

Phenomenological Research: Inquiry to Understand the Meanings of People's Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to introduce readers to phenomenological inquiry, an inductive qualitative research approach that is rooted in the philosophical proposition that researchers can gain valuable insight into the structure of how people understand their experiences. It is assumed that there is a structure or essence to the meaning people make of their experiences that can be described and that human experiences are spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, temporal, spatial, etc. Perceptive descriptions of these experiences can inform more humane workplace policy and helpful new theories. To develop such descriptions, researchers must challenge their own and a priori theoretical understandings of the experience. The article presents information about lifeworld, epoche, and essence; major tenets of the approach. Various ways of understanding and conducting phenomenological inquiry are also presented, including examples of how proponents of various viewpoints discuss methodological concerns. Further, the article provides guidelines for conducting phenomenological research, illustrated with examples of online accessible phenomenological studies in a variety of fields that were conducted from different viewpoints. The article stresses the importance of researchers being knowledgeable about the various viewpoints in order to be articulate about their own phenomenological methods decisions.

KEYWORDS

Epoche, Essence, Lifeworld, Methodology, Phenomenological, Qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenological research is a deep investigation of what experiences mean to people. At its core, it concerns the investigation of everyday human experiences in order to learn people's common sense understanding and the meaning they make of their experiences and the experiences of others. Phenomenological research requires a researcher to focus on people's experiences of a phenomenon to obtain comprehensive details that provide a basis for reflective structural analysis that ultimately reveals the essence of the experience.

Phenomenological research provides an opportunity for researchers to help people gain a new understanding of the meaning of these phenomena – these aspects of lived experiences. This qualitative research approach is designed to offer people insight into phenomena such as spiritual organization leaders' quest for wholeness (Thakadipuram, 2010); the lived experiences of outstanding teachers (Amparo, 2013); gay male law enforcement officers' experiences learning to cope in a masculinized industry (Collins & Rocco, 2015); entrepreneurial learning experiences (Cope, 2005); the embodied

experience of taking part in extreme sports (Willig, 2007), experiences with technology (Cilesiz, 2011), and the experience of being mentored (Gibson, 2006; Gibson & Hanes, 2003). Because there is a wide range of things that people can consciously experience (e.g., phenomena such as emotions, decisions, plans, and activities), this research approach has been used in many disciplines and academic fields. Insights gained from this research supports development of more humane workplace practices and policies as well as providing opportunities for inductively developing experience-based theories about phenomena.

Because phenomenological inquiry has its roots in philosophy, it is not surprising that there are multiple branches of phenomenological thought and therefore to ways of thinking about and conducting inquiry about the meaning of human experiences in the lifeworld. It should be noted, however, that researchers conducting phenomenological inquiries typically address the importance of their reflecting on their preconceived notions of and theories about the phenomenon of interest. Further, it should be noted that whatever the branch, these inquiries are typically undertaken to clarify the nuanced essence of people's lived experiences of the phenomenon. This clarification is based on studying, describing, and interpreting people's perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and memories about their experiences.

It is beyond the scope of this article to present more information about the branches. More extensive discussions of the definitions, histories, and tenets of various branches (e.g., existential, hermeneutic, transcendental, historical, ethical, and linguistic phenomenology) may be found on van Manen's open access website (PhenomenologyOnline, 2011) under the tab Orientations. For a view that includes related Eastern philosophy, see Kafle (2010). Because researchers of phenomenological studies typically include discussions of the philosophical and historical grounding of their studies (e.g., Amparo, 2013; Cope, 2005; Gibson & Hanes, 2003; Groenwald, 2004; Willig, 2007), I encourage readers who are interested in conducting phenomenological research to get a sense of how researchers position their work among the branches of phenomenology and use that observation to better understand the research or the guide. Readers can then also reflect on their own philosophical understandings, so that their ensuing research related decisions are aligned with those understandings as well as with what they have learned about the varied practices and philosophical tenets of phenomenological research.

