Investigating the Impacts of Compulsive Sexual Behaviours on Women Using Descriptive Phenomenology: A Research Agenda

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Abstract

Introduction Sexual addiction (SA) and compulsive sexual behaviour (CSB) are concepts used to characterise a nascent field of research and phenomena that can have major personal, relational, and psychological effects on individuals, their intimate relationships, and society. Impacts are manifold and may include emotional, relational, physical, sexual, and/or spiritual consequences. Literary analysis suggests that there is a wide knowledge gap in systematic in-depth qualitative studies that examine the lived experiences of impacted women.

Methods This conceptual paper presents a blueprint for qualitative research into female partner well-being following the discovery or disclosure of SA/CSBs by their male partners. After three years of collecting data (2021–2023), the prototype has been refined to the point where the descriptive phenomenology research design merits in-depth coverage of its constituent elements.

Results and Contribution The qualitative methodologies of this paper were developed to give voice to and better comprehend this understudied demographic. This methodological article advances qualitative knowledge creation in an emergent field of investigation, offering prospects for healing and recovery for individuals and relationships.

Conclusions This paper presents a comprehensive research design rather than any data or findings. This focus is intended and offers new prospects to build a nascent field of investigation. More specifically, other research may benefit from either adopting and/or adapting similar methodological approaches that examine the essences of human lived experiences. This paper lays the foundation for an important future research agenda.

Policy Implications The research methodological design presented in this paper is suited to facilitate social policy development through targeted strategies that may better validate and deliver more appropriate care to women in need. More specifically, by applying the approaches presented in this paper to the in-depth study of SA/CSB-impacted intimate partners, there is an opportunity to promote social consciousness, enhance empathy, and advance this field of investigation.

Keywords Research prototype · Compulsive sexual behaviour · Sexual addiction · Partner well-being · Methodological innovation · Qualitative research · Descriptive phenomenology · Research agenda

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Introduction

Sexual addiction (hereafter SA) and compulsive sexual behaviour (hereafter CSB) are concepts used to characterize a nascent field of research and phenomena that can have significant personal, relational, and psychological effects on individuals, their intimate relationships, and society as a whole. Because several studies present CSBs as a type of SA (de Alarcón et al., 2019; Carnes, 2015; Grubbs et al., 2020; Weiss, 2019, 2020), in this paper, the words CSB and SA will be used interchangeably or in combination. These terms typically refer to intense sexual preoccupations, socio-functional and psychological functional decline, and out-of-control behaviours that individuals take part in amid increasing adverse repercussions for themselves, others, and society (Braun-Harvey & Vigorito, 2016; de Alarcón et al., 2019; Carnes, 2015).

Several studies have linked the rise in SA/CSB and excessive sexual activities to the advancement of digital technology and easy access to online pornographic contents (Delmonico & Carnes, 1999; Schneider, 2005; Wéry & Billieux, 2017). Millions of people have been affected by online pornography and cybersex (DeKeseredy & Corsiano, 2015), which is commonly blamed for out-of-control CSBs (de Alarcón et al., 2019). Additionally, SA is also used to describe compulsive online pornography (OP) (Carnes, 2011; de Alarcón et al., 2019; Seyed Aghamiri, 2020; Wéry & Billieux, 2017). While not all pornography consumption is considered harmful (Litras et al., 2015), some researchers are concerned about how online pornography can impair healthy sexual development (Zimbardo et al., 2016). In the United States and Australia, for example, most men (64–70%) utilize internet pornography (Grubbs et al., 2018; Rissel et al., 2016). Importantly, research shows that OP can be equally damaging and traumatic to most intimate relationships as physical infidelity (Atwood & Schwartz, 2002; Seyed Aghamiri et al., 2022a).

