

Handbook of Research Design & Social Measurement

PHENOMENOLOGY

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PHENOMENOLOGY

Whereas narrative research reports the life experiences of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of the lived experiences surrounding a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists explore the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). It has roots in the philosophical perspectives of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and philosophical discussions by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1982), and it has been used in the social and human sciences, especially in sociology (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992; Swingewood, 1991), psychology (Giorgi, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989, 1994), nursing and the health sciences (Nieswiadomy, 1993; Oiler, 1986), and education (Tesch, 1988).

The history of phenomenology started with the German mathematician Edmund Husserl and his extensive writings addressing phenomenological philosophy from 1913 until his retirement (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). Husserl's ideas were abstract, and, as late as 1945, Merleau-Ponty (1962) raised the question, "What is phenomenology?" in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. In fact, Husserl was known to call any project currently under way "phenomenology" (Natanson, 1973).

Husserl emphasized many points (Moustakas, 1994; Natanson, 1973). Researchers search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience. They emphasize the intentionality of consciousness, in which experiences contain both an outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning. Phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings. The researcher also sets aside all prejudgments, brackets his or her experiences (a return to "natural science"), and relies on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience.

From these philosophic tenets, four themes are discernible (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990).

4.5.1 Variants

The individuals who embrace these tenets and carry them forward in intellectual thought come from many social sciences areas, especially sociology and psychology, and they form different philosophical camps, such as reflective/transcendental phenomenology, dialogical phenomenology, empirical phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and social phenomenology (Barritt, 1986; Tesch, 1990). We will briefly mention social phenomenology and focus attention on psychological phenomenology as expressed through empirical/transcendental phenomenology.

The sociological perspective, social phenomenology, owes much to Schutz, who articulated the essence of phenomenology for studying social acts (Swingewood, 1991). Schutz was interested in how ordinary members of society constitute the world of everyday life, especially how individuals consciously develop meaning out of social interactions (people interacting with each other). As an extension of Schutz's thinking, Garfinkel called this approach ethnomethodology, a way to examine how individuals in society make meaning of their everyday life. Often drawing on ethnography and cultural themes, ethnomethodology relied on methods of analyzing everyday talk (Swingewood, 1991).

The psychological approach also focuses on the meaning of experiences, but it has found individual experiences, not group experiences, to be central. As presented in the *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology*, the central tenets of this thinking are

to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences of structures of the experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13)

Moustakas (1994) proceeds to elaborate a type of phenomenology, “transcendental phenomenology,” which traces back to Husserl but places more emphasis on bracketing out the researcher's preconceptions (i.e., epoche) and developing universal structures based on “what” people experience and “how.”

4.5.2 Key Elements in Phenomenological Research

The conduct of psychological phenomenology has been addressed in a number of writings, including Dukes (1984), Tesch (1990), Giorgi (1985,1994), Polkinghorne (1989), and Moustakas (1994), and there is general consensus about how to proceed (Oiler, 1986). But these methods, “based on phenomenological principles...function as general guidelines or outlines, and researchers are expected to develop plans of study especially suited to understanding the particular experiential phenomenon that is the object of their study” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 44). With this caveat in mind, we will summarize the major procedural elements in using phenomenology.

Researchers need to understand the philosophical perspectives behind the approach, especially the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon. The concept of “epoche” is central, where researchers bracket their own preconceived ideas about the phenomenon to understand it through the voices of the informants (Field & Morse, 1985). Investigators write research questions that explore the meaning of that experience for individuals, and they ask individuals to describe their everyday “lived” experiences. They then collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Typically this information is collected through long interviews (augmented [p. 153 ↓] with researcher self-reflection and previously developed descriptions from artistic works) with groups of informants ranging in size from 5 to 25 members (Polkinghorne, 1989). This information is further analyzed by developing broad themes about the individuals’ experiences and constructing a detailed description that presents the “essence” of the phenomenon for the individuals being studied. The reader of the report should come away with the feeling that “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

4.5.3 Procedures for Conducting a Phenomenological Study

The elements become central features in the procedures for conducting a phenomenological study. In these steps, the phenomenological analysis is generally similar for all psychological phenomenologists who discuss the methods (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

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