Phenomenological Research Methods: Extensions of Husserl and Heidegger

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ABSTRACT

The relevance to understanding the lived experience and consciousness is the focus of a movement that began in the early part of the 20th Century. Phenomenology is a movement that explores the lived experience of a given phenomenon. Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger were two of the most prominent philosophers who spearheaded this movement and subsequently, they developed their own distinct philosophical approaches and methods of inquiry as means to exploring and understanding the human experience. Various and more distinctive psychological research approaches emerged in other disciplines from the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger, and the researchers who developed these methods contribute to expanding repertoires aimed at understanding of the human experience.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Phenomenological research methods; The lived experience; Husserl; Heidegger

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenological research methods are grounded in the rich traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics and especially the philosophical views of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Central to Husserl's claim is that the essence of a phenomenon could be understood through an investigation and description concerning core components of one's experience while suspending suppositions [1,2]. Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic view expanded on Husserl's work by moving beyond description and giving priority to interpretation, as he proposed that meaning is embedded in everyday contexts [3].

Consequently, a wide range of phenomenological research methodologies have been developed to examine and understand the subjective experience as it relates to a social or psychological phenomenon. Exploring phenomenological research methods that have emerged from both perspectives and clarifying differences may inform the researcher on a suitable design for a given phenomenological study [4,5]. This paper will discuss phenomenological research methods and draw comparisons on the basis of intended purpose, role of the researcher, approaches for data collection and data analysis to illustrate the range of methods available. To this end, the researcher may conceptualize the body of phenomenological research methodologies as a collection of methods that offer a multitude of pathways, all of which are uniquely yet collectively designed to shed light on the human experience.

Descriptive or Interpretive?

Descriptive oriented phenomenological research methods maintain that capturing a vivid and precise description concerning the perception of the lived experience can lead to understanding the essence of the phenomenon under study. As such, a research question may ask what it is like to experience a phenomenon [5]. Given that the primary aim is to capture an accurate description of a participant's experience, the researcher sets aside his or her own prior experiences, theories and suppositions. In phenomenological terms, the researcher brackets his or her personal dimensions. Bracketing is especially crucial during the data collection and data analysis process [2,3,6].

On the other hand, interpretive oriented phenomenological research is concerned with studying the lived experience whereby meaning is embedded in the experience. As such, one's experience of the phenomenon and how meaning is formulated from it can be understood by means of interpretation. Thus, a research question may ask what it is like to be with respect to the given phenomenon [5]. By understanding how one makes meaning of the experience, core components of the

phenomenon can be drawn out, analyzed, interpreted and revealed. In light of this, the researcher cannot wholly detach from his or her own presuppositions [2] nor should the researcher pretend that it is entirely possible to do so [6].

Description: Science or Technique?

Amedeo Giorgi [1] extended Husserl's philosophy to the realm of psychological research by developing a sound, rigorous and systematic qualitative research approach. Central to his descriptive phenomenological method is objectivity and description, as opposed to interpretation and explanation. At the same time, bracketing on part of the researcher takes place during the entire study. Giorgi's method is characterized as highly scientific, rigorous and objective in comparison to other phenomenological research methods [2,3].

According to Giorgi [1] the researcher is narrowly focused on capturing rich descriptions of experiences within their settings. As interviews are unstructured, open-ended questions are used to gather information about one's experiences, feelings, beliefs, convictions and perceptions with respect to the phenomenon under study [6]. In practice, the researcher encourages the participant to describe an experience in as much detail as possible. The researcher connects with the participant in such an open and visceral manner that the essence of the lived experience emerges and becomes evident [1,5].

Giorgi's [1] eidetic reduction is part of a data explication strategy that is designed to identify the core components that make up the essence of the phenomenon. To remain true to the facts, the researcher must be concerned with reduction of irrelevant data in order to identify individual psychological structures that emerge from descriptive data. The researcher's data analysis approach is more concerned with data explication than data analysis. The aim is to create an overall statement that mirrors the essential structure of the phenomenon [3,6].

As a proponent of Husserl, Patricia Sanders [7] developed her phenomenological research method, which is particularly applied in organization contexts [3]. Like Giorgi, Sanders places emphasis on accurate descriptions of how things are within a given context. However, the value of translating implicit components into explicit meanings to reflect on the lived experience is amplified. Sanders reaches beyond the dialogue by advocating that documents and participant observation can elicit rich, descriptive narratives [3]. Although bracketing also remains crucial, the essence is unearthed through reflectively describing noetic correlates [7], or meaning units.

