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Abstract

Phenomenological researchers generally agree that our central concern is to return to embodied, experiential meanings aiming for fresh, complex, rich description of phenomena as concretely lived. Yet when it comes to deciding how best to carry out this research in practice debates abound. Some approaches to phenomenology emphasize description; others interpretive layers. Some insist on a rigorous, scientific method; others seek more poetic, artistic flourish. In this article, the author offers preliminary thoughts about what unites seemingly divergent phenomenological research approaches. She suggests that the essence of the phenomenological research approach encompasses five mutually dependent and dynamically iterative processes: (a) embracing the phenomenological attitude, (b) entering the lifeworld (through descriptions of experiences), (c) dwelling with horizons of implicit meanings, (d) explicating the phenomenon holistically, and (e) integrating frames of reference. The author argues that studies that focus on experience are not necessarily phenomenological. The line being contested is the extent a study goes beyond subjectivity and into the broader realm of lifeworld experience.

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Prologue: Defining Phenomenology

Perhaps we shall then understand why phenomenology has for so long remained at an initial stage, as a problem to be solved and a hope to be realized. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p.viii)

Phenomenology is an umbrella term encompassing a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches. It is a way of *seeing* how things appear to us through experience. More than a method, phenomenology demands an open way of *being*—one that examines taken-for-granted human situations as they are experienced in everyday life but which go typically unquestioned.

Phenomenological researchers generally agree that our central concern is to return to embodied, experiential meanings of the world directly experienced. We strive for fresh, complex, rich description of phenomena as concretely lived. We ask, “What is this kind of experience like?” “How does the lived world present itself to me?” Yet when it comes to deciding how best to carry out this research in practice, debates abound. Researchers vary in how they enact phenomenological “being and seeing.” Some approaches to phenomenology emphasize description; others interpretive layers. Some insist on a rigorous, scientific method; others seek poetic, artistic flourish (Finlay, 2009). Giorgi (2006, 2011), for instance, critiques variations in the application of phenomenological method taking issue with the approaches of a number of scholars. He claims the ground of descriptive phenomenology as a *human science* as being the most appropriate for the psychology field. Interpretive approaches are challengeable, he suggests, when they (misguidedly) attempt to integrate philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer in praxis.

Numerous distinct methodologies have evolved, including descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, lifeworld approaches, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), and the dialogal approach, to name a few (Finlay, 2011). With such divergence what are our commonalities? What binds our dispersed “family”? Are there general processes that phenomenological researchers tend to engage despite some methodological aspects being mutually exclusive and epistemologically antagonistic? Furthermore, the line between nonphenomenological investigations of subjective experience

and phenomenological ones is often blurred. What makes a study specifically *phenomenological*?

In this article, I suggest that five mutually dependent and fluidly iterative processes unite our seemingly divergent research methodologies: (a) embracing the phenomenological attitude, (b) entering the lifeworld (through descriptions of experiences), (c) dwelling with horizons of implicit meanings, (d) explicating the phenomenon holistically and dialectically, and (e) integrating frames of reference (see Figure 1).

In practice, these processes interfold iteratively and precisely *how* they are engaged varies between researchers and their preferred methodologies. Priorities vary: Some (for instance, Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2010, 2011) emphasize the phenomenological attitude and how to dwell with horizons of implicit meaning; others (such as Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) dwell with implicit horizons whereas scholars such as van Manen (1990) and Todres (2007) emphasize the importance of a resonant explication where the eventual presentation or writing of the research is created to be evocative and textured. Regretfully, there is not the space to adequately work through the contradictory epistemological stances underpinning these different research methodologies.

In this article, I am not offering a method; my project is integrative and broadly thematic. Despite the points of philosophical debate and epistemological dispute between methodologies, I propose there are underlying commonalities in terms of the phenomenological processes engaged. I seek to explicate these, and I apply them by providing a worked example of my own case study research (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008). Drawing on a range of scholarly works, I highlight points where researchers offer competing accounts of how to operationalize the ideas in practice. A final section critically discusses my attempt to unfold the phenomenological research process.

Embracing the Phenomenological Attitude

[Phenomenological reflection] must suspend the faith in the world only so as to *see it*, only so as to read in it the route it has followed in becoming a world for us; it must seek in the world itself the secret of our perceptual bond with it. . . . It must question the world, it must enter into the forest of references that our interrogation arouses in it, it must make it say, finally, what in its silence *it means to say*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, pp. 38-39)

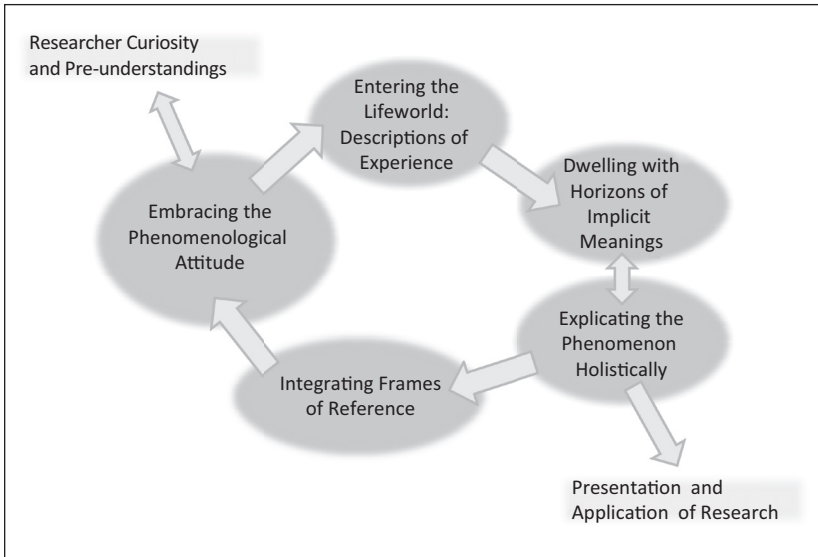


Figure 1. Iterative stages of the phenomenological approach

Phenomenological research starts with the researcher who has a curiosity or passion that is turned into a research question. They want to better understand a particular phenomenon (be it a lived experience, event, or situation) and they forge a “strong relation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 33) to the topic. The aim is not so-called scientific detachment; from the start (inter)subjectivity is embraced. As Binswanger (1963) suggests, we can only understand when we care: “One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be . . . the passion” (p. 83).