ORIENTING CONCEPTS

The Lifeworld

There are four elements to the lifeworld. One is how we react to the spaces we find ourselves in. Lived space may be the huge open spaces of a sports arena or a cathedral, familiar or foreign spaces, and places we feel safe or where we seek particular experiences. For example, I experienced university graduations differently when one was in a chapel and the other was in a field house. The latter felt more open to casual behavior like walking around and cheering for particular graduates, as if attending an athletic event; in the former, the experience was quieter and more restrained - more akin to attending a solemn religious service. Lived space may concern our workplace cubicles, offices, or modular meeting places. The location where the researcher interacts with study participants becomes part of the research experience for both.

A second element is how we experience time, which may be different from clock time. We may feel that time slows down during a boring meeting and speeds up during our time away from our workplace. Our lived time may include how we experience our chronological age including how we understand our past, our present, and our future. Phenomenological researchers should be sensitive

to how the temporal aspects of experience might inform their investigation. For example, both researchers and adult study participants bring ways of understanding a childhood experience with the phenomenon of interest to the investigation.

A third element is related to the idea that the lifeworld is an intersubjective world in which we live in relationship with each other. In these relationships we create the social world we live in and the meaning of our lives (van Manen, 1990). This intersubjective relationality includes the relationship between researchers and those who they research. Phenomenological researchers try to develop trusting relationships with their participants as part of encouraging participants to feel free to openly describe their experiences with the phenomenon of interest.

Finally, we are always bodily in the spaces of the world and this is part of our experience, as is the fact that we are often interacting physically with others. Our experiences are related to our lived body physicality (e.g., Willig, 2007). For example, cold, thirst, enthusiasm, competence, fear, etc. are all felt in our bodies. Also, we may physically react to the way others react to our bodies. Gibson and Hanes (2003) have reminded researchers that researchers and interviewees are “embodied consciousnesses coming together” (p. 186), noticing and reacting to nonverbal clues. Interviewees may use a researcher’s positive or negative body language, facial expressions, tones of voice to shape their descriptions of their experiences. They might change directions in what they are saying if they sense disapproval, to something that they feel the researcher wants to hear. Researchers should always be aware of this aspect of our intersubjectivity as they seek to understand individuals’ perceptions about their experiences. As our lifeworld increasingly includes virtual interactions through the use of avatars, researchers are turning to understand the essence of this proxy embodiment (e.g., Klevjer, 2012).

In one way or another, describing what the lifeworld consists of – that is, the structures of experience and the principles and concepts that give form and meaning to how we live our lives – has been the project of phenomenology and phenomenological research. This approach is typically traced back to Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German mathematician and philosopher who was searching for a way to bring the study of how conscious human beings understand the meaning of their experiences into formal scholarly scientific research. Psychological inquiry that emulated the natural sciences and treated human behavior as just automatic reactions to external stimuli was not appropriate (Lavery, 2003). He turned to philosophy for a way to establish a new human science, rejecting a view of reality as divided into subjects and objects. Because human consciousness is always directed toward an object (a phenomenon), the nature of an object lies in one’s consciousness of it. His call to study the conscious lived experience of people and developing descriptions of the essence of these experiences has remained at the core of phenomenological research. “The reality of anything is not ‘out there’ in an objective or detached sense but is inextricably tied to one’s consciousness of it” (Schram, 2006, p. 99).

Related to this view of reality is the idea of *intentionality of consciousness*; that is, consciousness is always directed toward a phenomenon. The meaning of a phenomenon thus lies in our consciousness of it. Therefore, to study a phenomenon is to study people’s consciousness of it, the meaning that they make of it. There is no subject-object dichotomy in phenomenological research.

But, as Schwandt (2006, p. 99) has cogently pointed out,

A phenomenological description is not just an idiosyncratic perspective of an experience or subjective opinion of a meaning. The researcher seeks to convey a meaning that is fundamental to the experience no matter which specific individual had the experience. As Polkinghorne (1989) suggests, the reader of a phenomenological study should come away with the feeling, “I understand better what it is like to experience that” (p. 46).