The technical aspects ensconced in Sanders's [7] method also place an emphasis on developing narrative themes during data analysis. As such, a reflection on the themes further establishes what and how the phenomenon is experienced. For Sanders, it is the fusion of the two components that represents the individual's perception, and which stands behind the reality of the phenomenon [3]. Slightly moving away from Giorgi's strict emphasis on the science of description, the aim of the analysis is to create more of what constitutes a reflective report rather than a description.

Interpretation: Craft or Art?

Jonathan Smith's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method largely stems from Heidegger's view. IPA is primarily an idiographic approach, as the main purpose is to offer insights on how the individual makes sense of a given phenomenon [3,4,8]. Traditionally, the phenomenon under study relates to personally significant experiences, such as major life events or significant relationships. IPA is especially employed by researchers who are attracted to heuristics and discovery [8].

What sets IPA apart from other varieties is its distinct fusion of psychological, interpretative, and idiographic elements. This unique marriage reminds the researcher that his or her personal experience may impact the research. Therefore, it is imperative that the importance of bracketing is recognized by the researcher throughout the research process. Smith's method is likened to a craft [3], as the researcher is free to interpret the experience as it is described [8]. Semi-structured interviews are best suited for data collection activities insomuch as the researcher guides the discussion to elicit meaning that is constructed from the experience. Case studies, observations and focus groups are also viewed as useful means to shed light on particular contexts [3].

The IPA approach is focused on extracting meaning through the close analysis of words and behavior. It is important to note that during the data collection and data analysis process, the researcher simultaneously takes into account a double hermeneutic approach [3]. In other words, the overall purpose of the study centers on the interpreting the participant's interpretation of the experience. What follows is an analysis that reflects on what has been captured and interpreted from the emergent themes. The aim of the analysis is to create a narrative account which reflects on the meaning of the experience, including corroborative verbatim statements from participants' responses [8].

DISCUSSION

Furthering the point of departure from the discussed practices, Max Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology method is grounded in both Husserl's and Heidegger's view inasmuch as it straddles both a descriptive and an interpretive approach [3,4,9]. Similar to his colleagues, Van Manen is interested in the essence of a phenomenon through description. However, his approach is characterized as an art, as opposed to a science, technique or craft, per Giorgi, Sanders, and Smith, respectively [3]. Contrary to the discussed bracketing ideas, Van Manen dismisses bracketing altogether and instead focuses on reflection and expression, and this regard is very much Heideggerian. The researcher is not only an integral part of the research, but he or she also serves as the expressive voice. As such, researchers should be aware that preconceptions may tend to insert themselves in any reflective activity [3,4,9].

According to Van Manen's approach, description and interpretation are not only fused, they are an expressive and creative process that can be dynamically placed on a continuum [3]. To illustrate, Van Manen claims that because description is often mediated by expression, a stronger element of interpretation can be applied to nonverbal behavior, artwork, or

text [4]. More specifically, the researcher assumes the role of the poet whereby he or she relates to the experience as it is shared through language or other representations during data collection. Data analysis encompasses the identification of emergent themes; however, the themes are isolated and then interwoven to create a moving story or a poem. Van Manen often refers to his approach as "psychology of practice," and he advocates for an "empathic" approach to research. The ultimate aim is to create an artistically expressive and articulate view of the experience as it is encountered in the lifeworld [9].

CONCLUSION

As illustrated, two distinct phenomenological philosophy perspectives have inspired a multiplicity of research methods. Such methods offer a variety of options for those who study a psychological or social phenomenon through the subjective experience. Given the wide range of options, researchers in the field may need to decide which paradigm to embrace to the extent that the research design properly falls in line with description or interpretation, or both (Finlay, 2009). Alternatively, rather than being fixed on one method, adopting a combination of approaches may be the most suitable practice as the researcher remains flexible and adaptive enough to meet the particular demands of any given inquiry (Finlay, 2009). What remains critical is understanding the variations among methods and their philosophical foundations, as each approach can profoundly impact the quality of the research and the view of the human experience.

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