The immediate challenge for the researcher having this passion or curiosity is to remain open to new understanding—to be open to the phenomenon—in order to go beyond what they already know from experience or through established knowledge. The researcher starts to engage a phenomenological attitude, which is one of noninterference and wonder. This special way of “seeing with fresh eyes” is the core element distinguishing phenomenology from other research approaches focused on exploring experience and subjectivity (Finlay, 2008). It is such an important aspect that I give it extra space and attention below.

Following Husserl's ideas of the reduction (also known as epoché), in the phenomenological attitude, one's habitual natural taken-for-granted understandings and past knowledge are *bracketed*. "In order to see the world," says Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. xiv), "we must break with our familiar acceptance of it." With this bracketing, critical attention can be paid to present experience of how the phenomenon is presenting in its self-giveness, and here it is necessary to go reflectively beyond or under surface appearance. The researcher seeks to be surprised and pushes away any certainty that something "Is": that it has a certain meaning. Theory and explanation are eschewed to probe this "Is-ness" further. A particular mistake is to see this attitude as something to be engaged in once and for all simply at the beginning of research, perhaps as an attempt to be rigorously objective or to eliminate bias. Instead, the researcher needs to be fully and continuously engaged in managing intrusions of pre-understandings throughout the research. "Enquiry is a continuous beginning" (Merleau-Ponty 1960/1964, p. 161).

Although all phenomenologists go along with the need to be open and not let one's own pet theories and prejudices get in the way, there is disagreement over what exactly should be bracketed and how. For example, Giorgi, takes a thorough-going Husserlian position, adopting a determinedly rigorous, scientific approach to the "reduction"; others such as Walsh (2003) and Finlay (2008) argue that researcher influence is inevitable and must be explicitly acknowledged and worked reflexively (i.e., with critical self-awareness). To give another example, Ashworth (1996) identifies three particular areas of presuppositions that should be set aside to get closer to the lifeworld: (a) scientific theories, knowledge, and explanations; (b) truth or falsity claims being made by participants; (c) personal views and experiences of the researcher. Hermeneutic phenomenologists disagree that the latter point is desirable, let alone possible.

Scientific Phenomenological Reduction

For Husserl (1936/1970, 1962/1977), the phenomenological reduction(s) is a radical self-meditative process whereby the philosopher brackets the natural world and any interpretations in order to let the phenomenon show itself in its essence. Included in this process are, first, "epoché of natural sciences" going back to the natural attitude of experience—what Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. viii) calls the "foreswearing of science"; second, bracketing the "epoché of the natural attitude" allowing a focus on experience, returning to that pregiven world, which proceeds knowledge, then

third, with the “transcendental reduction” the philosopher stands aside from subjective experience and ego, that is, viewing the world as a pure, essential consciousness. Husserl explains that with the phenomenological reduction as a whole, “I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*” (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 152).

There are important differences between a *philosopher’s* reflections, however, and the phenomenological *researcher’s* approach to reflective analysis of descriptions of lived experience. As researchers, we are not engaged in pure reflection, and often we deal with other people’s accounts. Pragmatic, instrumental compromise is needed and that means we must modify philosophers’ ideas when applying them to empirical and psychological research (Giorgi, 2009). A modified form of the reduction is called for—one that emphasizes an open, reflective stance without necessarily entering into Husserl’s transcendental realm. Giorgi calls this modified form the *scientific phenomenological reduction* (expanding Husserl’s “psychological phenomenological reduction” to include *all* human scientists). In this reduction, researchers strive to be fully present to their participants (or to the transcript or text) and what is being described. As part of this disciplined approach, past knowledge (specifically theoretical or scientific understandings) and ontological assumptions (including that the thing “really” exists) need to be held in abeyance. In other words, the objects to which acts of consciousness are directed are not existentially posited. Giorgi (2011) critiques approaches such as IPA, which, he says, focus undue attention on just bracketing assumptions and theory/concepts from outside sources “without bracketing the positing that takes place in the natural attitude” (p. 199). He argues that without this reduction, claims for the phenomenological status of a study cannot be made.

Elaborating the reductive process, Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom, (2008) and Dahlberg (2006) offer the term *bridling* in place of bracketing to evoke the idea of reining in or “restraining of one’s pre-understanding . . . that otherwise would . . . limit the researching openness” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 16). But rather than directing energies backwards into fighting pre-understandings, bridling directs energy into an actively waiting, disciplined, “nonwilling” dwelling-with. Researchers should not “understand too quickly, too carelessly or slovenly” nor should they “make definite what is indefinite” (p. 130).

Wertz (2005) similarly emphasizes a slowing down:

The researcher empathically joins with participants (“coperforms” participant’s involvements) in their lived situation(s). . . . This attitude involves an extreme form of care that savors the situations described in a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies, all the details. This attitude is free of value judgments . . . and instead focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the participant’s experience. (p. 172)

Illustrative Example

A practical example from some case study research I have engaged in illustrates this open, slowed process that sets aside external frames of reference. In this study, we sought to explicate one woman’s lifeworld experience following a cochlear implant (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008). After 50 years of being profoundly deaf, Pat found her world transformed, literally and metaphorically. My challenge as researcher was to set aside my naïve “natural attitude” that having a cochlear implant was a “good” thing as it brought someone who was deaf into hearing. I also needed to try to set aside my identity as a therapist who knew something about the process of rehabilitation and I needed to set aside my own experience of being a surgical patient forced to undergo rehabilitation. At a more profound level, I sought to bracket my habitual way of seeing the world, toward “seeing” it afresh through my “ears.” It was only as I became present to Pat’s intentions and tuned into her experience of facing a bewildering babble of noise that I suddenly discovered a much noisier, and disturbingly colorful, world (Finlay, 2008; Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008).

