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Bringing it back to show and tell: combining visual and textual data to explore a psychological construct

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use two studies to reflect on how we explored the topic of athlete well-being and the challenges presented when attempting to identify the shared meanings and theoretical underpinnings of this context-specific psychological concept. We discuss how semi-structured interviews left us feeling stifled during data analysis. This spurred us to explore visual methods, specifically photo-elicitation, in our second study to help us address a language gap and further understand the shared meanings and theoretical underpinnings of a psychological concept. Interviews in conjunction with photographs helped us collect more nuanced data, enabling a more interpretive analysis of athlete well-being. Visuals can be a means to bridge a language gap when it can be difficult to articulate one's experience. Lastly, we present participants' reflections on their experiences of selecting photographs and how they perceived this to aid in their understanding and articulation of athlete well-being. We argue that collecting data about a psychological construct is more ambiguous and abstruse for participants compared to asking them about a personal event, experience, or moment. We suggest that time to reflect on the psychological construct, through the selection process of photo-elicitation, is vital in collecting data with more depth and detail which leads to the ability to complete a more interpretive analysis. Finally, we bring this back to discuss the full potential of qualitative methods; operating from aligned epistemological and ontological underpinnings to subjectively explore a psychological construct where participants can ascribe their own cultural and contextual meanings.

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Interviews; photo elicitation; well-being; reflexive thematic analysis; visual methods

1. Introduction

Well-being has become a buzzword – a term used in daily conversations, prevalent in pop culture, and often used interchangeably or alongside other related yet distinct concepts including wellness and mental health (Trainor and Bundon 2023). It has been established that well-being is not merely the absence of mental health but is a distinct concept with theoretical roots in hedonism and eudaimonism (Lomas and VanderWeele 2023). Within the field of sport psychology, research on well-being has often lacked theoretical foundation (i.e. hedonism or eudaimonism) and is instead used as a term to encompass the absence of mental health indicators (i.e. depression) and/or the presence of positive affect (i.e. vitality) (Trainor and Bundon 2023). The result has been a reproduction of well-being research that speaks to athletes' experiences of well-being but has limited potential to advance understandings of athlete well-being as a theoretical construct. Just as a fish does not

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see the water, it can be challenging to research a concept or construct that is both everywhere and yet rarely reflected upon. Additionally, despite frequent acknowledgements by researchers that culture and context are critically important in shaping one's well-being (Lomas and VanderWeele 2023), few studies provide robust designs that would allow for researchers to capture or engage with the environment in which well-being is produced and experienced.

In this manuscript, we return to two studies where we explored the topic of athlete well-being and challenges encountered in attempting to identify the shared meanings and theoretical underpinnings of the concept. We discuss how semi-structured interviews, the *bread and butter* of much qualitative sport and exercise research (Jachyra, Atkinson, and Gibson 2014), left us feeling like there was something beyond our grasp and how we turned to visual methods (specifically photo-elicitation) in our second study to further understand the shared meanings and theoretical underpinning of the contextual concept. The purpose of this manuscript is to advance discussions of how researchers working from qualitative paradigms explore psychological constructs such as well-being and the challenges encountered when interviewing participants about concepts that are both universal and rarely defined. Throughout, we provide examples of interview guides, excerpts of transcripts, samples of photographs, and reflections from participants. We conclude with a discussion of how visual methods can be used to employ philosophically aligned qualitative methods when examining a context-specific psychological concept.

1.1. The dominance of interviewing in qualitative research

There has been an exponential rise in the use of qualitative methods in sport psychology over the last 30 years (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2017; Culver, Gilbert, and Sparkes 2012; McGannon et al. 2021). With this rise comes the formation of specific norms, reinforcement of certain behaviours and beliefs, and conformity to particular standards within the qualitative research community. When designing a qualitative research project, researchers in sport and exercise sciences often opt for conducting interviews to collect data without significant reflection on the type of data they will collect. McGannon et al. (2021) identified in their review of published qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology journals from 2010 to 2017, that 85% of the studies used interviews as the primary method of data generation (73.8% semi-structured interviews,11% structured interviews). However, other scholars have argued that interviews should not be viewed as the '*lingua franca*' (Jachyra, Atkinson, and Gibson 2014), default choice (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2017; Braun and Clarke 2023; Kim, Sefcik, and Bradway 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2018), or easy option (Smith and Sparkes 2016) when engaging in qualitative research design and that the choice to use interviews is often taken-for-granted with little to no justification for their use and/or how they align with the objectives of the study (Jachyra, Atkinson, and Gibson 2014; Smith & McGannon, 2018). We are not advocating for elimination or reduction in the use of interviews, but rather a thoughtful engagement of the *why, what*, and *how* of methodological decisions. Additionally, we would encourage greater reflection and transparency about the *type* of interview selected (i.e. semi-structured, go-along interview, life history interview, narrative interview) and the specific circumstances and interactions that constitute the interview process. As qualitative researchers, we need to question what is achievable with the use of a qualitative interview and query whether this is the optimal tool to aid us in our research pursuit.

An interview provides the opportunity to have a purposeful conversation and to generate 'new knowledge about social and personal aspects of life' (Smith and Sparkes 2016, 107). Furthermore, interviews are flexible, allowing for further probing areas of interest while also letting the interviewee direct the conversation down a meaningful path (Smith and Sparkes 2016). The pivotal benefit of using interviews is to help understand participants' *meaning* and *experience* as you can collect rich and detailed information while attending to perspective and interpretation (Smith and Sparkes 2016). Interviews also provide the opportunity to examine the social and cultural context as the participants' social world unequivocally shapes and mediates their meaning and experience. While

interviews can be used to answer a number of different types of research questions, they are not the only means to understanding meaning and experience.