Essence

This concept is related to the underlying tenet in phenomenological research that while there is both particularity and universality to human experience, neither should be neglected in developing the description of the meaning of the phenomenon of interest. In the literature the universal aspect of the phenomenon is often referred to as the essence, but has also been described as the common elements, the essential qualities, the central underlying meaning, the universal structures, the structure, and the invariant structure of the experience. Researchers endeavor to uncover the universal or essential quality of themes that are developed through their analyzing people's experiences. Without these themes the phenomenon would not be what it is. For example, in her study of how teaching is experienced by individuals who have been recognized as outstanding teachers, Amparo (2013, p. 163) found that one of the themes to her description of the phenomenon was that teaching was their life's "compass", because it "guides them and wraps them into meaningful and purposeful lives". Being an excellent teacher was part of their identity, not merely their job or profession. This theme was one theme in the structure of the phenomenon, without which it would be a different phenomenon.

However, it should be noted that the phenomenological research in the U.S. is often more of a constructivist undertaking, where the goal is to better understand how different people understand their experiences with phenomena. If there are essences to the experiences, then they may exist differently between demographically different groups. For example, in this way of thinking, the essence of the phenomenon of being mentored may be different for people of different genders, for people from different ethnic heritages, or for people at different stages of life. The goal may be to identify and describe how an underrepresented group understands its experiences to the literature. Adding these voices may disrupt taken for granted understandings about the phenomenon. To do this, the researcher seeks to understand how a person or specific group of people understand the meaning, structure and essence of their lived experience of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Epoche

A challenge to conducting this type of research is dealing with the understandings, beliefs, and thoughts that researchers bring to their investigation. This is especially challenging because, as van Manen (1990) has pointed out, "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). Therefore, unless we take actions to actively deal with this, our interpretation of the phenomenon will be affected by the common sense, taken for granted assumptions and our knowledge of existing bodies of knowledge that we bring to our investigations and that prevent us from seeing things as they are.

Researchers conducting phenomenological research should engage in the process of epoche; that is, they should "bracket" those attitudes, feelings, and preconceived notions and theories as much as they can in order to "be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). It has been argued that bracketing does not mean that the researcher forgets what has been experienced, but instead, that the researcher does not let that experience interfere with determining the meaning of a selected experience, akin to what jurors are asked to do in a criminal trial when the judge says that a piece of evidence is not admissible. That is, to suspend preconceived knowledge. From a slightly different viewpoint, van Manen (1990, p. 47) has advised researchers to engage in this reflection throughout the study and to "make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories" in order to "hold them deliberately at bay" because only by doubting them and always being ready to challenge them can we keep them from creeping back into our investigation.

METHODS OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

One challenge for researchers conducting phenomenological research is that there is no template for how to conduct it. As noted by Moustakas (1994, p. 104), the methods are “open ended. There are not definitive or exclusive requirements. Each research project holds its own integrity and establishes its own methods and procedures to facilitate the flow of the investigation.” This openness is part of the essence of researchers’ experience of conducting phenomenological research. In addition, it should be noted that this research approach is also based on an assumption that a study is never going to provide a complete description of an experience. Additional studies will always be able to add some new insight to the meaning of an experience. This being said, however, there are useful guidelines that will help researchers, particularly those who are novices to phenomenological research.

Above all, researchers should be reflective and insightful in all aspects of the project, including continually reflecting about their own understandings of the phenomenon, reflecting about their relationship with individuals in their study, and analyzing the life experience material that they have collected. One commonly used strategy for facilitating being reflective is keeping a researcher journal. This is a place for the researcher to note and comment on observations about individuals’ non-verbal behavior during interviews as well as any feelings, thoughts, and insights that they have about the interviews. These notes may be recorded after the interviews, while or after listening to recordings of the interviews or reading transcripts of the interviews. Notes may help the researcher improve interview questions, asking better probing questions. These reflections may help the researcher make meaning of the data; that is, help with phenomenological reduction. Typically, some reflections are also shared with readers of the final report, to allow them to better understand how the researcher made decisions throughout the investigation. Sometimes these reflections explicitly discuss a researcher’s conceptual conflicts and procedural issues that arose in conducting the phenomenological inquiry (e.g., Willig, 2007).