Hermeneutic Variations

Many contemporary phenomenologists contest the idea that the personal views and experience of the researcher should be “set aside.” It should not be done in pursuit of some scientific ideal, they say. Self-reflection constitutes an important part of the broader phenomenological reflection. Colaizzi (1973), for instance, advocates a process of “individual psychological reflection” (IPR) as an important first step of the research process. Wertz (2005) too finds the idea of researcher self-reflection consistent with a Husserlian application of the epoché of the natural attitude and the process of reflecting on consciousness:

This second epoché and analyses that follow from it allow us to reflect our own experiences and to empathically enter and reflect on the

lived world of other persons in order to apprehend the meanings of the world as they are given to the first-person point of view. The psychologist can investigate his or her own original sphere of experience and also has an intersubjective horizon of experience that allows access to the experiences of others. (Wertz, 2005, p. 168)

Following philosophers who have problematized and challenged Husserl's reduction, hermeneutic researchers (for instance, Todres, 2007; van Manen, 1990) recognize our historical and cultural embeddedness. They argue even more vociferously that they are implicated in what they study. Also, researchers using their own first person experience use only self-reflection. The conundrum then is *how* and *when* to include self-reflection and personal experience as part of the phenomenological attitude. Different researchers negotiate this process differently.

In my view, it is necessary for the researcher to take time to reflect on both *prior and* evolving understandings. Researchers have to know what it is they are striving to bracket in order to be open. Some critical *self*-awareness (i.e., reflexivity) is called for. In my own practice, I see the phenomenological attitude as a kind of reductive-reflexive dance where "the researcher slides between striving for reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight" (Finlay, 2008, p. 1).

Hermeneutic researchers explicitly engage this process when taking into account their own historicity and cultural location and how (inter)subjectivity both opens up and closes down evolving understandings. They examine how their attitudes/values/behaviors affect the research process and findings and how their role as embodied researchers co-constitutes meanings. In short, they are engaged in continually reflecting on interpretations of both their experience and the phenomenon being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of previous understandings and investment in particular research outcomes (Finlay, 2003). It is not enough to identify previous understandings and somehow bracket them. The process is more difficult than that; it is continuous, iterative, layered, and paradoxical (Finlay, 2008). At the same time, phenomenologists also need to guard against getting too self-absorbed, to getting caught up in self-indulgent introspection such that the focus of the research shifts from the phenomenon to the researcher. Equally it is important to avoid situations where hyper-reflexivity results in objectifying ourselves and others.

Entering the Lifeworld (Through Descriptions of Experience)

The body stands before the world and the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of embrace. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 271)

As the researcher moves into the study, a continuing challenge is how to help participants express themselves as directly as possible such that the lived world of experience is revealed. The focus is on the lifeworld—*Lebenswelt*—the matrix of meanings inherent in our ongoing relations with our world. Lifeworld points to our embodied sense of self, which is always in relation to others given through shared language, discourse, culture, and history. We have a sense of time, living in an unfolding present with a determining past and yet-to-be determined future; we are thrown into spatial relationship in the world surrounded by things that have meaning while we engage activities that become our projects. We share lifeworlds with others while also having our own unique vantage point.

Engaging the lifeworld, phenomenologists attend to embodied consciousness, aware that person and world are intentionally and intersubjectively intertwined. The aim of a phenomenological study is to investigate experience as we live it over time, as opposed to how we conceptualize it in a fixed way (van Manen, 1990). Our goal is to move beyond what the participant (or text) says of experience to what is revealed in the telling. This is the source of Husserl's often quoted rallying cry "To the things themselves!" "*zu den Sachen selbst!*" (Husserl, 1911/1980, p. 116). (Churchill [2010, p. 82] explains the German word "*Sachen*" is perhaps better understood as "affairs" or "matters" rather than "things." Thus, "'*Sachen*' of which Husserl spoke were the affairs of our lives—*what matters to us as human beings.*")

Below I suggest that the process of entering the lifeworld involves inviting description and that this is intertwined with a form of empathic listening. This applies both to dialogue with participants and/or to working with texts (including reflections, transcripts, protocols, documents or literary sources).

Inviting Description

To access the lifeworld, the starting point is usually to ask participants to describe what the experience of "x" is like for them (such descriptions may also be obtained through written accounts as well as through more creative

means, e.g., using literature). Phenomenologists seek down-to-earth, richly detailed description of the lived experience rather than abstract intellectualizations or empirical generalities that try to analyze, explain, or theorize. For example, researchers might ask: “Can you describe in detail a time this actually happened to you?” Some prompts to help return the participant to the specific scene or situation can help: “Put yourself in that place, and look around. What do you see/hear/smell?”

The value of returning to such concrete experience helps the research focus on discovering dynamic processes rather than seeing phenomenon as fixed. The lifeworld is always provisional and emergent, never static. We thus need to find ways to access that unfolding as things appear. In existential terms, we are always in the process of becoming; meanings are generated through ongoing experiences over time. Ideally, any descriptions (from participants and then later from the phenomenologist) needs to be able to capture something of this dynamic, ambiguous movement.

Often when a person recalls the experience in detail it can be vividly evoked, almost re-experienced. The researcher needs to stay with this and *stand-with* the participant (or text), encouraging more description, by not foreclosing too quickly by assuming a clear understanding or making interpretations. This is an opportunity to go deeper and possibly ask for more textured description: “As you’re now feeling a little of how it was for you, how are you experiencing it in your body?” Alternatively, more metaphorical description can be invited, such as asking the person “what would its color/sound be if it had one?” (Spinelli, 2007).