Anxiety disorders, mood disorders, attention-deficit disorders, and alcohol and substance misuse are all found to often co-occur with CSBs (Carnes, 2015; Reid et al., 2011). In addition, affected people struggle with intimacy, impulsivity, and interpersonal issues, as well as shame and an inability to withstand loneliness (Carnes, 2015; Reid et al., 2012). These co-morbidities can have negative intrapersonal and interpersonal implications (Reid et al., 2013; Weiss, 2019), which underscores how intimate partners can positively or negatively impact each other's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Carnes & Lee, 2014; Lawn & McMahon, 2014; Seyed Aghamiri & Luetz, 2021).

While individuals with SA/CSBs have received much scholarly interest and attention, their partners' lived experiences and well-being following the discovery/disclosure of CSBs have received less attention (Williams, 2019).

Although SA/CSB is not gender-specific, most people engaging in these behaviours are heterosexual males in committed relationships (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2000; Kishor et al., 2018). For this reason, this methodological article is framed by a 'heteronormative' perspective, meaning that it expressly focuses on females who find themselves in relationships with male partners. However, this emphasis does not imply that there is no need for studies that scrutinise the effects that SA/CSB may have on gay or lesbian couples, or on male partners of females who engage in CSBs.

Female partners may have various negative emotional, relational, physical, sexual, and/or spiritual ramifications imposed following the discovery/disclosure of their male partner's SA/CSB (Carnes, 2015; Weiss, 2020). Consequences may entail depression, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), diminished self-esteem, panic attacks, trauma responses, as well as significant adverse impacts on their general health and happiness (Steffens & Means, 2017; Weiss, 2020; Williams, 2019). Although some limited research exists that SA/CSB has negative effects on intimate partners (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Schneider, 2000; Schneider et al., 1998, 2012; Williams, 2019; Zitzman & Butler, 2009), to date there is a wide knowledge gap in the peer-reviewed academic literature concerning systematic qualitative studies that illustrate the lived experiences of impacted female partners. As a result, the present qualitative methodology was developed and implemented in this context to give voice to, explain the essence of experiences, and better comprehend this understudied demographic. More research into this population could reveal parallels or differences between impacted women, and new findings could build on existing data (Milrad, 1999; Schneider, 2000; Steffens & Rennie, 2006; Williams, 2019; Zitzman & Butler, 2009).

It should be noted that this paper presents a roadmap for in-depth qualitative research into female partner well-being following the discovery or disclosure of SA/CSBs by their male partners. Applying this methodological approach has the potential to provide much-needed insight to advance this under-explored field of investigation. As such, this paper presents a comprehensive research design rather than any data or findings. This focus is intended and offers opportunities for qualitative data collection both in Australia and internationally. After targeted and extensive piloting and data collection over several years, the prototype has been refined to the point where the research design merits in-depth coverage of its constituent elements in its own right.

Unlike quantitative research methods that define variables and test hypotheses, qualitative research methods explore events in a given context before formulating hypotheses (Creswell, 2015; Peoples, 2020). Accordingly, by generating hypotheses, this paper adds to the body of theory generation research (Chen & Luetz, 2020). Moreover, experts,

professional caregivers, and faith-based organizations that work with CSB-affected female partners could benefit from more detailed information about these individuals' experiences and their requirements for adequate support. To this end, from a holistic perspective, implementing the proposed research methodological approaches has the potential to reveal the needs of this demographic, such as during recuperation and recovery. In synthesis, applying the phenomenological approaches presented in this paper to the study of SA/CSB-impacted intimate partners, the current paper presents a prototype for in-depth qualitative research that overcomes the limitations of previous approaches and points to opportunities for advancing an emergent field of investigation.

This paper is organised as follows. First, we present the rationale for applying a uniquely targeted methodological blueprint design. Next, we discuss the phenomenological methodology applied to the study of SA/CSB. This entails the discussion of the strengths and limitations of phenomenological approaches and an overview of phenomenological reduction and bracketing / epoché. Finally, the paper recapitulates the main points in light of its intended contribution to field building. This includes a succinct analysis and synthesis of how the methodological approaches presented in this paper may further advance in-depth qualitative social research for agenda-setting.