Further useful guidelines have been suggested by van Manen in his book *Researching Lived Experience* (1990). He has provided a detailed guide to the philosophy and research methods associated with an interpretive view of phenomenology. He identified and discussed a “dynamic interplay” among six methodological themes/activities. Researchers are advised to (a) turn to the phenomenon that seriously interests them, one that is important to them; (b) investigate the experience as it is lived, rather than as we theorize about it; (c) reflect on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon; (d) describe the phenomenon through writing and rewriting; (e) maintain a strong, oriented relation to the task of understanding the phenomenon; and (f) keep in mind both the parts and the whole (e.g., how particular concepts or theories overlay our understandings of structure of the phenomenon) in balancing the study. Each of these six activities is discussed in detail in an individual chapter. Specific explanations of concepts, strategies, and examples are included. They are activities to engage in as the researcher makes decisions throughout phenomenological investigations.

Beginning an Investigation

Write and Reflect about Your Own Experience

In turning toward a phenomenon, researchers begin to engage in epoche. They reflect on their own experiences and connections to a human experience that interests them. Whatever the source of that interest, researchers should describe and reflect upon their experience with the phenomenon and their own taken for granted notions of the phenomenon. Researchers should consider writing plainly about their experience, before investigating how it might be described using a theory or using others’ descriptions or explanations that might be found in the literature. I recommend that they write this description, because writing is an integral part of conducting phenomenological research.

Van Manen (1990) has suggested that researchers write a description of at least one particular experience with the phenomenon, perhaps the first experience. The description should include how the researcher felt during that experience; what emotions were part of the experience. He advised

researchers not to ignore their senses, as in how things smelled and sounded in their experience with the phenomenon. The description should be direct. The purpose is not to establish causation or to “beautify” the description. For van Manen, writing this description is to help a researcher reflect upon the experience, and use that analysis to develop a well-defined and well-focused research topic. In addition, it is a good introduction to the researcher reflection and writing tasks that are integral to conducting phenomenological studies. Examples of these accounts may be found on van Manen’s website, PhenomenologyOnline (2011), under the Sources tab (e.g., nurse Pilar Camargo’s account of experiencing the death of a patient and Heather Devine’s account of experiencing a workout and thus, the phenomenology of training).

Become More Knowledgeable about Phenomenology as a Research Approach

As individuals read beyond introductory overviews such as this article, they should *begin* to engage with the phenomenological research authorities such as Max van Manen and Clark Moustakas. This engagement will continue as they conduct the study and make decisions about the focus and methods they employ. This engagement concerns examining their (ontological) ideas about the nature of reality and (epistemological) ideas about what researchers and readers can know about that reality and the authorities’ sometimes divergent ideas to thoughtfully figure out which ideas make the most sense to the researcher. This process should help them make decisions about how to approach research decisions, such as those dealing with their subjectivity and with selecting data sources about human experience.

Develop a Well-Focused, Important Research Topic

Reading about phenomenological research and writing about personal experiences are part of the process of deciding if the research problem being considered is best examined through a phenomenological approach. This research approach is well suited for research undertaken to understand the core, the essence, the meaning of some aspect of individuals’ everyday experiences of a phenomenon. For example, experiences of time, insomnia, being left out, and women’s movement from dependency to autonomy in Moustakas’s (1994) *Phenomenological Research Methods* and van Manen’s (1990) examples of parenting and teaching.

In addition to identifying the phenomenon, researchers should develop an argument concerning the social significance of investigating the selected phenomenon. That is, how investigating and sharing this understanding might help the researcher and readers develop more thoughtful practices and policies. For example, how deepening our understanding of people’s experiences of phenomena such as mentoring, teaching, parenting, professionalism, entrepreneurship, learning, and illness has the potential to inform humane and reasonable workplace practices and policies.

For example, Collins and Rocco (2015) explored gay male law enforcement officers’ experiences. They pointed out that it was not well known how gay men working in the masculinized industry of law enforcement learned to cope with the many challenging and stressful experiences they faced. They found that participants learned how to develop a “survival consciousness” that enabled them to navigate often implied rather than explicit rules of engagement inherent in the hyper-masculinized culture of law enforcement. Based on this, the authors made a strong argument that researchers, educators, and government officials work with law enforcement stakeholders to help bring about more accepting policies and practices for gay law enforcement officers and for the gay community.