From a participant’s perspective, the experience of engaging deep description while being truly seen by another can be profound. In addition to knowing that one’s perspective is witnessed, being listened to opens up potentially transformative space and time, allowing the person to make sense of their experience, perhaps going beyond previous understandings.

Throughout any exploratory dialogue, focus needs to be on the experience rather than on what the person thinks or feels in isolation. Investigations that engage just attitudes, for instance, lose a more holistic appreciation of the experience that is always at once embodied, cognitive-affective, relational, and social. Phenomenologists maintain that experience (of events and situations) cannot be uncoupled from the wider lifeworld. Embodied consciousness of—and relationship with—the world goes beyond personal subjectivity. Rather than simplistically engaging the participant’s subjective feeling of being anxious, for example, richer phenomenological exploration will result by seeing that anxiety as a pervasive atmosphere where the world is experienced as unsafe, where others are perceived as threatening, and where one’s

body becomes alert to danger. Heidegger (1987/2001) refers to the way our ontological disposition (“attunement”) is related to mood as a kind of atmosphere:

When I am in a mood of sadness, then things address me quite differently or not at all. Here we do not mean feeling in the subjective sense. . . . Feeling concerns my whole being-in-the-world. . . . Attunement . . . belongs to being-in-the-world as being addressed by things. (pp. 202-203)

To give an illustration, van den Berg (1972) describes how a person’s world can “collapse,” or how feeling unbalanced they “lose their footing”:

The depressed patient speaks of a world gone gloomy and dark. The flowers have lost their color. . . . The patient suffering from mania . . . finds things full of color and beauty. . . . The schizophrenic patient sees hears and smells indications of a world disaster. . . . The patient is ill; this means that *his world* is ill. (pp. 45-46)

In such descriptions, phenomenologists show their commitment to nonduality—person and world (or body and mind, individual and social, and so forth) are intertwined (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968).

Empathic Listening

Novice researchers can make the mistake of believing participants’ descriptive words (for instance, as presented in written protocols) express the phenomenon and that it is sufficient in research reports just to provide lengthy quotations from participants. The problem is that participants are usually *in the natural attitude* when they reflect on their situation (in a taken-for-granted way). Something more is required to listen—see—beyond this. With reference to reading texts (whether protocols, transcripts, or wider literature), Willis (2010) invites readers to engage a “listening reading” attitude. This involves reading with a reflective, attentive, empathic silence that allows authors to speak to the imagination, heart, and soul. Churchill, Lowery, McNally, and Rao (1998) propose an intuitive *empathic dwelling* toward “feeling into” another’s experience. Elsewhere Churchill (2003, 2010) argues that as we bring ourselves into any face-to-face encounter (and into any subsequent encounter with text), we also bring our bodies. We thus are able to resonate empathically as well as intellectually.

Our listening needs to learn receptiveness, responsiveness, and care. Our listening needs to return to the intertwining of self and other, subject and object; for it is there that the roots of its communicativeness take hold and thrive—and it is there that a non-egological listening-self is sleeping, embedded in the matrix of melodious energies. (Levin, 1989, p. 223)

Such empathic listening and dwelling is enacted alongside the epoché. Here, the researcher tries to stay with the participants' descriptions (or text), becoming ever more open to what is being communicated. In the empathic listening, there is an "attentive being-with" (Todres, 2007) that involves becoming absorbed in the world of another. Imagining the foreground and background of the participant's body-world pulls with it understandings beyond what is explicitly said. In the description, much *more* is offered.

Of course, another's alterity (difference) is always much larger than we can know—what Levinas calls the "infinity of the face of the Other." There is always *more*. In the face-to-face encounter, we bring our respective histories and are tied to one another in both commonality and otherness: "What is the tie between two instants that have between them . . . the whole abyss, that separates the present and death, this margin at once both insignificant and infinite?" (Levinas, 1987, p. 79).

Illustrative Example

To illustrate this process of going beyond participants' words and finding the "*more*," consider the following phenomenological description taken from my case study research with Pat (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008): Through her story of her surgery and subsequent rehabilitation, Pat expressed how her sense of self and the taken-for-granted, comfortable world she knew before surgery had disappeared and how she was thrown into an alien, surreal existence full of hypernoise. Entry into this new world of sounds proved a mixed blessing as she struggled to come to terms with her changing relationships. On good days, she could be exhilarated by all her sensory gains and her feeling of being more connected with and to the world. On bad days she felt distracted and overwhelmed, as if forcibly confronted with the painful reality of her own disability (past and present). The challenge she faced was not simply the cognitive-perceptual one of learning to discriminate between sounds.

Assaulted by the surreal noisiness of the world and finding her relations with others disrupted, Pat felt a disconnection from her world. People's

voices—including those of her husband and children—sounded alien to her and the world felt dangerous. Simultaneously, she was fearful of her own alien-ness—a state that she associated with losing control.

When I saw films where the aliens abducted people and then put a switch on them I was even more affected because I tried to envisage the switch on me. . . . I felt it was going to convert me into something scary. I laughed at the jokes friends did about getting sucked by the magnet into a high lamppost. . . . I was going to be attached to the cars, when I went to the restaurant the cutlery was going to jump at me. . . . In between the jokes there was the fear of changing so much and being under a control of a computer, of hospitals and audiologists and the country itself. (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008, p. 264)

As we sensed the strangeness of how Pat was experiencing both herself and others, we recognized that although she did not explicitly emphasize this, Pat was experiencing anxiety, fear, and a desire to withdraw. Although, over time, she slowly worked through her mixed emotions, she never fully recaptured the openness to others she had experienced previously (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008). Pat was engaged on a journey: She needed to reorientate herself and learn to cope with her transformed self and world. Somehow she had to find a way to integrate, and come to terms with, her past, present, and future *being*. Again, she never quite put this “project” into words.