Rationale for Implementing a Uniquely Targeted Methodological Research Design

The following enquiry guided the conceptual design of the methodological approaches discussed in this paper: What are the lived experiences of female partners following discovery/disclosure of their male partners' SA/CSB? This is a timely question that addresses a well-known gap in the literature (Seyed-Aghamiri et al., 2022a, b). The central thesis of the current phenomenological approach was developed and adapted for this context with the aim of capturing subjective experiences, elucidating the meanings and essences of the women's experiences, and obtaining a greater knowledge of this understudied group's actions and reactions.

Implementing this methodological approach offered the impacted women the freedom to offer insights into the core of their experiences in a manner that other research methods are unable to provide or access. While the benefits of phenomenological research are well-recognised and applied in the medical and psychological fields (Iaquinta & Larrabee, 2004; Yousefi & Shahgholian, 2015), no other studies have investigated SA/CSB-impacted intimate partners using this approach. More specifically, phenomenological research is frequently used in the medical field to investigate patients' experiences with illnesses and treatments (Yousefi &

Shahgholian, 2015). While the phenomenological approach can thus be applied to a wide range of research fields, it holds particular promise to offer unique insights into the experiences of women who have been affected by the emerging social phenomenon known as SA/CSB. By capturing the depth, complexity, poignancy, and richness of lived experience in this area, this method allows fresh and profound perspectives. Crucially, this paradigm makes it possible to uncover phenomena from the standpoint of how impacted women understand and attach meaning to their existence.

By exploring the poorly understood perspectives of women who have experienced this specific form of silent and disenfranchised suffering, adopting descriptive phenomenology research is appropriate and timely. According to Husserl (1977), a descriptive phenomenology necessitates an emphasis on lived experience and a detailed and comprehensive description of the universal essence of participants' experiences. Furthermore, the current research design is appropriate, being based on Crotty's (1998) epistemic constructivist approach, which emphasises that individuals uniquely experience the world and construct their own subjective worldviews.

The rationale is to capture the true essence of the lived experiences and well-being of female partners of males who engage in CSBs after pertinent behaviours have been discovered/disclosed. According to the constructivist perspective, individuals respond to experiences differently depending on their subjective interpretation of the phenomena (Ataro, 2020; Punch, 2014). Additionally, techniques like phenomenological reduction and thematic analysis can aid in creating a more coherent description of an experience and support the development of a thorough understanding of the true essence of the participants' lived experiences through an accurate portrayal of the phenomenon under study (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). Accordingly, in this paper, descriptive phenomenology serves as an appropriate research methodology for highlighting the essence of female partners' subjective lived experiences, with semi-structured in-depth interviews typically providing the primary data collection instrument. Becker (1992) explains that phenomenological researchers are "unlike traditional researchers, [because] they want to understand the nature of a phenomenon" (p. 33) as authentically characterised by the lived experiences of individuals (Becker, 2018). This involves rich descriptions that are generated and analysed within a qualitative paradigm of inquiry, which encompasses the research design, data analysis and interpretation of findings (Luetz et al., 2020; Punch, 2014).

Due to the nature of research, which is "an organised, systematic and logical process of inquiry" (Punch, 2014, p. 5), a qualitative paradigm affects all stages of the research process (Creswell, 2015; Noyes et al., 2019). However, through its ontological and epistemological underpinning,

the qualitative approach attempts to unveil the mystery of the social world (Punch, 2014). According to Koerber and McMichael (2008), qualitative studies provide a "window-like" or a "mirror-like" perspective of a particular phenomenon (p. 462). The qualitative paradigm, in general, shares a broad philosophy, such as person-centeredness and a particular open-ended starting point (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Furthermore, qualitative research entails searching for meaning and discovering how people make sense of the world (Braun et al., 2017). Moreover, "qualitative research is an inclusive term for a wide variety of approaches and methods for the study of natural social life" (Saldana, 2014, p. 3).

Furthermore, qualitative research focuses on personal experiences rather than measuring an attribute in large groups or making generalisations about vast populations (Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Punch, 2014). Indeed, one of the significant assets of qualitative research is its focus on examining human experiences in great depth (Denzin, 2017; Grossoehme, 2014).

