question. Event-focused interviews are designed to capture rich, in-depth, chronological information about people's experiences. The method is well-suited to investigating episodic phenomena that occur in specific, recent activities, especially where the use of momentary assessment methods is not practical (e.g. natural setting or competition) and/or when insights captured through naturalistic recordings or post-event questionnaires are likely to offer a limited insight into the phenomenon of interest. As such, event-focused interviews are well-suited to exploring episodic phenomena that are: context-dependent

(e.g. what is someone's experience like during a race, or in the final stages of that race?); likely to oscillate over time (e.g. how does someone's experience change during the course of an activity?); difficult to replicate in controlled settings (e.g. competition final); and/or likely to benefit from the use of event-contingent recording, due to their infrequency or irregularity.

As a qualitative method that focuses on investigating episodic phenomena that occur in specific, recent activities, event-focused interviews are not particularly well-suited to: exploring people's general perceptions, beliefs, and/or global understanding of a phenomenon (e.g. the meaning of sport in one's life); research that seeks to build an understanding of a phenomenon in general over long time periods (e.g. experiences of growth during one's professional career); and/or investigating phenomena (e.g. psychological processes) that are unlikely to be limited to a single activity. While such topics might still be well-suited to interviews, as well as other qualitative methods, adopting an event-focused approach would not be most appropriate in these situations. Furthermore, an event-focused interview, like any interview, is not the only way to ascertain information about someone's experience (Smith and Sparkes 2016). Therefore, researchers should ensure that the event-focused interview is not simply chosen by default without considering other sources of data.

What should be considered when developing event-focused interview sampling criteria?

The purpose of event-focused interview sampling criteria is to increase the likelihood of accessing data on the target phenomenon. Interviewing is a time-intensive process for researchers and participants; hence the use of event-focused interview sampling seeks to circumvent potential concerns with research waste as a result of the collection of irrelevant data. When developing event-focused interview sampling criteria to determine the occurrence of our target phenomena, it was important for us to consider the following questions: (i) what criteria will be used?; (ii) how will these be evaluated?; (iii) who should judge if the criteria are met?; (iv) where and when will the target phenomenon take place?; and (v) why are the criteria appropriate? For many researchers, providing answers to these questions might be relatively straightforward, however, there are several challenges that could arise and should be considered in the decision-making process, as we learned in our experiences.

First, definitional, conceptual, and measurement debates are widespread and, in many cases, rapidly evolving across the sport and exercise psychology literature. In turn, this can make it more difficult to choose and justify appropriate criteria, thus highlighting the importance of investing considerable thought into the final criteria selected. Second, if the natural incidence rate of the target phenomenon is rare, researchers might need to consider collecting information on lab-based experiences. Such an adjustment, however, might not be feasible if there is uncertainty on how to induce the target phenomenon or if the research is focused on natural settings. Third, in deciding who judges that the inclusion criteria are satisfied, it will be necessary to decide to what extent the researcher(s), other informants (e.g. coaches), and/or participants contribute to this decision. While some researchers might be able to access adequate information to judge alone, some valuable information might be missed in many areas if other-informant or participants' subjective reports are not included.

In planning our event-focused interviews studies, some of these challenges presented us with dilemmas. For example, when designing studies to explore flow and clutch performance/states (e.g. Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2020; Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021, 2021; Swann et al. 2017b, 2019), we needed to decide: would objective performance and subjective ratings of performance and/or experience be used to sample participants? Similarly, across all of our studies we were faced with the dilemma: should objective ratings of performance be privileged over participants' subjective ratings of performance or experience (or vice versa), or should they be given equal standing? In our event-focused interview studies, we have used objective markers of performance as well as subjective ratings of experience and/or performance, with these criteria successfully identifying the desired phenomena. Ultimately the challenges researchers face when

designing event-focused interview studies will differ depending on the topic under study and no universal approach can be prescribed for event-focused interview sampling criteria. Instead, we recommend that researchers should: (i) be cognisant of the considerations and issues surrounding event-focused interview sampling presented here; (ii) consider the perspectives within their own field of research; and (iii) thoughtfully review, evaluate, and determine the best criteria on a study-by-study basis.

How soon should event-focused interviews be conducted after the event occurs?

Attempting to determine an 'optimum' or 'maximum' timeframe for collecting event-focused interview data is a difficult task. The idea that researchers should seek to reduce the recall period when assessing people's experiences in specific events, or over particular time periods, is not new in psychology research. For instance, in the case of the FSS-2 questionnaire, Jackson and Eklund (2012) stated that: 'It is recommended responses to the FSS-2 be collected with 1 h [sic] of a completed activity ... collecting responses close to the conclusion of an activity is more likely to yield a more accurate assessment of the state flow experience' (356). Likewise, in explaining the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), a retrospective diary method designed to collect information that would be obtained through momentary assessments, Kahneman et al. (2004) stated that: 'Evoking the context of the previous day is intended to elicit specific and recent memories, thereby reducing errors and biases of recall' (1777). As such, these perspectives are consistent with the view that 'the more recent the event, the better it is recalled' (Reis, Gable, and Maniaci 2014, 381).