Despite current trends, interviews are not always the ideal method of data collection, or rather; interviews *in isolation* may not be the best way to answer a research question. There is an over-reliance on interviews in qualitative research (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2017; Culver, Gilbert, and Sparkes 2012; Kim, Sefcik, and Bradway 2017; McGannon et al. 2021) which risks missing opportunities to draw on other methods that could contribute in different ways to understanding participants' experiences. There are several limitations of interviewing which all relate to the limitation of language (i.e. difficult to discuss subjects, limited verbal communication skills, lack of emotional expression; Sandelowski 2002). Despite these limitations, interviews remain the most used method of qualitative data collection.

Visual methods have been suggested as an alternative to interviews and specifically as a means to overcome some of the limitations when working across linguistic barriers (i.e. situations where researcher and participant have different linguistic backgrounds Barrick 2023; or when conducting research on 'hard to articulate' topics). In 2021, McGannon et al. reported that only 3.7% of qualitative studies across six journals used visual methods. However, in the last 5 years there has been growth in utilising visual methods including photo-elicitation, auto-photography, digital story-telling, artefact prompted conversation, reflexive photography, and vignettes as evident through recent publications (e.g. Bean, Lesser, and Ritondo 2023; Giffin et al. 2020; Hill and Flemons 2024; Nemani et al. 2023; Reis et al. 2021; Ryou and Lee 2023; Trainor et al. 2025; Warhurst and Black 2021). These methods allow for *showing* and not just *telling*, a different way of articulating, expressing, and understanding phenomena (Phoenix 2010). While it is true that a large portion of qualitative research (rooted in paradigms such as interpretivism and constructivism) is focused on participants' experience and meaning, sometimes our inquiries also move beyond these foci or require alternative means to access participants' realities. Thus, it is worth considering how and when we might combine interviews and other forms of data collection. While trends in current literature are showing increased engagement with visual methods combined with interviews, none of these studies have explicitly addressed how this can facilitate the exploration of a psychological concept.

1.2. The rise of visual methods and photo-elicitation

At its most basic definition, visual methods encompass any method that uses visual evidence. Visual data can include photographs, drawings, maps, websites, and posters (Phoenix 2010). Photographs, in particular, have been described as having the potential to further possibilities of knowing (McGannon et al. 2021) and generate knowledge (Culver, Gilbert, and Sparkes 2012) through exploring the nuances in photographs (Bean, Lesser, and Ritondo 2023) and different details that are not possible through words alone (Giffin et al. 2020). In 2003, Power suggested that our culture is 'a visual culture in which the image has become more powerful than the word as a form of communication' (9). More than 20 years later, Power's (2003) statement is even more salient as rapid developments in technology have made taking, making, and distribution visual content easier than ever before (Goodyear and Bundon 2021). Thus, the use of visual data in qualitative research is not new, but we are in a moment where the rise in engagement with visual methodologies described by Phoenix in 2010 is converging with increasing quantity and variety in the type of visual content available for use in qualitative research (i.e. digital, social media, AI; Dean and Bundon 2024; Tamminen et al. forthcoming).

Moreover, photographs and other visual materials are created in a particular moment and can include elements of the physical space, the material artefacts in place, the individuals present, and more. As 'created' content, photographs can also reflect what the creator felt important, interesting, moving or meaningful in the moment and thus decided to capture. As such, it is clear to see that discussions about visual methods are inseparable from discussions about the conditions in which visual content is produced. Within the domain of sport and exercise, visual methods (i.e.

photographs) can be used to study the physical culture of movement practices (Phoenix 2010). This physical culture represents, 'human physical movement occurring within recognised cultural domains such as sport' (Phoenix 2010, 93). Visual methods can provide insight into how the phenomenon captured is culturally constructed (Pink 2007), as photographs and other visual content are embedded within the participant's personal, social, and cultural world (Nash 2015). Images can *show* different aspects of a phenomenon and outline more details than words alone (Pink 2007).

Within qualitative sport and exercise research, there has been recent work advocating for the use of visual methods on their own – that is independent of other methods and forms of data collection/generation. Visual methods can be used to illuminate and elucidate unique layers of personal meaning, discourses, and narratives that can be analysed to present nuanced interpretations (Goodyear and Bundon 2021; Stewart, Woodward, and Gough 2020). Further, findings can expose new insight into how visual methods and physical culture intertwine when discussing participants' experiences (Stewart, Woodward, and Gough 2020). While we believe that line of inquiry to be generative and a worthy pursuit, in this work, our interest lies in thinking about how photographs specifically and other visual materials might be used alongside interviews. There are many reasons that photo-elicitation methods have been used in qualitative interview-based research; however, we highlight two areas that are particularly relevant when exploring a context-specific psychological concept: 1) enabling greater depth and detail in interviews; and 2) enabling more interpretive data analysis. While we did not analyse photographs in our study, we wanted to draw attention to additional benefits. First, enabling a more nuanced and reflexive interview includes techniques which facilitate in-depth communication (Mills and Hoeber 2013). This includes spending time in interviews discussing the meanings behind participant generated photographs, where participants have reflected on the task and what photographs to bring. Photographs can stimulate a greater emotional connection between a participant and their story and/or encourage participants to include details that they would otherwise overlook or have forgotten (Davison, McLean, and Warren 2015). When discussing a psychological concept, participants were able to consider what well-being meant through the selection of photographs, resulting in clear articulation of their perspective. Second, enabling better data analysis includes using photographs to supplement the verbal data. Utilising multiple data collection methods contributes to crystallisation of constructed data (Pain 2012), a more complex and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Richardson 2000). Photographs can be used to aggregate data, develop trends, summarise themes, and visually build theory (Glegg 2019). Using both visual and verbal data allowed us to collect more nuanced data that enabled greater levels of interpretation during data analysis. Essentially, photographs can support verbal data to provide new forms of data that create a different *picture*, that shows and provides insight into participants' realities. In our study, the intention was to solely use photographs to support interviews, with the focus on enabling communication. It is not always necessary to use photographs in both data collection and analysis, as it is dependent on the intention behind the use of photographs. While these two benefits of using visual methods are not new, they have not been discussed in relation to exploring psychological concepts.