An in-depth qualitative investigation seems to be the most appropriate methodological approach to investigate the lives impacted by SA/CSB, given how relationships can be sources of healing or harm (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010). This is because of the devastating multidimensional nature and multifarious impacts of CSBs on women based on their unique subjective experiences (Weiss, 2020; Carnes, 2015; Williams, 2019). Examining the 'how' and the 'why' and the meaning-making as well as the complex social processes as deduced from the experiences of impacted women can be best explored using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2015; Esterberg, 2002; Punch, 2014). Previous work in this area is sparse (Hall, 2015), and to this end, there is strong justification for inductive theory-generation research (Luetz et al., 2020; Peoples, 2020; Punch, 2014; Seyed Aghamiri et al., 2022b; Sloan & Bowe, 2013).

This paper is guided by what Merriam (2009) found concerning qualitative methodology, namely that it is typically focused on: "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). Consequently, because a qualitative approach offers a complete understanding of how biopsychosocial phenomena interact, it may result in improved healthcare delivery (Boyle, 1991; Seyed Aghamiri & Luetz, 2021). Developing and using a qualitative technique may advance the study of the impacted women and result in a deeper awareness of their well-being in relation to CSB. Ultimately, such approaches are well-positioned to identify key elements of the women's support requirements, which is crucial for meeting their perceived needs. Qualitative approaches also aid in-depth analysis and could promote a thorough comprehension of areas that other methods frequently overlook. Finally, a focus like this can more effectively inform the development of appropriate social policies (Creswell, 2015; Giorgi et al., 2017; Peoples, 2020; Weiss, 2021).

Phenomenological Methodology Applied to the Study of SA/CSB

The word 'phenomenology' comes from the Greek words phae, which means to appear or to show (Moustakas, 1994), and "phaino, which means to bring light, to show itself in itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of the day" (Heidegger, 1997, pp. 74–75). In simple terms, phenomenology is a study method that aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon by looking at it through the eyes of individuals who have lived through it (Teherani et al., 2015). According to Neubauer et al. (2019), the naturalistic paradigm, which assumes that reality is not fixed, is the foundation of phenomenology. Neubauer et al. further stated that, based on phenomenology, reality is founded on personal, subjective truths. Therefore, the phenomenological philosophy corresponds with the naturalistic paradigm by assuming that people actively create their own reality and that knowledge about individual reality may be gained through interactions between researchers and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to honour the women's narratives, this paper is guided by Van Manen (1990), who advocates utilising a phenomenological approach because:

> Lived experience is the starting point and endpoint of phenomenological research. Phenomenology aims to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in their own lived experience (p. 36).

Thus, phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology with roots in various philosophical traditions. These include Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (descriptive), Jean-Paul Sartre's existential phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (interpretive) (Draper-Lowe, 2016). Husserl maintained that things perceived by an individual's consciousness should be the subject of scientific research, rather than positivism's strict concentration on objective observations of external reality (Neubauer et al., 2019). Furthermore, the emphasis should be on what is immediately provided to a person's intuition (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Van Manen (1990) suggested that "a good phenomenological description is something that we can nod to, recognising it as an experience that we have had or could have had" (p. 27). Applying a descriptive phenomenology can assist to uncover a phenomenon's essential universal meaning structures/essences and offers the capacity to accommodate both the breadth and depth of female partners' lived experiences (Creswell, 2015; Helkkula, 2011; Husserl, 1970; Peoples, 2020). It is assumed that the meaning people construct of their experiences has a structure or essence that can be articulated and that human experiences are spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, temporal, and spatial in nature (Bliss, 2016). Relatedly, through a descriptive phenomenological lens, awareness of the female partners' perceptions and lifeworld, including thoughts, memories, and emotions, can be validated (Reiners, 2012). Relevant to the aims of this paper to highlight the voices of women, "the endpoint of descriptive phenomenological investigation is to present a theoretical model representing the essential structures of the phenomenon under study" (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 177).