From a contrasting perspective, narrative researchers have highlighted the need to consider the complex relationship between memory, time, and 'truth' in qualitative interviewing (Randall and Phoenix 2009). In critiquing the problem of 'truth', Randall and Phoenix (2009) argued that 'the person being interviewed can never tell us "the whole truth" about their life, nor even about some experience or episode therein, for memory is by definition a factionalising faculty' (130). Randall and Phoenix (2009) also highlighted that the period of time since an event will influence people's memories of that event, adding that 'time itself ... plays a role in recollection. Our memories of the past are recalled amidst present agendas and present concerns, and always in the light of what we anticipate in the future' (127). Thus, when viewed from this lens, the passing of time would not necessarily change the 'truthfulness' of a participant's account, but may produce different insights into a participant's story about their experience.

In sum, and commensurate with a qualitative perspective, views on timeframe for event-focused interviews may differ depending on a researcher's philosophical positioning and the purpose of a specific piece of research. For instance, if researchers adopt a relativist perspective and aim to understand people's stories about an episodic phenomenon and how these unfold over time, reducing the timeframe before an event-focused interview will not be a priority. While some researchers might seek to reduce the timeframe between the occurrence of an episodic phenomenon and a subsequent event-focused interview, it is important to note that a participant's recall ability may also rely on them having enough time to process their experience and 'transform the event-as-experienced into the event-as-told' (Sandelowski 1999, 82). Thus, researchers should also consider the appropriateness of interviewing participants shortly after the occurrence of the target phenomenon for ethical as well as epistemological reasons.

Combining event-focused interviews with other methods

The current paper presented procedures and guidance for event-focused interviews based on the authors' experience of using this method in research cohering around themes related to optimal experience and performance in sport and exercise. We do, however, advise against any tight

prescription of the event-focused interview method and strongly encourage methodological creativity in how event-focused interviews are utilised by qualitative researchers within and beyond this field. As such, we propose a number of avenues that could complement and enhance event-focused interviews in future.

To aid chronological recall of an activity, researchers could supplement event-focused interviews with visual methods. For example, video footage (e.g. Hogue Mackenzie, Hodge, and Boyes 2011) or photographs (e.g. Strachan and Davies 2015) could be used as elicitation tools to help participants recall the events of interest. While participants have provided a verbal account of the timeline of their sport or exercise activities in our studies, another visual method that could be particularly valuable for improving sequential recall of an event is time-lining (Smith and Sparkes 2016). In addition to visual methods, researchers could collect further data prior to event-focused interviews through diary entries (e.g. Didymus and Fletcher 2012) or post-event reflections (Chow and Luzzi 2019). Within some activities, it might also be feasible to obtain naturalistic data (e.g. recordings of social interactions – LeCouteur and Feo 2011) or collect data through verbal reports of psychological processes during activities using TA (e.g. Whitehead and Jackman 2021), with the event-focused interview offering an opportunity to explore this information in more detail. Additionally, longitudinal event-focused interview studies (e.g. Jackman, Crust, and Swann 2017) could be beneficial, especially for researchers that seek to obtain multiple accounts of target phenomena that occur over prolonged time-periods (e.g. multi-day activity). Finally, researchers could also obtain performance and/or observational data prior to conducting event-focused interviews (Schweickle, Vella, and Swann 2021; Swann et al. 2016), which could be useful for recruiting and sampling participants, and enhancing the researchers understanding of the activity, thus enabling the development of specific interview questions.

Conclusions

When performed well, event-focused interviews can gather in-depth, temporal, and context-specific insights into people's recent experiences during everyday activities. This form of data collection is proposed as a promising addition to the collection of methods used to study social-psychological phenomena in the field of sport and exercise psychology. In sum, the benefit of the event-focused interview method lies in its capacity to build rich, detailed, contextual, and temporal understanding about people's experience in specific activities, whilst overcoming the practical challenges and/or limitations of using naturalistic recordings, momentary assessments, and post-event questionnaires. This paper has provided general guidance on how the method can be implemented in research, drawing on a range of studies conducted by the research team. Although event-focused interviews are not easy to conduct and are not a panacea for all research questions, the method may be a valuable approach to acquire rich, detailed, and chronological data, which could, in turn, have the potential to advance theoretical and practical knowledge of many episodic phenomena in sport and exercise.

Note

1. Clutch states and clutch performance represent distinct phenomena. Whilst clutch states are purported to underlie clutch performance, questions remain over whether such states are inherent to the occurrence and experience of clutch performance (Schweickle et al., 2020).

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