As evident from recent publications, one of the most frequently used forms of visual methods in qualitative sport research is photo-elicitation, e.g. Bean, Lesser, and Ritondo 2023; Giffin et al. 2020; Higham et al. 2024; Hill and Flemons 2024; Nemani et al. 2023; Reis et al. 2021; Ryou and Lee 2023; Warhurst and Black 2021. While using photographs in combination with interviews is not a novel technique, when we examine the reasons why these methods have been used together in recent research, we see differences in why other researchers have used photographs and why we used photographs. In recent years, authors have claimed several reasons why they chose to utilise photographs as an additional data collection method. The main intentions include working with specific populations (Bean, Lesser, and Ritondo 2023; McGannon et al., 2022; Nemani et al. 2023), a deeper commitment to participatory methods (McSweeney et al., 2021; Warhurst and Black 2021), examining sensitive experiences (Giffin et al. 2020), and exploring under-researched areas (Reis et al.

2021). Authors still emphasise the (traditional) benefits of more effective emotional responses (Phoenix 2010), better understanding participant perspective (Cope, Stephen, and David 2015), gaining access to multiple dimensions (i.e. crystallisation; Harper 2002), and deconstructing power relations (Mills and Hoeber 2013; Power 2003). While these benefits are still very much evident today, we also argue for the enhanced ability to (de)construct and understand psychological concepts in a specific context, such as well-being in sport.

Historically, photo-elicitation has been used to bridge communication gaps, particularly when the researcher and participants come from different linguist backgrounds (e.g. Barrick 2023; Caldeborg 2022). However, even with shared language, not all conversations (i.e. interviews) are accessible or easy. Increasingly, we see photo-elicitation being used across multiple contexts with different participants, including those from Western countries that are from the same linguist and, in some cases, cultural backgrounds. While some might see this as misaligned with photo-elicitation methods that have been previously considered, we would argue that regardless of the population that one is engaging with there are always benefits to thinking about alternative ways of communicating, particularly when the topic of the research may be difficult to articulate and culturally and contextually situated. Additionally, the rise in visual methods in physical culture (Phoenix 2010) and particularly the rise in social media content/engagement with social media (Dean and Bundon 2024) mean that photos are increasingly part of how individuals document their lives and communicate their experiences to others. Many participants have photographs readily available – it is the right method for the right time. Thus, we advocate for the extended benefit of using photograph elicitation to compliment interviews when exploring a contextually situated psychological construct (i.e. *sport* psychological well-being).

1.3. A reflection on two studies of athlete psychological well-being (PWB)

Below we describe two studies; in the first, we used interview methods alone, and in the second, we used interviews combined with photo-elicitation. Study one was our departure point and critical for shaping our thinking and setting the premiss for study two. To provide further information around the construct, there are two broad ways to conceptualise well-being, objectivist and subjectivist (Holst 2022). While objective perspectives align with post-positivist assumptions that exude what it means to be well, subjectivist perspectives rely on individuals meaning of what it means to be well within their social reality. Specifically, we were interested in the eudaimonic tradition of well-being (PWB) which has a number of different conceptualisations, but generally encompasses fulfilment, positive functioning, and actualisation (Lomas and VanderWeele 2023). However, a challenge arises when attempting to examine a psychological construct that has been objectively theorised in a subjective (and qualitative) manner.

1.3.1. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to explore currently injured varsity athletes' experiences of sport injury and PWB. The overarching research question for this study was *what are athletes' perceptions of global (general) PWB and sport PWB?* For this study, participants were asked to partake in one semi-structured interview. We focused our interview guide (Figure 1) on questions about PWB from all angles, such as *what does PWB mean to you? What does sport PWB mean to you? Can you tell me about a time when you experienced high sport PWB/low sport PWB?* The first author completed 12 interviews, for a total of 16 hours of interview.

As it can be seen from Figure 1 – we composed an extensive interview guide on questions surrounding athlete PWB. While we were able to gain some understanding of how athlete PWB was shaped, we lacked insight into the conceptual side of PWB.

After analysing and interpreting the data, we were not able to gain a conceptual understanding of what is PWB, rather we only received fragmented descriptions and a list of adjectives to describe PWB. This was likely a result of the interview questions, exclusive reliance on interview textual data,

Perceptions, experiences, and understanding of psychological well-being (PWB):

1. What does the term **PWB** mean to you?
    a. Where did you learn about PWB?
    b. Can you describe what it looks like? Components? Characteristics?

2. What does the term **PWB in sport** mean to you?
    i. Can you describe what PWB in sport looks like to you?
        - Can you describe a high level of sport PWB?
        - Can you describe a low level of sport PWB?
    ii. What kind of components do you think make up sport PWB?
    iii. How do you think you develop sport PWB?
    iv. How does your sport PWB change over time or with circumstances?
    v. What kinds of things do you think help build your sport PWB?
    vi. What kinds of things do you think hinder your sport PWB? What do you do in this case?
    vii. Has sport PWB played a role in your successes or failures as an athlete? Explain
    viii. Would you describe yourself as having high sport PWB? Please describe why or why not.
    ix. How do you think your injury has influenced your sport PWB?
    x. How would you rate your sport PWB now compared to before the injury?
    xi. (If applicable) Can you describe the changes to your sport PWB post injury?

3. Can you describe a time when you experienced high sport PWB?
    a. Can you describe a time when you experienced low sport PWB?

4. What does the term PWB in other aspects of your life mean to you? For example, your **overall PWB**.
    i. Can you describe what overall PWB looks like?
        - Can you describe high overall PWB?
        - Can you describe low overall PWB?
    ii. What kind of components do you think make up overall PWB?
    iii. How do you think you develop overall PWB?
    iv. How does your overall PWB change overtime or with circumstances? I.E
    v. What kinds of things do you think help build your overall PWB?
    vi. What kinds of things do you think hinder your overall PWB? What do you do in this case?
    vii. Would you describe yourself as having high overall PWB? Please describe why or why not.
    viii. Has overall PWB played a role in your successes or failures in life? Explain.
    ix. How do you think your injury has influenced your overall PWB?
    x. How would you rate your overall PWB now compared to before the injury?