Orient Yourself

As researchers orient themselves toward the phenomenon that they are interested in investigating, they should continue to orient themselves away from commitment to a particular theory, framework, or organized set of ideas concerning the experience. This is because these are all particular explanations that act as lenses for how we see the phenomenon, necessarily limiting that vision to what the particular lens we are using makes clear. Researchers should avoid orienting themselves toward a particular

theory or theories at this point in order to remain open to the phenomenon. Otherwise, they may well find it difficult to remain oriented to the phenomenon as they proceed with developing a research question and with gathering data.

Developing a Phenomenological Research Question

At the core, phenomenological research questions are simple questions: What is it like to have a particular experience? As Moustakas (1990) has pointed out, the question is not formulated to “predict or to determine causal relationships”, but rather to “reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience” (p. 105). The question, should flow from and be aligned with why this is an important topic to study. For example, Amparo (2013) described the current contentious and legal and social debates concerning appropriate preparation for and assessment of good teaching. This was part of her argument that there is a crucial piece missing from the discourse: insight into the experience of good teaching that can best be gained through studying “the lived-experience of teachers recognized as outstanding teachers” (p. 7). This led to a research question asking how teaching is experienced by recognized as outstanding teachers. For another, Cope (2005) pointed out that despite a plethora of research about entrepreneurship; the field still lacked a clear understanding of the experience of being a small business entrepreneur, specifically how participants understand what they have learned first-hand from meeting the challenges of starting and managing their small businesses. This led to research questions about the nature of entrepreneurial learning.

Gathering Information about Experiences with the Phenomenon

Part of investigating the phenomenon as it is lived, rather than as we theorize about it, is to remain open to participants’ understanding of the phenomenon of interest. For example, when Gibson decided to investigate the experience of being mentored from the perspective of women faculty, she did not use her definition of mentoring to recruit participants, because it was based on her own understanding of being mentored. Instead, she interviewed faculty members based on their reporting that they had experienced being mentored, thus focusing on participants’ understanding of the phenomenon, rather than the researcher’s (Gibson & Hanes, 2003).

Select Sources of Data

There is no agreed upon number of sources or of participants among phenomenological researchers. The sources of data for phenomenological studies are people who have experienced the phenomenon of interest or literary or other sources of information about people’s experiences with the phenomenon. For Moustakas (1994), individuals’ demographics (e.g., “age, race, religion, ethnic and cultural factors, gender, and political and economic factors”, p. 107) may be general considerations of who to select. For others, who are interested in the experiences of individuals of specific demographics, the demographics of interest may become essential criteria, too. Sources of information might be interactions with people as they engage in an experience. If we participate in an experience with them, then we may hold conversations with them, sharing the experience, taking field notes, photographs, etc. Selection of whom to speak or interact with, or whose work we wish to analyze is always purposeful; based on the criterion that the individual has experienced the phenomenon of interest.

Based on this primary criterion, researchers may interact with some people, interview others individually or in focus groups, and read, or reread a novel whose characters experience the phenomenon in the same project. That is, types of sources may include visual and graphic arts and may be varied in a study. Although in-depth interviews are the most common way to gather data in phenomenological inquiry; that is, inquiry into the meaning of people’s experiences, researchers can also learn about those experiences through novels, diaries, journals, and other stories; through poetry; through art, movies, and other visual and graphic arts; through new media and technologies.

Perceptive and intuitive authors, poets, and artists may explore phenomena such as success, failure, struggle, and hope in their work in ways that allow us to experience the phenomena vicariously and

thus gain useful insight into an aspect of human experience. Researchers may collect experiential materials through participatory observation, where they both participate in the experience and maintain a reflective stance about the meaning of the experience. Van Manen (1990) included a detailed discussion of how phenomenologists may use these myriad sources. For example, he illustrated this idea concerning sources of “concrete occasions” of the phenomenon of children “feeling left or abandoned” included a poem, a novel, a short story, a movie, and someone’s autobiographical account. Other sources of data include documents that participants have written, such as the personal essays about teaching that exemplary teachers had composed in Amparo’s (2013) study.