Dwelling With Horizons of Meaning

[Phenomenological description] must stick close to experience, and yet not limit itself to the empirical but restore to each experience the ontological cipher which marks it internally. (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964, p. 157)

Novice researchers can fall into the trap of spending huge amounts of time and energy on data collection—for example, carrying out interviews—as though that is the real research. In fact, the most significant part of the research comes with the labor-intensive phase of processing data and analyzing meanings. Too often novice researchers deal with data superficially: for instance, simply reporting what was said in the interview. They may then rush to impose categories, and this can only result in a qualitative thematic

analysis that is too generalized. They miss their potentially wondrous opportunity to engage a phenomenon in depth.

It is the researcher's task to engage the phenomenological attitude to go beyond participants' words and reflections (or words in a text) in order to capture something of implicit horizons of meaning and *prereflective* experience (i.e., the actual experience before thinking about it). As Giorgi (2009) explains, the relation between experience and expression is much more complicated: A description portrays some aspects of experience that are figural, but there are also embedded meanings to consider. Researchers need to be present to the situation (the phenomenal world) the participant is describing as a whole to intuit the lifeworld meanings.

The eventual phenomenological description proper that is offered in research reports is thus the researcher's description, *not* the original naïve description. This is illustrated by my case study research where, as researchers, we went beyond Pat's actual words, to intuit and describe her sense of alien-ness in herself and her world. "Research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude" (van Manen, 1990, p. 32).

A further layer of reflection and "seeing" can come from engaging the relationship between researcher and participant. This embodied intersubjective relationship is our primary access to the world of the other. Relational dynamics themselves may reveal something of the phenomenon being discussed (Finlay & Evans, 2009). For example, a participant may be describing a trauma in a distanced, dissociated manner that is similarly received by the researcher. That "cut-offness" is being revealed, perhaps out of awareness, in the relationship.

Analytic Approaches

How researchers approach their analysis will, of course, vary according to the specific phenomenological method they embrace. Giorgi (2009), for instance, is clear about his stages of descriptive phenomenology, which he presents as follows: (a) read for sense of the whole, (b) determination of meaning units, and (c) transformation of participant's natural attitude expressions into phenomenological psychological sensitive expressions, (d) through the use of imaginative variation, the essential structure of experience is articulated. Crucially, it is through the use of phenomenological reductions (including Husserl's eidetic reduction using free imaginative variation) that the essences, or structures of meaning, are disclosed. In contrast, Halling (2008) proposes a dialogal phenomenological method that places emphasis

on working more fluidly and collaboratively. The research process and findings emerge organically through sustained dialogue with others (this includes researchers dialoguing together in a group as well as with participants). The process of applying imaginative variation is recast as “empirical variation.”

Attempting to engage a scientific but flexible approach, Smith et al. (2008) consider the analytic process as multidirectional.

There is a constant shift between different analytic processes. . . . This dynamism is at the heart of good qualitative analysis and is what makes it both exhilarating but also demanding. It is also what allows for the possibility of creative insight and novel outcome. (p. 81)

(For more detailed guidance on how to do particular types of analysis I recommend consulting specific articles, chapters, and books that show the step-by-step working through of methods in practice, such as Wertz [1983, 2010] and Smith et al. [2008].)

Dwelling

Engaging the analysis process involves researchers dwelling with data, examining them and then progressively deepening understandings as meanings come to light. As Romanyshyn (2007, p. 232) romantically puts it, “To . . . loiter in the presence of what is present is to recover the animate flesh. It is the lived body that lingers in an erotic conspiracy with the world.” It is important with such analysis to take time to dwell with the raw data such that *implicit*, layered meanings come to the fore. These may emerge spontaneously as one dwells intensely with small parts of the data. Different understandings assume figural significance against a ground of possible meanings; choice of analysis can be seen to shape emergent understandings. Any one analysis, says Churchill (2000, p. 164), can be presented only as a “tentative statement opening upon a limitless field of possible interpretations.” The analysis process is often a messy one, involving both imaginative leaps of intuition as well as the systematic working through of many iterative versions. Early versions often bear little resemblance to the neatly packaged themes or more literary accounts we see outlined eventually in research papers.

Thus, the analytic process involves a focused act of discovering out of silence, sediments of meaning, nuance, and texture. The more you dwell, the more you will feel yourself engaging the phenomenon, perhaps reexperiencing the sense of it. Wertz (1985, p. 174) describes it well: “When we stop and

linger with something, it secretes its sense and its full significance becomes . . . amplified.”

At its best, the process of doing the analysis becomes an *embodied lived experience* in itself, not simply a cognitive, intellectual exercise. When I am immersed in an analysis I am there sensing, savoring, moving with, empathizing, responding, and resonating with my whole body-self. As I worked through the analysis of my data from the research with Pat, for example, I relived my conversations with her and “re-membered” (re-embodied) a walk we took in the woods together. I experienced such transformational insight as I laid aside my habitual listening and awareness of sound in order to tune into Pat’s raucous nascent world (Finlay, 2011).

Given the complex, ambivalent, and ambiguous nature of human experience, it remains an ongoing challenge to make sense of our ambiguous human being-world. Analysis, in my view, should be judged on its capacity to capture in words something of these layers. The key question is, “Does the analysis bring the phenomenon to life?” My personal advice for novice researchers embarking on phenomenological analysis is to seek, in whatever way they can, richness in complexity, depth in ambivalence, and poignancy in paradox (Finlay, 2011).

Explicating the Phenomenon Holistically

To understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being . . . *to hear what it says*. . . . The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of “psychic reality” spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said . . . it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 155)

The process of explicating the phenomenon holistically involves first becoming absorbed in and unwrapping layers of meaning and then finding ways to explicate the phenomenon such that it lives. The challenge throughout is to be able to appreciate something of the profound complexity that lies at the heart of lifeworld phenomenon; to become aware of different perspectives; and to enable another to see or hear differently. In the words of Jager (1975, p. 39), “To see truly . . . turns out to be a multifaceted holistic movement in which each aspect must be interpenetrated with all others.”