Figure 1. Study 1 interview questions.

and/or colloquial nature of the concept. This presents challenges when trying to understand well-being as a contextual psychological construct. We found it exceptionally challenging to explore PWB in depth. What we noticed about interviewing about a construct was the deductive (objective) nature of questions and probes and lack of depth/nuance in participants' responses. Holst (2022) debates what is meant by *being* in well-being – and without exploring *being*, well-being studies tend to centre and draw on objectivist perspectives, without grounding peoples' experiences in the world, unfolding in space and time. With objectivists perspectives of well-being, we isolate peoples' experience (Bradley 2015), divorcing it from the social and temporal contexts. In combination with this, *being* in the world is often hard to notice (Heidegger 1993), and Holst (2022) adds that 'even when one notices it, a challenge remains, namely, to verbalize it' (41). This subsequently impacted the data we collected and the resulting data analysis, ultimately being constrained by the data we collected, limiting our ability to interpretably engage with data.

We are mindful that some of the challenges of data collection can be traced to the existing issues in the current literature on athlete well-being (i.e. psychological concept), such as the conceptual opacity and the inconsistent, amalgamated and atheoretical definitions (Trainor and Bundon 2023). Despite this, we realised that we needed to collect better suited data for our research questions, and so, we chose to alter our data collection methods.

1.3.2. Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to again examine athletes' perceptions of PWB, but this time using interviews in tandem with participant-generated photographs. Our focus was on *how elite athletes perceive the configuration of (context-specific) sport PWB*, considering *both high and low experiences of athlete PWB*. Athletes were asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews and bring photographs to each interview. For the first interview, participants were asked to bring 2–4 photographs that represented what optimal sport PWB meant to them and a time when they experienced optimal sport PWB. For the second interview, participants were asked to bring 2–4 photographs that represented what less than optimal sport PWB meant to them and a time when they experienced less than optimal sport PWB. For interviews one and two, questions regarding the photographs included: *Can you tell me about this photograph that you have brought? What is happening in this photograph? What are the feelings associated with this photograph? How does this photograph represent optimal/low athlete PWB? What is not included in this photograph?* The first author completed 52 interviews, totalling 43 hours of interview data, and collected 200 photographs (optimal and less than optimal PWB). While there is a difference in the amount of data that was collected between Study 1 and 2, we are focused on the type and suitedness of the data collected.

To explore 'being' in well-being, photographs provided the opportunity to situate participants' experiences of PWB in a specific context. Since we were attempting to operate from a subjective perspective of well-being, the focus on context was vital (Sumner 1996). Further, as previously mentioned, *being* can be difficult to notice (Heidegger 1993) and even more difficult to verbalise (Holst 2022). While there are many types of photographs, in our study we utilised participant-generated personal photographs that portray the intimate dimensions of the person (Harper 2002), as it related to the contextualised psychological construct under investigation. Photographs are used as an impetus for guiding and stimulating discussion, and evoking stories, emotions, and experiences that may otherwise not be shared without the use of photographs (Fawns 2023).

This time, we centred our interview guide around the participant-generated photographs (see Figure 2). The resulting interview guide was much shorter and included focused questions on athletes' PWB experience, which was only possible because we had photographs to use as a starting point for conversations.

Our interview guide from Study 2 was more effective at exploring PWB in depth, ultimately enabling the collection of more detailed data that we could interpretively analyse. The red box in Figure 2 highlights the questions formulated to address participants' photographs about PWB. Visually, it can be seen that there are far fewer questions used in the Study 2 interview guide

Photographs: Athlete PWB perceptions and experiences

2. Can you tell me about the photographs that you have brought?
    a. How did you go about taking or finding these photos?
        i. What did you immediately think of capturing or think of avoiding?

    ask these questions for each of the photographs taken

    b. What is happening in this photo?
        i. What do you see in this photo?
    c. What are the feelings associated with these photos?
    d. How does this photo represent optimal athlete PWB?
    e. What is not included in this photo?

Optimal athlete PWB Conceptualizations

3. What does sport well-being mean to you?
    a. In your opinion, what contributes to 'optimal' sport well-being?

4. What makes you feel fulfilled in life?
    a. What makes you feel fulfilled in sport?

    **(probe for links between winning and feeling fulfilled)*

5. What is your 'purpose' in life?
    a. What is your purpose in sport?

6. Is it possible to have optimal sport wellbeing and be an elite athlete? Why or why not?
    b. How might success be tied to optimal psychological wellbeing, if at all?
        i. Do you need one to have the other? **probe for connection*
    c. How might failure impact psychological wellbeing, if at all?

    **Probe for connection between PWB & performance (losing/winning)*

Figure 2. Study 2 interview questions.

compared to the Study 1 interview guide; despite this, the questions from the Study 2 interview guide provided us with more success in learning about athlete PWB. This supports the claim that photographs can aid in a more detailed, interpretive, and contextualised understanding of a phenomenon; in this case, athlete PWB.

Most notably, using photographs helped us enter the interview at a later part in the conversation. This is likely due to two reasons, the participant having time to reflect on the content of the interview (i.e. the concept of PWB) and establishing rapport with the participant from pre-interview conversations around photographs. While this is a desirable benefit for any research interview, it may be particularly important when interviewing populations that are hard to access and those who have limited time. Olympic and Paralympic athletes do not have excess spare time, limiting their ability to participate in research projects, especially those with time-intensive interviews. Having the ability to enter the interview conversation at a later point could be especially relevant when the research team needs to collect high-quality in-depth data with limited time and often with only one opportunity.