Given this historical context and the emergence of various philosophical focal areas of interest (Table 1), Husserl's (1970) descriptive phenomenological approach, which expressly focuses on the essence and meanings of lived experiences, is deemed the most appropriate for capturing the authentic expressed narratives of the affected women.

In synthesis, phenomenology is a human science that unites the stylistic domains of the humanities in a systematic, holistic, and logical manner (Peoples, 2020). According to Moustakas (1994), "phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge" (p. 26). A sequential summary of the paper's philosophical framework is shown in Fig. 1.

Strengths of Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological methodology seeks to understand a phenomenon holistically and contextually (Davidsen, 2013; Peoples, 2020). This purposeful focus on the individuals' viewpoints and perceptions has several strengths. This subsection briefly discusses the three most relevant ones.

First, according to Maxwell (2013), the phenomenological design allows the researcher to apply their interest and passion as fuel throughout the study. Maxwell considers this a benefit and a supportive motivation. Second, the process of data collection is an advantage of this design, as the researcher gains actual information about the participants' experiences by employing broad and open-ended questions (Ataro, 2020; Maxwell, 2013). This allows the interview process to function as a way of yielding firsthand and high-quality data (Creswell, 2014). Third, the revision procedure, which occurs throughout the research process as new experiences and meanings appear, allows the researcher to build patterns and premises that the interviewees can confirm and evaluate (Miles et al., 2014).

According to Patton (2002), "the human factor is the greatest strength and the fundamental weakness of phenomenological qualitative inquiry and analysis — a scientific two-edged sword" (p. 433). However, Patton further explains that qualitative enquiry at each level depends on the ability, skills, insights, analytical intellect and style of the analyst, which makes each qualitative study unique.
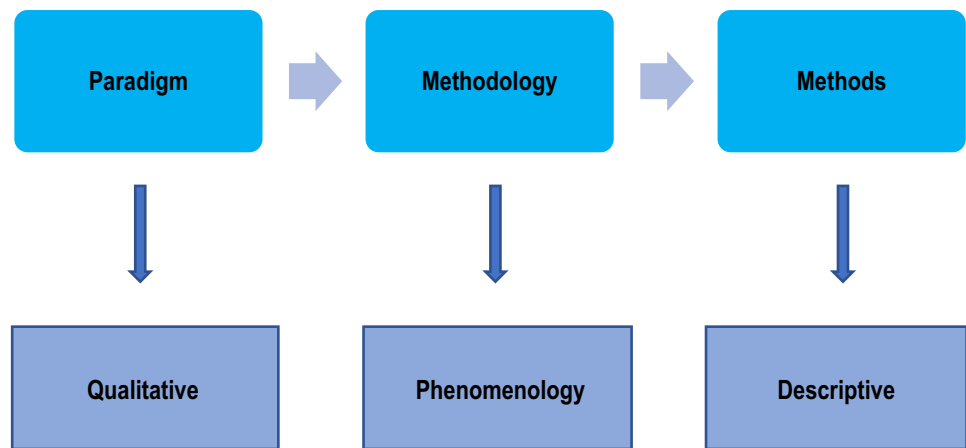
Limitations of Phenomenological Research

Although phenomenological qualitative research aspires and promises to provide factual data, the approach also has

Table 1 Comparison of transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology (based on Neubauer et al., 2019)

Areas of Distinction	Transcendental (Descriptive) Phenomenology	Hermeneutic (Interpretive) Phenomenology
Origins in Philosophy	Husserl	Heidegger
Ontological Assumptions	The knower's reality is internal; what emerges in their consciousness is their reality	A person's lived experience is an interpretive process that takes place in their lifeworld
Epistemological Assumptions	To reach the transcendental state, the observer is separate from the world and bias-free; phenomena are analysed by descriptive means	The observer is a part of the world and is not free of bias; phenomena are interpreted
The Role of the Researcher in Data Collection	During data collection and analysis, the researcher maintains subjectivity and applies bracketing	During data collection, the researcher reflects on key themes from participants' experiences with the phenomenon while also reflecting on their own
The Role of the Researcher in Data Analysis and Writing	The researcher builds textural descriptions, considers phenomena from many perspectives, determines units of meaning, and groups them into themes (the 'what' of the phenomenon). The aim is to provide a structural description (the 'how') and inventive variation. Finally, the researcher puts these descriptions together to get the phenomenon's essence	The researcher considers how the data (or parts thereof) lead to increased understanding of the phenomena through iterative cycles of capturing and writing comments towards formulating a robust and nuanced interpretation (whole)