The debate at stake when deciding *how* to explicate findings depends on whether phenomenology is embraced primarily as science or art. Giorgi

(2011) requires phenomenological methods to be scientific and replicable, denying idiosyncratic procedures. He critiques other phenomenological methods for being too flexible. If a “method only suggests steps it is not truly a method” (Giorgi, 2011, p. 208). Others such as van Manen (1990) and Smith et al. (2009) argue we cannot be so prescriptive when taking a hermeneutic approach. Jager, another hermeneutic scholar, goes further by challenging the terms of any “method” debate. He argues for an approach to phenomenology that eschews scientific method in favor of the humanities. Taking up van den Berg’s project, he calls for a “psychology less bound to the world of natural sciences and more attuned to the inhabited human world as it is explored by the arts and humanities” (Jager, 2011, p. 9).

Unwrapping Layered Understandings

As indicated in the previous section, the focus of any explication needs to be on unpacking both manifest and hidden meanings through iteratively examining the data. Wertz (2011) summarizes the process in terms of exploring the participants’ intentionality (their consciousness of) and lifeworld:

The researcher then reflects on the person’s intentionality with respect to their situation, holistically explicating the organization of constituent processes and meanings, including the person’s embodied selfhood, emotionality, agency, social relations, and temporality. . . . When conducted methodically, this approach is characterized by meticulous and thorough description that achieves fidelity to psychological life. (p. 133)

Other phenomenologists also suggest that reflection can be usefully guided by explicitly referring to universal lifeworld elements. Van Manen (1990), for instance, identifies four fundamental lifeworld themes (“existentials”): lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived relations. Ashworth (2003, 2006) proposes the concept of “lifeworld fractions” of embodiment, selfhood, spatiality, temporality, sociality, mood-as-atmosphere, project, discourse, freedom, and historicity. Whichever typology is adopted, lifeworld concepts such as embodiment and temporality provide a useful focus for analysis and can structure any writing up. “Disrupted body-world relations” (highlighting embodiment) or “Being an outsider” (highlighting spatiality and self-identity) are two examples of themes created from lifeworld elements.

Returning to my case study illustration of Pat’s experience, in our analysis one theme we focused on was one we titled “*Mood-as-atmosphere: Feeling ‘alien’ and ‘alienated’*”:

Assaulted by the surreal noisiness of the world and finding her relations with others disrupted, Pat feels a disconnection from her world. People's voices—including those of her husband and children, the individuals with whom she is most intimate—sound alien to her. At the same time she is fearful of her own alien-ness—a state which she associates with losing control. (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008, p. 265)

For Seamon (in press), different perspectives can be taken by considering phenomenon “holistically,” “dialectically,” and “as process.” He demonstrates this layered analysis by using the example of *place* (i.e., physical, historical, cultural, and intersubjective location). *Holistic* understanding involves appreciating the way person and world are intertwined and how attachment to place cannot be reduced to subjectivist emotional understanding or objectivist cultural understanding. *Dialectical* understanding of place taps into movement and rest, inward and outward dimensions, homeworld and alienworld. Finally, place attachment as *process* acknowledges that we are ever changing as we inhabit place.

By insisting on the lived reciprocity of self-place and becoming-through-place, Seamon enters the arena of Husserl's *generative*—rather than static—phenomenology, which was further developed by Steinbock (1995). Generative phenomenology is a critical reflection on, and participation in, the intersubjective historicity of phenomena. Any description is transformed in the very process of being described, says Steinbock, so it is “incumbent upon phenomenology to take account of the constitutive shifts introduced by the phenomenologist into the phenomenon, which in turn modifies the analysis” (p. 268).

Ultimately, whatever meanings are articulated in research, much more remains *unsaid* and our findings always remain provisional, partial and emergent. The relationship between the “said” (explicit) and the “unsaid” (implicit) remains obscure. Bodily, relational understanding exceeds any language description we can come up with. “All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is within it an infinity of meanings to be elaborated” (Levin, 1997, p. 63).

We must actually do the work that summons us from a place beyond ourselves, and in the end we must let it go back to that place as we are called back to life. This is the archetypal rhythm of an imaginal approach to re-search that keeps soul in mind, a pulse that finally, at the end of the work, registers the difference between what has been said in the work and the soul of the work that remains unsaid. (Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 80)

Creating Rigorous and Evocative Findings

Having identified some of the meanings to be expressed, the phenomenologist is then faced with further challenges. How to produce the findings systematically in a way that portrays experience in its rich and dialectical, ambiguous complexity? How to communicate effectively with one's readers at both an intellectual and personal level? (Halling, 2002). This phase of the journey

demands the faithful transmission of the message of the oracle back to the city; it requires the theorist to prepare for his audience, to recollect the major aspect of his journey, to bring order and relevance to a chaotic mass of events. (Jager, 1975, p. 38)

Phenomenological writing needs to describe, and describe well. Perhaps more than is the case in any other qualitative research approach, phenomenologists are required to be attentive to the way we express our findings. How can we develop rich descriptions that are faithful to the phenomenon that evoke the embodied lived world? How can we enact both scientific and communicative concerns? How are we to express findings in ways that are systematically rigorous yet also graceful, poignant, and elegant (Polkinghorne, 1983)?

Those embracing phenomenology as a *human science* (such as those following Husserl's project of philosophy as a rigorous science, employing phenomenology as method) will be committed to ensuring research is conducted in systematic, verifiable ways. In descriptive phenomenology, for instance, research steps are made explicit and sequential allowing them to be performed again by different researchers. Idiosyncratic, variable, and artistic forms cannot, in this view, claim scientific status (Applebaum, 2012).