The use of photographs presented participants with the opportunity to *show* and not just *tell* their experience, potentially more relevant as we live in a 'visual culture' where we experience and make sense of social reality visually (Power 2003). Photographs have the capability to *show* embodiment (Clark 2023), meaning that participants can use photographs to *show* what 'optimal' (or lack of) athlete PWB looks like and means to them. As participants are less practiced in speaking about a psychological concept compared to a personal experience, the use of photographs helped with directly situating their understanding (Glaw et al. 2017) of PWB in a specific context. Further,

photographs can contribute to helping the interview conversation move from concrete to socially abstract (Harper 2002). For example, in our research, instead of asking participants *what does athlete PWB mean to you* without any premeditation or reference point (i.e. Study 1), interview questions were anchored in photographs that participants had thoughtfully selected prior to the interview (i.e. Study 2); this aided in interview conversations starting with the contents of the photograph (i.e. winning a race, game, competition) and its connection to athlete PBW before moving into underlying and more abstract connection of photographs to athlete PWB (i.e. personal growth and fulfilment, sport culture narratives, fear or failure). This directly mitigated the challenges around lack of depth and interpretation in the data when solely using interviews to explore PWB (i.e. we could collect more meaningful data). It is important to consider that photographs offer a different way of knowing the world and are a distinct form of data with layered meanings (Phoenix 2010). They can be used to prompt deeper insight, connections, and understandings about the phenomena under investigation (Davison, McLean, and Warren 2015; Giffen et al. 2020), which can move interview questions from deductive to inductive. Photographs can also enable the ability to focus on subjective perspectives of well-being, ultimately aligning with a qualitative research paradigm. The use of photographs in combination with verbal data can effectively provide added depth to participants' experiences (Giffen et al. 2022; Padgett et al. 2013; Reis et al. 2021). In Study 2, the combination of these methods contributed to a contextualised, deeper, more detailed, and abstract understanding of the psychological construct of PWB as it bridged a communication gap, situated participants experiences in visual and physical culture, and allowed participants to reflect and make (initial) sense of the concept prior to interviews.

Well-being or '*being*' well, is the 'existential relationship between the self and the spatial and temporal dimensions in which somebody finds themselves' (Heidegger 1993, in; Holst 2022, 41). We need to elucidate the importance of context in 'being' well. Photograph elicitation interviews 'connect the core of the self to society, culture, and history' (Harper 2002, 13), helping advance contextualised PWB. Combining verbal and visual methods allows capturing a wider breadth of the experience (Giffen et al. 2022), as well as advancing contextualised PWB by visually conveying an understanding of PWB in a particular context. Mayan (2009) described how using photographs can 'entice and inspire people to draw on experiences and think about issues in ways that would otherwise be unavailable to them' (83), and contextual factors that may otherwise go unnoticed. Additionally, photographs are images of physical matter. Through photographs participants can share (and then speak about) the objects, the people, and the places, that are part of the culture and the context in which PWB is shaped and experienced. This is especially useful when there is a focus on the *subjective* perspective of a psychological concept.

The use of two methods (interviews and photographs) in our study, along with RTA, combined to create the ideal method(ology) to study a contextualised psychological construct. We actively chose not to analyse the photographs as we specifically intended photographs to help bridge a communication gap and support interviews; we were not interested in analysing the contents of the photograph, but rather examining participants' meaning associated with the photographs. Photographs were still utilised throughout the entirety of analysis (through coding, clustering, developing themes, and selecting quotations). While the physical photographs were not analysed they were clearly intertwined with verbal data and used to further contextualise participants' quotations and aid interpretation of text. For example, we combined each participants' photographs (optimal and low PWB) and collaged photographs on a single sheet of paper (for each participant) to graphically capture contrasting experiences of their PWB. This is to say that while photographs themselves were not analysed, they were very much a vital part of the analysis and the construction of findings. Thus, we have provided examples below of how we used photographs in analysis.

Following appropriate ethical procedures, we received verbal and signed consent from participants to use the photographs presented in this article, as well as revealing their identity in this process.[1] We engaged in on-going consent, where we revisited participants' preferences regarding use of photographs and revealing identity after the second interview. The contrast between high

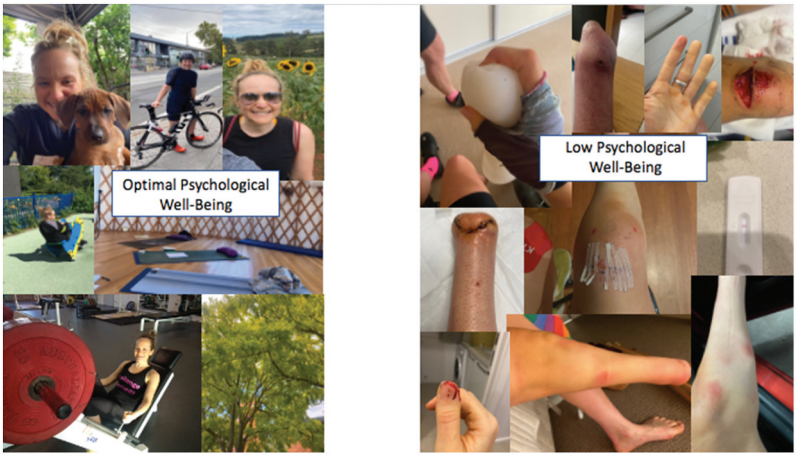

Figure 3. Hannah's photographs of optimal and low PWB.