Fig. 1 A Visual Representation of the Paper's Philosophical Framework

some inherent weaknesses. This subsection discusses the four most relevant ones.

First, it can be challenging to fully prevent the researcher's biases, values, and beliefs (Janesick, 2011) from influencing the integrity of the participants' narratives. Relatedly, one of the first issues to address here is the personal biases of the researchers, which have arisen from previous personal experiences. Van Manen (1990) says that "the problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much" (p. 46). Nevertheless, these experiences, assumptions, and pre-understandings may be 'bracketed' and put to one side through the method of epoché bracketing, which is staying unbiased, and putting aside prejudgments and preconceived views (Moustakas, 1994); this will be discussed later.

Second, it can be time-consuming, labour intensive and involve a copious amount of data requiring analysis (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014).

Third, there may be some limitations concerning credibility and reliability. Therefore, it is the researchers' responsibility to convince themselves and their audience "that the findings are based on the critical investigation" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 131). Furthermore, Groenewald (2004) indicates the need to "describe the lived experience in a language as free from the constructs of the intellect and society as possible [sic]" (p. 12), which can be challenging at times. Therefore, an unbiased involvement with and attitude towards the women participants needs to be used throughout data processing, as it is the unequivocal aim to use their own expressions, narratives, and language. By practising intentional awareness, some of the hazards associated with the researchers' own personal attitudes need to be controlled, supporting what Sundler et al. (2019) call an open and reflective mind. Relatedly, Patton (2002) suggests that "the researcher must do their best in the interview phase to present the data and communicate what the data reveals given the purpose of the study" (p. 433).

Fourth, bracketing and phenomenological reduction can itself be considered a limitation. The phenomenological reduction "to pure subjectivity" (Lauer, 1958, p. 50) is the researcher's thoughtful and focused exploration of the phenomenon with total respect for its meaning (Hycner, 1985). Even so, Hycner stresses that it is a significant challenge in the study of a human phenomenon that, through overanalysing, the phenomenon can be reduced to cause and effect. Furthermore, the phenomenological reduction points to epoché / bracketing "in a sense that in its regard no position is taken either for or against" (Lauer, 1958, p. 49) and prevents the researchers' interpretations and presuppositions from mixing with the participants' (Husserl, 1977; Moustakas, 1994). However, epoché / bracketing may not always be fully attainable, particularly in qualitative research, where the researcher is considered "the instrument of analysis through all phases of a qualitative project" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80). Thus, the researcher's complete detachment is not humanly achievable (Tuohy et al., 2013). Therefore, it is unrealistic for any researcher to expect to fully escape their interpretations of social reality (LeVasseur, 2003).

Phenomenological Reduction and Bracketing / Epoché

In light of the current paper's objective, which seeks to establish a robust qualitative research methodology to effectively explore the experiences and well-being of female partners, it is pertinent to justify the application of phenomenological reduction and bracketing / epoché. Applying this approach entails an inductive process in descriptive phenomenology in which the researcher removes non-essential elements from accounts of the experience to describe the essential phenomenon (Saldaña, & Omasta, 2016). The concept of phenomenological reduction is crucial in the process of identifying a phenomenon's essence/meaning. Rather than starting with a theory or premise, qualitative phenomenological research generally uses inductive reasoning to allow discoveries and patterns to emerge (Creswell, 2015).