Other approaches will demonstrate rigor by offering examples and quotations from the data to illustrate points made and bring readers into close relationship with the phenomenon (Halling, 2002). For many researchers, this means providing quotations from participants to make transparent the evidentiary base of any analytical claims. Smith et al. (2009), for instance, argue that IPA studies become more plausible and persuasive by presenting an evidence trail: For small IPA sample sizes, they suggest that quotations from each participant should probably be supplied.

Researchers need to consider how their research is written or presented (and for those specifically championing a humanities approach to phenomenology this becomes a priority). Following the Utrecht phenomenological tradition, van Manen (1990, 2007) advocates the inclusion of an artistic

dimension so as to “stir our pedagogical, psychological or professional sensibilities” (van Manen, 2007, p. 25). A phenomenological text is most successful, he declares, when readers feel directly addressed by it: “Textual emotion, textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement” (van Manen, 1990, pp. 129). Similarly, in his book on *Embodied Inquiry*, Todres (2007) follows Heidegger and explores the mysterious relation between language and Being. As he sees it,

The “unsaid” (i.e., implicit meanings), lives always exceedingly as that which the said is about. Speech in a broad sense is pregnant with this excess . . . the shape of understanding is first ‘wet through’ by the insight of intimate participation and this can come to language in tentative ways. (p. 19)

Researchers can facilitate this embodied understanding by making it “habitable” for others and by evoking lived experience through words in a lively, engaged way that communicates a sense of bodily *being-there*. For example, if themes or narratives are to be presented, can the ambiguity of the experience be expressed in an evocative way? Perhaps themes can set out to capture ambivalence by describing an experience as evoking “shame *and* pride” or “longing *and* belonging.” Alternatively, are there any metaphors that might be used in the service of description: for example, “wounded healer” or “feeling pregnant with excess”?

Our concern for “texture” as well as “structure” (Todres, 2007) in our phenomenological enquiry allows us to engage more holistic, layered forms of knowing. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. xxi) tells us the “dialogue and infinite meditation” of phenomenology never knows where it is going even as it attempts to remain “faithful to its intention” of disclosing the world. Thus, the “unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it” is highlighted.

Integrating Frames of Reference

Husserl’s essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xv)

Engaging Phenomenological Philosophy

At various points in the explication of a phenomenon there will be an opportunity to engage scholarly contemplation of the wider contexts and literature. In particular, phenomenological philosophy can become a lens through which to deepen the analysis of lived worlds. Phenomenological philosophy both integrates the explication and needs to be integrated itself. I might even question the extent a study is phenomenological if it is not anchored explicitly in phenomenological philosophy (*either* in terms of its method *or* in the service of the description).

Which form or variant of phenomenological philosophy is used, and how, is a matter of choice and debate. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology avowedly engages Husserlian ideas to ground the method whereas the dialogal approach of Halling (2008) and colleagues returns researchers to the work of philosophers such as Buber and Gadamer. Mook (2009) applies van den Berg's method of metabletics to trace ideas through history and culture. Dahlberg et al.'s (2008) Reflective Lifeworld approach, and Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA, are underpinned by hermeneutic-phenomenological values. Other hermeneutic scholars such as Churchill (2003), Jager (2010), Mugerauer (1994, 2008), Seamon (1980), Simms (2008), and Todres (2007) explicitly draw on theories of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger to explicate their phenomenon of focus.

Illustrative Example

In the case study research with Pat, we drew on Heideggerian concepts of *Unheimlichkeit* and attunement to angst to deepen understandings of her experience of alienness. The philosophy gave us a vehicle to explore and highlight the dialectical ambiguity of her experience as something in process and part of her *being* trajectory:

Svenaesus (2000a, b) argues that illness is often experienced as an obtrusive feeling of not-being-at-home. Here, our lived body is uncannily experienced as something "other than me"; something that is out of my control. As Svenaesus puts it, "Illness is an uncanny and unhomelike experience since the otherness of the body then presents itself in an obtrusive, merciless way." (Svenaesus, 2000b, p. 131)

While Pat is not suffering from any illness, she feels “ill at ease” with her new implant. She does not feel at home; she feels her body to be alien and sees those around her as alien-like beings. Her implant has brought her face to face with her feelings of alienation—previously buried beneath the taken-for-granted life in which she had been apt to deny the extent of her disability. At the same time, her new experiences allow her the opportunity to question her existence and open up the possibility for new authentic *Being*. (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008, p. 264)

Other Interpretive Frames

Explicit use of references to phenomenological philosophy can thus help researchers engage in layered, horizontal analysis, that is, seeing from different horizons and perspectives. This is not an exercise of in external theory to bear to *explain* or *interpret* experience as such a move would divert the researcher away from the phenomenological path of description. Many phenomenologists will probe etymological sources and engage historical or literary texts (see the various accounts in Embree, Barber, & Nenon, 2010). A net might be cast wide across time and space; classical history, myths, and legends may be engaged, as in the work of Jager (2011); or contemporary cultural and literary forms may be invoked (as seen in Seamon, 1993, 2010). However, care needs to be taken when importing outside material and only doing so because the data or method seems to invite it. Outside theory and references might legitimately be brought in (particularly with hermeneutic projects) to enrich an analysis or raise further questions, as long as the focus remains on description rather than interpretively importing theory in a questionable attempt to find the “real” meanings. In contrast, descriptive phenomenologists argue the “most important criterion” is that “one neither adds nor subtracts from the invariant intentional object arrived at, but describes it precisely as it presents itself” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 137).

Smith et al. (2009), considering an alternative approach, accept the possibility of linking an IPA investigation with, say, psychoanalytic, discursive, or critical theory discussion to illuminate a description, though they caution against importing material with different epistemological commitments. Of relevance here is Ricoeur’s (1976) distinction of the following: (a) the “hermeneutics of meaning-recollection” (empathy), which aims for greater understanding of the thing to be analyzed in its own terms, where meanings are brought out and (b) the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which involves more radical interpretation where external sources are used to challenge surface accounts.