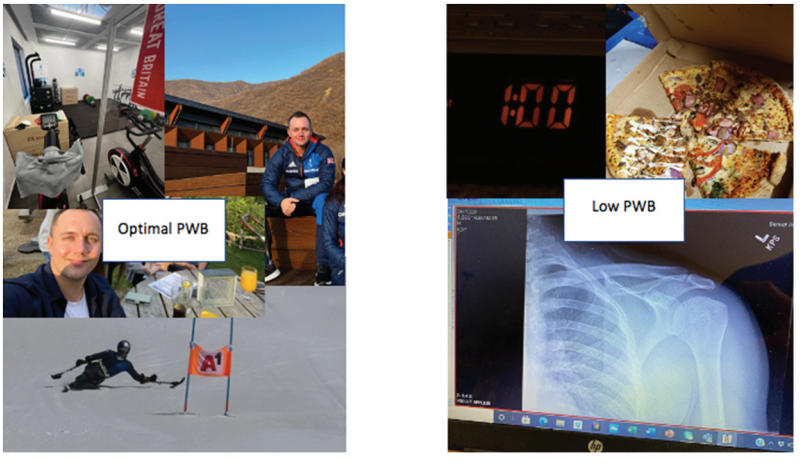

Figure 4. Alex's photographs of optimal and low PWB.

and low experiences of athlete PWB can be seen in Figures 3, 4 , and 5. In Figure 3 Hannah's experience of low PWB was infiltrated with managing her disability and poorer physical health, whereas her experiences of optimal PWB included being with friends (unable to show pictures), being outdoors, and participating in sport.

In Figure 4 Alex's optimal PWB was tied to competing, development, persistence, recovery, and family, compared to his low PWB tied to injury, overwhelming stress, burnout, lack of structure and difficulty readjusting after extended periods away (leading to poor habits).

Lastly, in Figure 5, Micah's optimal PWB was tied to growth as an athlete, celebrating accomplishments with loved ones, and having fun during sport, compared to low PWB tied to injury, missing out on opportunities, stress, and extreme pressure.

Further into the analysis, we combined (interview) text with (photograph) visuals to further contextualise quotations to capture a more complete understanding of participants' experiences – this helped us with our analytical narrative. We were able to gather more robust and detailed descriptions of PWB and draw from both textual and visual data to enhance our interpretation. It

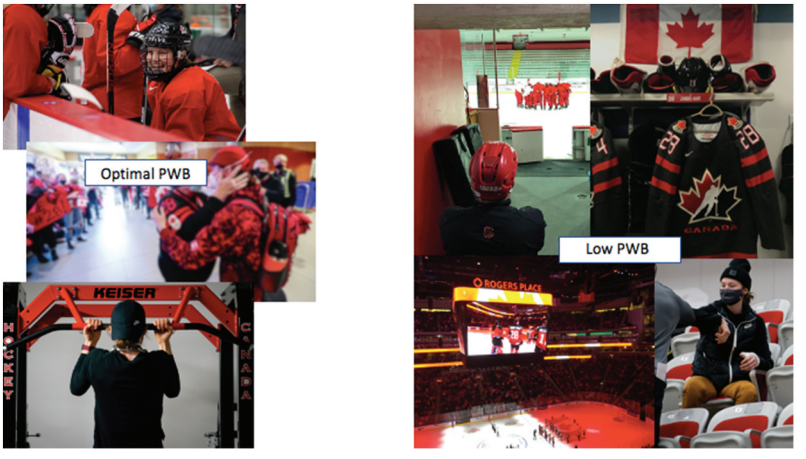

Figure 5. Micah's photographs ofoptimal and low PWB.

Figure 6. New Zealand Olympian's photographs.

is important to note that interviews and photographs were not two separate sets of data, rather each interacted with one another to produce 'one data set'.

1.4. Combined data: photographs and textual data

In combination with verbal data, photographs have the ability to advance contextualised PWB (e.g. sport/athlete PWB) by *visually* capturing an understanding of PWB in a particular culture context. Using photographs in tandem with interviews can open up space to discuss their experiences, providing additional depth to participants' data (Padgett et al. 2013). Not only did the photographs add to the interview process and the data that was collected, they also played an important role during data analysis and the construction of findings. The combination of (interview) text with the (photograph) visuals aided to further contextualise quotations and capture a more complete understanding of participants' experiences.

During analysis, we combined participant quotations with their photographs to further our understanding and aid in our construction of themes. Here, we wanted to show how photographs can be used to help aggregate data, develop trends, and summarise themes (Glegg 2019). The idea behind this is that verbal and visual communication are processed in different parts of the brain, and

Figure 7. Evan Dunfee's photographs.

Figure 8. Haley Smith's photographs.

when combined can facilitate greater understandings, new insights, and connections (Pain 2012). Below we provide three examples of presenting text with visuals (see Figure 6; Figure 7; Figure 8) to *show* how this can aid in the interpretation of findings, provide more context, understanding, and depth – and ultimately capturing (a richer) participant experience of sport PWB in a specific physical culture.

> For me being able to live in the sport in a sustainable way, where you're not having to take massive breaks to escape it because you're exhausted by it. Also having stuff outside [sport] that you enjoy as well. You kind of have all these things working together.
>
> Sustainable is the key word, I've definitely had times where it hasn't been sustainable, and it's just been all sport and nothing else. For me, if I have stuff outside then I'm happy. I think it's important to find a way that works for

you and understand what you need.

– *New Zealand Olympian*

Just the years of this unwavering motivation that was based on winning, it was unwavering because it never once was fulfilling the thing I thought it would. You know, the assumption being that the success was going to breed, happiness, confidence and all those things . . . and it was always sort of chasing that.

– *Evan Dunfee, Canadian Olympian, Bronze Medalist*

I became more confident because I was just engaged in the process . . . and when I had a failure, I was quickly able to bounce back. Those experiences taught me that my self-worth or my ability as an athlete did not hinge on any single performance. When I went out on a racecourse it just felt free and light and I had freedom.

– *Haley Smith, Canadian Olympian*

Here it can be seen how visuals can complement and extend our understanding of textual data – whether they be used in analysis for analytical reasons or presented in published manuscripts.

1.5. Participants' reflections on the use of photographs

At the end of the second interview, we asked participants how they felt about using photographs to help explain their understandings of athlete PWB. It was commonly noted that the task to bring photographs to interviews enabled more time to reflect and understand their own experiences of athlete PWB. It was the process of engagement in (deliberate) reflection that contributed to thoughtful and detailed conversations about one's perceptions and experiences. Without this process, participants identified that it would have been 'too hard', 'too abstract', and 'too quick; to discuss their understandings of athlete PWB. Photographs directly situated participants' meaning and experience within a particular physical culture (Phoenix 2010). Through the impetus of photographs, we were able to subjectively and contextually explore PWB. The use of visual methods enhanced participants' reflexivity enabling them to articulate a more complete understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Giffen et al. 2022; Reis et al. 2021).