Phenomenological data gathering encompasses a variety of research activities (Vagle, 2018), such as the researcher's engagement in bracketing or epoché and reflection along with rigorous data analysis, which contributes to reducing the data to lived experiences and essential themes.

Husserl (1960) saw transcendental phenomenology (descriptive) as a credible alternative to scientific enquiry methods. He stated that by applying the transcendental reduction process to consciousness, one goes deeper into awareness and reveals a phenomenon's underlying structures. Transcendental phenomenology is based on the original work of Husserl and focuses on the description of the participant's experiences rather than the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The researcher attempts to uncover what it is like to experience the phenomenon under investigation, focusing on describing the first-hand experience accurately so that others can see and feel it (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

The first reduction, known as the transcendental stage, necessitates transcendence from ordinary life's natural attitude through epoché (Neubauer et al., 2019). According to Moustakas (1994), to remain unbiased means to "set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (p. 85) in the process of bracketing or epoché. As such, epoché is one of the most critical steps in any study that uses descriptive phenomenology as its method (Creswell, 2015; Giorgi et al., 2017). The participant's experiences are considered individually in the second phase, and a complete description of the phenomenon's meanings and essences is generated (Moustakas, 1994). The third and final stage in transcendental-phenomenological reduction is to arrive at the phenomenon's essence (Neubauer et al., 2019). Epoché / bracketing the natural attitude to transcend subjective experience, ideas, and suppositions to observe and describe phenomena, objectively aids in identifying the phenomenological essence (Husserl, 1960). Applying epoché will, according to Ataro (2020), increase the scientific rigour of phenomenological research.

For the purposes of effectively applying epoché / bracketing, reflective journaling may be employed throughout to identify personal knowledge, values, and experiences that may influence the findings. In addition, the researcher's thoughts, ideas, and feelings from personal encounters with CSB may be recorded in the researcher's journal, which, if unreflected, may hamper data collection and analysis. Ultimately, this procedure makes it easier to exclude preconceived notions or assumptions about the interview data or findings.

The recounted experiences may then be meticulously analysed to accomplish epoché throughout the data processing, including self-reflection journaling, counselling, consultation with supervisors and other external scholars, member checking, and audit trail. Reflexive journaling and repeated engagement with data are useful to represent the participants' actual narratives and viewpoints. In addition, field notes should be taken during each interview. Furthermore, these practices are used to record bracketed ideas and form an audit trail that improves the data's overall trustworthiness. Accordingly, it becomes easier to suspend judgment or expectations concerning interview data or findings. To ensure the results truly reflect the participants' experiences, every effort should be made to ensure that the researchers do not influence the interview content. As per Leung's (2015) recommendation, rather than enabling past personal and professional experiences to define or overshadow a participant's descriptions of their lived experiences, reflection should allow the data to speak for themselves.

As a safeguard for data integrity, if and when additional clarifications are needed, member checking may be applied. This process entails approaching the participants to seek further clarification. Moreover, this procedure benefits in verifying the accuracy of the researchers' own subjectivity and enhances the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings. This strategy prevents any irrelevant or inaccurate perceptions from being superimposed and allows participants to explain their meaning to their satisfaction via agreed-upon confidential and secure communication media. The research design proposed in this paper is particularly well-suited to offer a platform for accurately amplifying the unique voices of the affected women. Moreover, this method allows for comprehensive exploration, encompassing both the breadth and depth of the topic and the women's experiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has intentionally presented a comprehensive research design rather than any data or findings. Set within an empirical qualitative research framework, this paper has presented a viable model for investigating the lived experiences and impacts of SA/CSB on female partner well-being and represents a timely agenda for future research. Extensive piloting has refined the phenomenological prototype to the point where it merits coverage of its constituent elements. Methodological approaches that are supported by practice-informed techniques promise to advance qualitative empirical discovery in support of a more humane therapeutic theory generation. As such, the research agenda presented in this paper promises to overcome the limitations of previous research approaches (Futrell, 2021; Williams, 2019).