It is ironic that phenomenologists (who champion the nondualist cause) are often pressed to line up with either the descriptive or hermeneutic camps. In practice, the space between description and interpretation is ambiguous. If phenomenological researchers engage wider literature (phenomenological or otherwise) to help elaborate meanings, is interpretation necessarily involved? Much depends on how the term interpretation is understood. If interpretations are used to account for data and explain *why* an experience occurs, then the project is moving away from phenomenology. Van Manen (1990) suggests that when description is mediated by nonverbal aspects, artwork, or texts, a stronger element of interpretation is inevitably involved. However, drawing on Gadamer's ideas, he helpfully distinguishes between interpretation as pointing *to* something (interpretation suited to phenomenological description) and interpretation as pointing *out* the meaning of something by imposing an external framework (such as when offering a psychoanalytic interpretation). Wertz (2005) picks up the former sense when he argues that "‘interpretation’ may be used, and may be called for, in order to contextually grasp parts within larger wholes, as long as it remains descriptively grounded" (p. 175).

Epilogue: Phenomenology as Project

The world is not what I think, but what I live through. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, pp. xvi-xvii)

In this article, I have ambitiously—perhaps presumptuously—attempted to offer benchmarks for unfolding phenomenological processes of "seeing" and realizing understanding. My aim has been to suggest *tentatively* the dynamic interplay of elemental structures implicated (van Manen, 1990). This is not an attempt to specify or reify a method. We already have numerous established methods available: for example, those laid out by Dalhberg et al. (2008), Giorgi (2009), Halling (2008), and Smith et al. (2009). Instead, I have sought to take a step back to reconsider our phenomenological project as a whole.

Is my attempt foolhardy? Perhaps. But I think it important that I have made the attempt, and that I have tried to do so with an open, phenomenological attitude. Reflecting on the nature of our work as seen in research practice and publications, I have sought to engage a process of free imaginative variation as part of the phenomenological attitude. In this process I have tried to remove or change aspects in order to distinguish essential features from incidental or particular ones (Wertz, 2010). It seems to me that all five processes specified in this article are involved in phenomenological research *across the*

spectrum of the different approaches available, for all that there is variation in the way the processes are operationalized. Without explicitly engaging some version of the *phenomenological attitude*, can the research be considered specifically phenomenological? I would say “not.” Without the phenomenological attitude, we are left with a subjective account of lived experience—territory many other qualitative methodologies would claim (see, for instance, Wertz et al., 2011). Similarly, there needs to be a focus on *description* (from participant, text, or researcher) and an attempt to *dwell with horizons of meaning*. If the overall purpose of the study is not primarily description, then the study is not phenomenology. Without the detailed dwelling, surely one is just left with a straightforwardly general qualitative analysis. Is it necessary to *explicate holistically* and to have an anchor in *phenomenological philosophy*? I would say “yes” and “probably,” respectively. If an account focuses in a reductionist, partial way, say on cognition, then a basic tenet of philosophical phenomenology as eschewing duality is broken. Probably the work should not even be seen as phenomenology. But these questions remain a matter for continued debate.

The blurred line between phenomenological and “phenomenologically inspired” is likely to continue to puzzle. It is a moot point whether or not the distinctions matter. If a study captures lived experience, does it matter what it is called? Does it matter if its phenomenological or philosophical credentials are thin? My inclination is to take an inclusive approach while calling for critical attention to be paid to the values and philosophies that lead us to particular perspectives. You may disagree and seek to hold tighter boundaries. The debate that I invite you to engage is whether phenomenology in the specific field of psychology should be more narrowly ring-fenced. Should it only be a rigorous human scientific method? Is there a way to engage a human science as a “praxis in which neither the human realm of meaning nor scientific rigor is sacrificed” (Applebaum, 2012, p. 41)?

A number of legitimate criticisms can be raised against my attempt to specify the phenomenological approach. First, the model in Figure 1 could be criticized for attempting to model something that by definition needs to emerge organically and to remain indefinite. Given that the phenomena we study are ever changing, we need methods that are responsive to the dynamic and dialectical. We thus should not foreclose on our project too quickly or too definitely. And surely our methods need to evolve with the times? Phenomenology is itself an evolving approach as contemporary scholars build on the work of its founders (Zayed, 2008). How can there not be ongoing variation, given the multiplicity of factors: different researchers, different disciplines, different primary philosophers, different points in history and

culture? For now, I can only sketch a provisional map of the kind of research I see in practice in my world as a practitioner and phenomenological researcher. As van den Berg argues (1971, p. 348), knowledge and understanding should be “sought in the continuously changing nature, structure, form and organization of that country, of that time . . . of which each individual constitutes a part.”

Second, it could be argued that by arguing at such a general level, I have run the risk of turning our methodology into something vague, in the process sacrificing the epistemological clarity, elegance, and/or rigor that specified approaches offer. Perhaps so. I prefer to leave the process of doing phenomenology open to being applied organically and creatively, if judiciously. I want to leave room for the researcher or scholar to find their own way. And I celebrate the diversity that results even if some confusion reigns.

Caveats aside, I value our common heritage and see it as something that requires emphasis and celebration. Inspired by the fact that for many of us phenomenology is something of a calling, I have in the course of this article sought to identify and put into words what it is that “calls” us so powerfully and insistently. For the details of different methods and specific accounts of how to do phenomenology, I urge readers to return to the original sources. For within the various empirical and/or literary manifestations of research work (straddling both the human sciences and the humanities) can be found the extraordinary world that phenomenology opens up. Surely, if we are not drawn into new discoveries and “see” the world in a different way, then our phenomenology is not achieving its potential (Finlay, 2011).

And sometimes . . . we might just eschew method altogether and revel in the possibilities offered by phenomenology as an open way of *being*.

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Bio



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