For the first interview, I spent a lot of thought to find things that either would be relevant or that actually meant something to me . . . I think [photographs are] a really useful tool, it gives structure and something to come back to, and you've also put some thought into the photo, not just turned up and been like, oh yeah, this thing, and chat about it for a while.

– *British Paralympian*

I think it definitely made me think more about [psychological well-being]. I think I had an overview understanding of what well-being meant to me and how I would reflect on it and what I would do, but I think having the photos definitely made me feel more and think more in depth about what it was when I felt a certain way.

– *British Olympian*

I think for me, it was that I could think about it ahead of time.

– *Canadian Paralympian*

We see how pre-interview reflections helped with conceptual versus experience-based questions.

Photographs also gave the interview a sense of immediacy, as if the event or experience captured had just taken place (Fawns 2023). Photographs can stimulate a greater emotional connection between participant and their story (Davison, McLean, and Warren 2015).

I think seeing something in front of you makes you remember what it was like at that point.

Whereas, if you're just talking about it yes you know the moments, but you can't remember *like that*. When I see it, I remembered exactly being there and laughing with my family. All those little things. Whereas, if I didn't see that photo, I probably wouldn't even remember doing it.

– *British Olympian*

> I found it interesting to go back through photos . . . I look at my photos and they remind me of how I was or what I was experiencing at that time. Just in retrospect, thinking about like mental wellness or negative times it would be very hard to describe them, and it would be very hard to pinpoint exactly what it was like.
>
> – *Canadian Olympian*

> It was hard to dig a little deeper and think more about well-being all-encompassing around sport. But then once the photos were actually there, when you asked me about them, it was very easy to think about why that was relevant or what was happening in that moment.
>
> – *Canadian Olympian*

In addition, photographs can create structure for the interview, act as a point of departure for more detailed conversations on the phenomenon and give participants a sense of autonomy to physically contribute and guide the interview. Typically, in an interview the first set of questions relates to contents of the photograph, while the second set of questions uses the photograph as a point of departure to move beyond what is physically captured in the image. This method further stresses co-production of data (Phoenix 2010) and works to extinguish the power imbalances between researcher and participants (Pink 2007). Using photographs also contributes to making the interview more creative and less intimidating (Pain 2012), subsequently facilitating the relationship between researcher and participant (Glegg 2019).

> I think [photographs] helps you. Because [psychological well-being is] a very fluid concept. It's hard to define, but having photos, giving visual cues, that was helpful.
>
> – *Canadian Olympian*

> I think [photographs are] really helpful. Because it's a prompt, it's personal. It's a really good talking tool, I reckon. It's personalized. So, there's autonomy that I suppose that you've create.
>
> – *Australian Paralympian*

> But it's also a good starting point, and then talking beyond the photo it's useful.
>
> – *New Zealand Olympian*

A few participants did have further queries about selecting their photographs and reached out via email and direct message.

> [Participant Email] I'm just going through all of my photos right now, and I'm not really sure what you're looking for. Do you have any advice or suggestions?

> [Researcher Response] I wanted to leave the criteria open ended to let athletes choose their photos freely. That said, I wanted athletes to look for photographs that represented what well-being means to them – I might suggest that you think about athlete well-being means to you and then look for photographs where you experience well-being or that are representative of well-being (i.e. certain places, moments, materials, etc.).

There is no right or wrong photos – so don't get too overwhelmed!

This additional dialogue with participants often helped reassure them that there were no right or wrong photographs.

It is important to note that some participants did express difficulty in selecting photographs that represented low athlete PWB. At this point participants understood the exercise of selecting photographs but sometimes struggled with finding photographs that reflected their experiences.

> [Email] Apologies on the delay, I really struggled to find photos that represented this as I usually do not have photos if they don't bring me joy. (attached 4 photos)
>
> – *Canadian Olympian*

> The [low psychological well-being] was trickier . . . just because in general with photographs, we tend to keep things we want to remember.
>
> – *Canadian Olympian*

> I am not sure if I have many photos that would represent [low psychological well-being].
>
> – *British Paralympian*

> I found it quite hard to think of photographs to reflect how I thought of [low psychological well-being] . . . I found it initially quite hard to think of what photos would reflect what I was thinking about. But actually, having this discussion, I found it quite easy to then be prompted by the photo.
>
> – *British Olympian*

Two participants did not bring photographs of less-than-optimal PWB to the second interview, where they stated that they did not have anything that represented their experiences.

[Social Media DM – Re: Less than optimal athlete PWB photos]

> Participant: I am not sure if I have many photos that would represent that
>
> Participant: But I'm assuming you're talking about burnout, injuries, motivation slumps and stuff like that?
>
> Researcher: We're interested in looking at periods where athlete PWB might be hindered or lowered
>
> Participant: Hmm, I don't really have any. Even of myself on crutches or anything . . .
>
> Researcher: Okay, maybe we can just chat without photos. I haven't done that yet with any other athletes, but it's all good. I also have a few follow-up questions from our first interview.

[Pre-interview conversation]

> Participant: I didn't bring any photos because I was really struggling to get any. I don't know, just when things aren't going so well, it's not really a time that I generally end up taking photos.
>
> Researcher: Okay, no worries. A couple other athletes have said the same thing. The reason for the photographs is just to try to help athletes think about what either optimal wellbeing meant to them or low wellbeing meant to them. So, we can have a conversation around that. I did have some follow-up questions from our first interview. So, I just noted down a few things to ask you about to maybe expand on.

Although participants had difficulty selecting low PWB photographs, they still engaged in a process of thoughtful reflection to consider what low athlete PWB meant to them, and we were still afforded the opportunity to discuss their pre-interview reflections.

Overall, the combined methods of interviews and photographs contributed to a more nuanced and interpretive understanding of the psychological construct of athlete PWB.