Sexual addiction (SA) and compulsive sexual behaviour (CSB) can have significant personal and interpersonal effects on individuals, their intimate relationships, and society. The adverse effects are multifaceted and may include emotional,

relational, physical, sexual, and/or spiritual consequences, in addition to a range of negative impacts on outlook on life. Descriptive phenomenology can be a purposeful approach to examine unique subjective human experiences in a manner that allows the researcher to capture the shared narratives and 'sit in the speaker's emotions'.

Unlike many physical ailments that readily allow the sufferers to openly (or at times reluctantly) seek and receive care and support, the complexities and sensitivities of human relationships imply that SA/CSB-impacted women may experience a distinct kind of 'disenfranchised suffering', which tends to entail silence, social embarrassment, isolation, and shame, among others. Consequently, affected women in need are hindered—or even prevented—from reaching out for help.

Social scientists commonly use phenomenology research to reveal fascinating perspectives on cognition—consciousness did not arise from a disembodied mind; rather, it evolved via experience (Finlay, 2011). When society has access to the insights that phenomenological research may thus provide, it is better able to comprehend individuals, foster holistic and well-informed perspectives, and facilitate targeted care and support. As a result, this type of qualitative research can increase consciousness and empathy, which in turn can challenge misconceptions and influence the development of new theories, adjustments to societal responses, and changes to social policies.

There is a paucity of systematic qualitative studies illustrating the lived experiences of impacted women following discovery/disclosure of CSB-associated behaviours. Against this background, qualitative methodological approaches were developed for use in the context of studying intimate partner perspectives on SA/CSB and to give voice to and better comprehend this underexplored population. With this aim in mind, this paper described a timely research agenda and approaches to advance knowledge in an incipient domain. This was achieved by situating the investigation within a descriptive phenomenological design. Knowledge obtained using such in-depth qualitative approaches promises to enhance the support to affected women during healing and recovery. Fundamentally, understanding the lived experiences of this group is an essential prerequisite for building this largely uncharted field of research. This promises positive cascading effects for society at large. More specifically, the research design of the current paper is suited to facilitate the validation of experiences and thereby contribute to more appropriate care for women in need.

Given this paper's stated aim of advancing methodological innovation in respect of promoting a better understanding of female partner perspectives on SA/CSB, this article focused on detailing the development and adaptation of qualitative methodology rather than on presenting empirical information. This is argued to be essential and necessary to inform and support other similar qualitative research that may benefit from either adopting or adapting the research approaches presented in this paper. Moreover, this article also contributes to the body of knowledge by conceptualising future research opportunities and contributing to an emergent research agenda. Although SA/CSB is not gender-specific, most people engaging in compulsive behaviours are heterosexual males in committed relationships (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 2000; Kishor et al., 2018). For this reason, this methodological article intentionally focused on female partners using a 'heteronormative' perspective, meaning that it expressly exemplified methodology suited to understanding women in intimate relationships with men who engage in SA/CSBs. Evidently, this emphasis does not imply that there is no need for studies that scrutinise the effects that SA/CSB may have on gay or lesbian couples, or on male partners of females who engage in CSBs. On the contrary, the authors acknowledge alternative sociolinguistic and geodemographic contexts that are characterised by a need for more qualitative research of the kind advocated by this methodological paper, including in relation to age, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, Indigenous communities, and LGBTQ + populations, among others. Furthermore, a better understanding of how partners perceive the effects of their own SA/CSBs on their intimate mates during and following disclosure/discovery also forms part of building this nascent field of investigation (Seyed Aghamiri & Luetz, 2023). This paper conceptualises and supports opportunities for future qualitative research, thus advancing a timely emergent research agenda.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Institutional Review Board Statement This study was conducted according to the guidelines of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) (National Statement (2007) developed jointly by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian Research Council (ARC) and Universities Australia, and published by the Australian Government (2007) https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018 (accessed 19 May 2023). The study was approved by the Alphacrucis Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC no. EC00466) on 31 August 2020 (participant group 1: female partners) and 1 June 2021 (participant group 2: therapists). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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