

Analysing phenomenological data and writing up

Above all else, phenomenologists seeking to explicate 'lived experience', must do justice to the phenomenon studied; our research method needs to be responsive to the phenomenon, to be true to its integrity towards capturing something of its 'is-ness' (Giorgi, 1975, 2009).

Phenomenological understanding is distinctly existential, emotive, enactive, embodied, situational, and nontheoretic; a powerful phenomenological text thrives on a certain irrevocable tension between what is unique and what is shared, between particular and transcendent meaning, and between the reflective and the prereflective spheres of the lifeworld. (van Manen, 1997, p.345).

To manage these tensions researchers need to engage in reflective and reflexive analysis (Finlay, 2003) moving back and forth in a kind of dialectic between experience and awareness; between studying the parts and the whole. As researchers, we need to strive, explicitly, to understand some of the connections by which subject and object influence and constitute each other. We need to acknowledge both our experience and our experiencing.

While all phenomenological analysis involves reflection, different variants privilege either the use of systematic procedures or the spontaneous emergence of creative intuition. For instance, using the analytical method suggested by Wertz (1983) and Giorgi (1975, 1985, 2009), systematic readings of the transcript are undertaken by first dwelling on the phenomenon (through empathetic immersion and reflection), then describing emergent psychological structures (i.e., constituents and recurrent themes). In contrast, with dialogal analysis (Rowe *et al*, 1989), researchers prefer to use open, spontaneous, fluid dialogue in a group context rather than adhering to any explicit procedures.

A key process involved in analysis is the act of 'dwelling' with the minutiae of data. "When we stop and linger with something, it secretes its sense and its full significance becomes... amplified" (Wertz 1985, p. 174). Dwelling is the process by which phenomenology makes room for the phenomenon to reveal itself and speak its story into our understanding (von Eckartsberg, 1998). It forces us to slow down, to pause, to re-examine taken-for-granted assumptions and the idea that we already know this phenomenon. In the dwelling we linger and become absorbed in what is being revealed. What is involved is "an extreme form of care that savors the situations described in a slow, meditative way and attends to, even magnifies, all the details" (Wertz, 2005, p.172).

As we dwell, new understandings emerge; data is transformed into meanings. At this early stage of analysis we empathically join with our participants as we dwell systematically with the raw data and wait for implicit, layered meanings to come to the fore. Different understandings assume figural significance against a ground of possible meanings. As von Eckartsberg (1998) puts it:

One embeds oneself in the process of getting involved in the text, one begins to discern configurations of meaning, of parts and wholes and their interrelationships,

one receives certain messages and glimpses of an unfolding development that beckons to be articulated and related to the total fabric of meaning. (p.50)

If dwelling is understood as settling 'at home', the ethos of dwelling is hospitality. In the context of phenomenological research analysis it could be said that we settle into the data (accounts of lived experience), respectfully embracing the language of our hosts or visitors and making ourselves thoroughly at home with it.

In practice, dwelling involves more than a passive 'hanging out' in which we wait for meanings somehow to emerge. Instead, meanings have to be mined and layered themes have to be shaped up through successive iterations. Psychological meanings have to "be detected, drawn out, and elaborated" (Giorgi, 2009, p.131). It is also necessary to go reflectively beyond surface appearance, treating it as something that is present to consciousness rather than actually being the way things are. "One should separate the act of perceiving from the act of positing," argues Giorgi, "and systematically consider what is presented in the act of perceiving...The withholding of positing leaves us with presences, not existences"(2009, pp.90-91). The process is intense and involves detailed and methodical labour.

First we immerse ourselves in the data. For instance, we might listen to the whole recorded interview and re-read the transcript several times to get a sense of the whole. Here we attend to both the verbal and non-verbal elements, including subtle pauses, intonation and emphasis. In the process, we seek the feeling that we're engaging the phenomenon; we may even experience it in a bodily sense. Then, gradually, we begin to focus on small chunks of data commonly called 'meaning units': phrases or passages of text, including non-verbal communication, which express a particular point or meaning that can be differentiated from preceding text. These are then progressively elaborated to in effort to pull out a deeper understanding. Meanings are then crystallized and condensed, with the researcher trying to stay as close as possible to the participant's actual words. Throughout, the focus remains at the level of discrete but meaningful chunks of material from, say, personal accounts or individual transcripts. Gradually meanings are sifted and honed, resulting in a fine-grained analysis.

The actual steps and procedures employed during this dwelling phase vary according to the variant of phenomenology engaged. While some variants have more idiographic intent, the focus remains on the nature of the phenomenon as a human experience and not on the individual per se. The question is 'what is this experience like?' 'what does it mean to be x?' With Giorgi's scientifically-driven descriptive phenomenology (2009) the procedures can be summarised as: (a) read for sense of the whole, (b) determine 'meaning units', (c) transform participant's expressions - given in the 'natural attitude' - into phenomenological psychologically sensitive expressions, (d) use 'free imaginative variation' to remove or change aspects of the phenomenon in order to distinguish essential features (and their interrelated constituents) from particular or incidental ones (Wertz, 2010). (If it is impossible to imagine an example of a phenomenon without a particular characteristic, then that characteristic is 'essential'. If, on the other hand, it is possible to imagine the phenomenon without a specific characteristic, then the latter would be viewed as not part of the phenomenon and disregarded). The aim is the description of essences (or, in Giorgi's terms, 'essential

structure') of phenomena through eidetic analysis, a generalising procedure that clarifies these essences. In these procedures, Giorgi takes his cue from Husserl, whose goal was a radical, scientific study of consciousness with all its meanings, processes and intentional objects (consciousness of something). For Giorgi (2011) being 'scientific' means having an established or fixed method (sets of steps and procedures) which obtain findings which can be replicated. In valuing this scientific sensibility, he is critical of more personal, idiosyncratic approaches where methods are fluidly or randomly applied.

In contrast to the descriptive phenomenological method, Smith et al. (2009) offer a hermeneutic variant. They present their Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a systematic, flexible, multidirectional analytic process. Here, researchers engage a 'double hermeneutic' whereby participants are seen to make sense of x while researchers make sense of the participants' sense-making. Researchers are then advised to explore the semantic content and language used at a number of levels: descriptive (taking explicit meanings at face value), linguistic (for example, noting metaphors) and conceptual (taking a more analytic approach).

Ashworth (2003, 2006) recommends the use of lifeworld "fragments" to dwell, providing a practical, discovery-orientated structure in which to see the particulars of an individual's experience. These (interpenetrating) fragments are seen to articulate certain existential universals: embodiment, selfhood, spatiality, temporality, sociality, mood-as-atmosphere, project, discourse, freedom and historicity. It can help to interrogate the data using these dimensions, for instance, trying to identify the participant's sense of embodiment or sense of self lying behind their words.

Whatever variant of phenomenology, the process of understanding participants' words (and silences) is about opening up meanings:

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)

For further information on the process of analysis please see these two papers:

Finlay, L. (2014) Engaging analysis, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*.

Finlay, L. (2014) Embodying research, *Person-centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*.