1.6. Advancing understanding though the combination of existing methods

Through the process of completing both Study 1 and Study 2 – the struggles, the reflections, and the use of additional methods – we reflected on how the combination of methods afforded us the ability to mitigate the challenges of exploring a context-specific psychological concept. Further, we highlighted the main benefits of combining these methods in our work and the implications more broadly.

The most notable challenge was attempting to explore a psychological construct situated in a particular context (i.e. athlete/sport PWB). We encountered issues around the depth, detail, and ability to articulate personal meaning within Study 1. In Study 2 photographs equivocally allowed us to collect different findings that were more complete, detailed, and contextualised, ultimately bridging a communication gap. Participants in Study 2 indicated that having the ability to reflect on the interview content (and subsequently the psychological construct) allowed them to take the time to digest and construct what the concept meant to them. This is closely related to what Harper (2002) termed 'breaking frames' with visual methods, which referred to enabling meaningful reflection on a particular topic – that it helped participants 'break frames' to explore their own social context in more meaningful ways. Participants were not put on the spot, but rather had time to

grasp, wrestle, and reach an understanding prior to articulating personal meaning. We argue that time to reflect on the research topic, especially in the case of a psychological construct, is vital in collecting more nuanced data; as collecting data about a psychological construct (i.e. what does well-being or happiness mean to you?) is more ambiguous and abstruse for participants to process on the spot when compared to a personal event, experience, or moment (i.e. tell me about a specific injury or sport event). Thus, the time prior to the interview when participants engaged in meaning making (through the process of reflection and selection of photographs) aided in the articulation of personal understanding. Ultimately, the use of textual and visual data resulted in different data being collected, enabling different engagement with the data. Interview text and photographs visuals were a single interrelated data set that could not be separated, both in the collection and analysis of data.

The use of photographs in research studies are often used for participatory and empowering purposes. However, in our research study, we chose to use photographs for other reasons – to help explain the unexplainable. Photograph elicitation helped bridge the connection between an abstract psychological concept and physical culture. Not only did photographs concretely anchor participants' experiences (i.e. well-being), they were also embedded within a specific physical culture (i.e. sport). The emphasis on physical culture situates participants' experiences within a contextualised culture (i.e. what is being seen; what we are allowed to see; how it is socially shaped; Phoenix 2010), connecting abstract concepts to personally driven explanations within a specific physical culture. Often psychological concepts are rooted in post-positivism, as concepts are globally defined, and measurements are formulated to determine degree of presence. However, depending on the method used, this post-positivist orientation dismisses the interpretivist/constructionist conceptualisation of psychological constructs. Fundamentally, there are two overarching theoretical perspectives to categorise well-being; objective and subjective (Holst 2022). The tension arises when we take the objective perspective of psychological concepts and attempt to translate and fit them into subjective methodological frameworks. As influential philosophers have argued, concepts founded from objective perspectives purposefully exclude subjective elements, and likewise subjective concepts cannot be effectively understood from an objective perspective (Kierkegaard, 1992; Nietzsche, 2007). Sumner (1996) argues that context is an essential feature of subject well-being. It is not possible, nor epistemologically and ontologically aligned, to attempt to amalgamate objective and subjective perspectives within a single methodological framework – they are inherently based on different ways of thinking. As qualitative researchers operating from aligned research paradigms, we would need to employ subjective perspectives of psychological concepts (i.e. well-being). The challenge of studying context-specific psychological concepts comes from the dominant post-positivist, objective conceptualisation of these concepts. While we attempt to study these concepts through subjective lenses in qualitative research, there are often fragments of objective beliefs that infiltrate the process. How do we escape these objective fragments to employ truly qualitative practices? While we cannot claim a complete answer to this question, we can provide some insight from our experiences of examining well-being in study 1 and 2. Participant photographs can be a way to aid the exploration of subjective, context-specific, well-being.

We suggest that one way to engage in qualitative methods that are ontologically and epistemologically aligned to explore a context-specific psychological construct, is to employ the use of participant-generated photographs. Photographs provide the ability to situate participants' experiences within a specific culture. Photographs are not just visual prompts in interviews, they are visual prompts that are specific to and embedded within a particular time and place, in our case, the sport context. The use of photographs within interviews can bring awareness to contextual aspects of the psychological concepts that may have been overlooked if there was a sole reliance on language. We advocate that there is an opportunity to unleash the full potential of qualitative methods to focus on contextualised individual understanding of a psychological concept that do not impose objective perspectives. We found that this *contextual* component was limited by language in study 1, whereas in study 2 we centred participants' photographs that were exclusively grounded in the context of

high-performance sport. While photographs can be one way to help bridge the language barrier to discussing contextualised well-being, we suspect that alternative methods that transcend language can also be utilised with other psychological constructs to employ *aligned* and *subjective* qualitative methods.

We share our experiences, struggles, and deliberations to offer alternative means to explore a context-specific psychological construct and engage in philosophically aligned qualitative methods. There are many different and available 'non-verbal' methods out there that can be combined to produce different data, even while exploring the same concept. Combining different qualitative data collection methods can aid with understanding the unfolding complexities of a phenomena (McGannon et al. 2021). It is important to think beyond the interview. People make sense of their lives (i.e. think, feel, communicate) in more ways than can be obtained from only an interview (Braun, Clarke, and Gray 2017). It might just be a matter of mixing and matching methods and using methods in a different way than originally and historically intended. We have no doubt that textual and visual methods can be applied to study other psychological constructs with other participants in other contexts.

Note

1. Each participant was given various options with regard to the use of their photographs – agreed to use photographs, agree to use photographs with images obstructed, agreed to use selected photographs, or decline the use of photographs. In addition, the ethics board did not allow the inclusion of photographs that identified other people, so such photographs are blurred to maintain confidentiality of others or not used. Permission to use photographs and reveal identity was received from participants for all photographs presented in this article (verbal recorded consent and signed consent).

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