

## The phenomenological attitude

When we adopt the phenomenological attitude, our habitual, taken-for-granted understandings are bracketed. For Husserl, (1936/1970, 1962/1977), the reduction, including the epoché, is a radical self-meditative process whereby the philosopher puts aside the natural, taken-for-granted everyday world and any interpretations in order to let the phenomenon show itself in its essence. As part of this disciplined approach, past knowledge (specifically theoretical or scientific understandings) and ontological assumptions (including that of the thing “really” existing) need to be held in abeyance. But Husserl went further, arguing for a transcendental reduction whereby the philosopher was thought to be able to stand aside from both subjective experience and ego and view the world as a pure, essential consciousness. For Husserl, these reductions as a whole means that “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, however, between a philosopher’s reflections and the phenomenological researcher’s 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 to apply philosophical ideas to empirical psychological research. Giorgi, in his descriptive phenomenology, argues for abstaining from Husserl’s transcendental realm and staying with a modified form he calls the ‘scientific phenomenological reduction’, expanding Husserl’s ‘psychological phenomenological reduction’ to include all human scientists (Giorgi, 2009).

Van Manen (2011) explains the reduction, which he applies in his hermeneutic (interpretive) approach, in the following way:

One needs to reflect on one’s own pre-understandings, frameworks, and biases regarding the (psychological, political, and ideological) motivation and the nature of the question, in search for genuine openness in one’s conversational relation with the phenomenon. In the reduction one needs to overcome one’s subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that may seduce or tempt one to come to premature, wishful, or one-sided understandings of an experience and that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon as it is lived through.

Thus theory, explanation, judgements and the researcher’s previous experience and beliefs are temporarily pushed aside to probe the ‘is-ness’ of the phenomenon further. Critical attention is paid to how the phenomenon is presenting – specifically how it is experienced by participants in their natural attitude. Researchers accept that what participants say about their own experience is their ‘truth’ and do not morally judge. Their focus is on the meaning of the situation as it is given in the participant’s experience.

If the hallmark of descriptive phenomenology involves a rigorous application of the reductions and epoché following Husserl (Giorgi, 2009), other phenomenologists – particularly hermeneutic ones - tend to view the phenomenological attitude more loosely in

terms of openness and sensitivity. Here the researcher aims to stay open to receiving what is given. Throughout researchers strive to be as present as possible to the phenomenon (via the participants, transcript or text) and to what is being described. This stance involves being empathic and genuinely curious while also being reflexively (i.e. being critically self-aware) mindful of our own position and perspective given our particular personal, cultural and historical location (Finlay, 2008).

This openness, says the hermeneutic philosopher Gadamer (1975) includes:

our situating the other's meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it . . . This kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own foremeanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 268–269)

Dahlberg et al. (2008) develop this idea of openness in their (hermeneutic) version of Reflective Lifeworld Research. They recommend that the researcher adopts an "open discovering way of being" and develops a "capacity to be surprised and sensitive to the unpredicted and unexpected" (2008, p. 98). In their version of openness, "vulnerable engagement" and "disinterested attentiveness" are simultaneously present. As they see it, "Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect and a certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility." (p.98)

Churchill (2012) – another hermeneutic phenomenologist – reminds us that our openness is at once both empathic and compassionate: Our encounter with another (an Other) provides us with an experience within which we "hear the ethical call that summons us to respond with compassion" (2012, p.9).

Whatever variant of phenomenology, the task remains profoundly dialectical: researchers need to straddle subjectivity and objectivity, intimacy and distance, being inside and outside, being a part of and a part from, bracketing the self and being self-aware, and so on. Phenomenology champions a holistic non-dualist approach to life and this philosophy needs to be mirrored in its methodology.

To give an example of what the phenomenological attitude means in practice, consider the researcher who is studying the lived experience of postpartum depression, when she herself has gone through a similar experience. It would necessary for her to try to bracket her own experience in the first instance and not assume any commonality of experience. The researcher would need, instead, to be genuinely curious about the other, and be open to the very real possibility of being surprised by what the participant brings. In assuming a more unknowing stance, she would also need to put aside Western medical model notions about this diagnostic category, with its anticipated clinical presentation, and also any culturally-specific ideas about women's role, needs and behaviour following a birth. If a participant described her experience as being a bit "different" from that of others in that

she still loved and felt attached to her child, the researcher would need to put aside theories of attachment and any doubts that the participant might be engaged in impression management; neither should she interpret this as a defensive move. Instead, the researcher strives to engage the other with empathic, compassionate interest.

As the point is explicitly to avoid carrying familiar assumptions into the research, the researcher must stay open to the participant's particular perspective and experience. How does the world appear to the participant? What does she herself mean by feeling attached to her child? What does she understand to be the difference between her experience and that of others? The researcher's challenge is to access this lived experience as lived rather than as simply engaging conscious reflection on it.

**For further information on the phenomenological attitude please see my paper:**

**Finlay, L. (2008). A dance between the reduction and reflexivity: Explicating the "phenomenological psychological attitude" *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 39, pp.1-32.**