Recruiting Participants

If conversations are to be held or if people are to be interviewed, then of course, participants are those individuals who meet researchers’ criteria and who agree to speak with them at length and agree that conversations and interviews will be recorded and published. It will facilitate data analysis if they are articulate. It will facilitate data interpretation if they are interested in the project and participate in providing feedback concerning the description of the phenomenon. There are many ways to recruit potential participants, as can be seen in the research discussed below.

Phenomenological researchers often publicize the fact that they are looking for participants through friends, colleagues, social media, professional organizations and networks, etc. After finding a conventional method did not yield participants for a study about the phenomenon of adult learning in contemporary confusing, fragmented, rapidly changing times, where reality can appear unpredictable and ambiguous, Nicolaidis (2015) found that she could recruit highly capable individuals through writing and performing a half hour play about her encounters with ambiguity. After performing the three-act play twice, before a diverse group of consultants and a community service board, and inviting attendees to participate in her study, she was able to select nine adults who met her selection criteria.

Collecting Data

Although human experiences can be investigated through observations, shared interactions, and literature and the arts, it is more typically investigated in phenomenological research by speaking directly with people in conversational, in-depth interviews. Nicolaidis (2015, p. 182) argued that “deep and vulnerable” conversations with participants helped them explore and dialogue about how each of them experienced and understood their encounters with ambiguity. These conversations allowed the researcher and participants to experience shared encounters, leading to fruitful shared efforts to interpret the experience. Other phenomenological researchers have argued for collecting data through transactions that are further along a continuum between Nicolaidis’ working with participants as co-researchers toward more formal researcher directed interviews, where interviewees primarily respond to researcher questions. These may be one in-depth interview or several in-depth interviews. For an example of the former, Gibson (2006, p. 66) conducted in-depth 90- 120 minute “conversational interviews” with women faculty who had experienced mentoring. As an example of the latter, over a period of 15 months, Nicolaidis (2015) conducted three 90-minute face-to-face interviews with each participant in her study and exchanged e-mails with them.

If interviewing is planned, researchers typically develop semi-structured interviews with open ended questions that help participants keep focused on the story of *their* experience. They should be asked for concrete examples or asked what it was like (e.g., what did it feel like) to have that experience. They may be asked to describe the phenomenon (e.g. “ambiguity” in Nicolaidis’s 2015 study). They may be asked what meaning the phenomenon has in their lives. In addition to including what and how “tell me about your experience” questions, participants may be asked to describe or draw their image of the phenomenon (e.g., AIDS; Anderson & Spencer, 2002). Researchers should be prepared to ask a few open questions and to be flexible and based on the replies, be open to asking probing and follow up questions to explore, capture, and ultimately understand each person’s experience.

This includes following up on metaphors that may be introduced by participants (e.g., metaphors for experiencing ambiguity in Nicolaides's study).

Developing and Presenting the Descriptions

Reducing the Data

Analyzing, or reducing, data from these sources is conducted to reveal the essential themes therein. This process may be highly structured or more open and holistic. Whichever specific approach researchers use, this aspect of developing the phenomenological description will involve being reflective about both individual and common experiences. It will involve using intuition and imagination to develop the descriptions. It will involve a lot of writing as the researcher engages in articulating the "underlying themes of meaning that flow through the experiences" (Gibson & Hanes, 2003, p. 193).

Novice phenomenological researchers seeking a structured approach may be attracted to Creswell's simplified version of Moustakas's modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data (2013, pp. 193-194). It should be noted that this approach follows the "suspension" view of bracketing and positions it as part of data analysis, rather than at the beginning of the investigation. Like Creswell (p. 82), I think it more useful to write this description at the beginning of the study.

The goal of this method of analysis is to produce a description that includes both the *what* and the *how* of participants' experience with the phenomenon. There are six steps in this highly structured analysis:

- In order to understand and as much as possible suspend the ideas researchers inevitably bring to the study about the phenomenon of interest, they should begin by describing their own experiences with it.
- The next step is "horizontalization of the data". Researchers should read transcripts of the interviews or other written data to find and construct a list of "significant statements." Each statement concerns how the individuals experienced the phenomenon and all statements are considered to have equal worth. Statements should not overlap in content. Statements should not be repeated in the list.
- The significant statements should then be assembled into larger groups of "meaning units" or themes.
- Using verbatim examples, researchers should write a "textual description" of what happened; what the participants experienced.
- Then researchers should write a "structural description" of how the experience happened. This description is built upon researcher reflections concerning the setting and context of the participants' experience. Imaginative variation is part of this process, systematically imagining possible structural meanings underlying the textual description to illustrate how the experience came to be what it was.
- Finally, researchers should write a composite description of the "essence" of the experience that incorporates both the textual and structural descriptions. This often is presented as a long paragraph that describes what the participants experienced with the phenomenon and the context of how they experienced it.

At the less structured end of a phenomenological data analysis continuum, is van Manen's (1990) analysis that is based on phenomenological reflection, undertaken to grasp and "make explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience" (p. 77). Because it is based on the idea that researchers have written about their experiences with the phenomenon at the beginning of the project, this view of phenomenological analysis calls for continual reflection of that experience in order to continually

challenge preconceptions about the phenomenon throughout the analysis of others' experiences. Analysis may be conducted in a linear line-by-line analysis of the text, examining each sentence or group of sentences to see what each adds to the researcher's understanding the experience. It may involve selecting and highlighting larger portions of the text. It may also involve a more holistic approach, with researchers formulating a phrase that expresses the "fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Researchers should ask what the text they are examining is an example of. Reflections and analyses should be informed by the four fundamental or "existential" themes of human experiences. That is, how we experience space and time, how we experience physical or bodily presence, and how we experience relationships between people.

This process leads to insights about some aspect of the structure of the experience, which may be thought of as themes or focused simplifications of ideas about the structure of the lived experience. Thematic statements may then be used to develop notes and paragraphs, where the researcher begins the non-mechanistic, creative process of developing an explicitly phenomenological description that "permits us to 'see' the deeper significance or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 122). Following initial analysis attempts, the researcher should engage with the literature about the phenomenon.

For examples of more highly structured phenomenological data analysis, see Amparo (2013) and Cope (2005). For examples of less structured data analysis, see Nicolaides (2015) and Thakadipuram (2010).

Getting Feedback about the Description

It is important for researchers to get feedback from participants about the themes and descriptions that they have developed. This helps to provide support for the notion that the researcher is accurately describing the common elements of the participants' experiences. As an example, Thakadipuram (2010) solicited feedback from participants to confirm that the essential themes of the study were agreed upon. The four themes were then used to develop a leadership wholeness model. It is also helpful to get feedback from peers, colleagues, advisors, even from friends. They can help researchers see how to strengthen their analyses and descriptions.

Reporting the Description

There are many ways these descriptions may be presented. Van Manen (1990) has described at least five ways, including thematically. Willig (2007) presented her findings thematically and in a "poetic narrative" composed of participant quotes. Discussions of the descriptions typically include how they were developed and how they might relate to literature about the phenomenon. They also deal with the social significance of the findings; relating the study to personal and professional practice and to potentially fruitful future research.

CONCLUSION

Individuals in a wide variety of fields (e.g., education, nursing, psychology, adult education, business, technology) have used phenomenological research approaches in their quest for insight into the core, the essence, the meaning of phenomena related to their fields. They have gained insight into the meaning people make of their embodied learning, teaching, mentoring, leading, etc. experiences. Such insight has tremendous potential to help professionals to develop more ethical, effective programs and practices for their particular settings (e.g., organizations, institutions, classrooms) and to facilitate productive conversations in the field about developing theory and policy that are rooted in a deeper understanding of the complexity of human experience. For a discussion of both, see Murdoch and Franck (2011).

Although researchers seldom discuss theory generation and building in reports of their phenomenological inquiries, based on the patterns and themes discerned in people's descriptions of their lived-world experiences, theoretical implications emerge from this inherently inductive research approach. Theories about the meanings and implications of phenomena thus generated become stronger when more evidence is provided for their "descriptive power" in a variety of contexts and circumstances (Cope, 2005). This holistic, reflective, experience based, inductive, descriptive, view of theory found in phenomenological inquiry may be seen throughout much qualitative research.

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