

## Variants of phenomenology and data collection

While the aim of phenomenological research is to describe the everyday world as we immediately experience it, variants of phenomenology highlight different dimensions. Methods are contested. Descriptive phenomenologists inspired by Husserlian ideas (e.g. Giorgi, 2009) would attempt to study 'essences of phenomena as they appear in consciousness'. In contrast, hermeneutic researchers following Heidegger and others engage more explicitly interpretive approaches (e.g. van Manen, 1991) exploring a person's sense of self, space, time, embodiment and relations with others in a less essentialist way. In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al, 2009) we find another hermeneutic variant – one which is more idiographic in intent, focused as it is on the individual's cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being.

Of the many methods of collecting qualitative data available, some are more suited to phenomenology than others - there are natural affinities. The most common methods used include: the use of narratives in interviews, diaries and protocols, participant observation, and the use of reflective diaries and researcher's own introspective accounts. Supplementary techniques such as the use of art or poetry can be useful for exploring meanings further.

Phenomenologists doing interviews, for example, will tend to ask participants to describe their experience concretely by posing such questions as: 'How would you describe a typical day?' or 'Please describe that particular incident in more detail'. This way of opening a dialogue is valued over and above asking more general abstract questions such as 'what does the experience of friendship mean to you?' or 'What is depression?'. The researcher's aim is to empathise with the participant's situation and offer further prompts geared to existential dimensions of that situation. For instance, researchers asking 'how is this person experiencing their day?' They might then seek to apply such notions as 'felt space' and 'felt time'. For example, what is the participant's experience in terms of felt-space? Do they feel safe, free, trapped, exposed, small...? In terms of felt-time, does the participant seem to be experiencing this as pressured, slow, discontinuous...?

More than the specific methods of collecting data, as researchers we need to embrace a phenomenological sensibility where we strive to engage the phenomenon as fully and as holistically as possible. We are aiming to both sense and make sense of others' experiencing. How we do this will vary amongst different researchers.

In my practice as both an integrative psychotherapist (Finlay, 2012) and a phenomenological researcher (Finlay, 2011, 2013), I emphasize embodiment in the way that I attune to and bring into the process the bodily experience both of my research participants and of my own self. I have sought to find a way to give voice to bodily experience. How might I listen to the body's language and hear its innate wisdom? Here I follow Gendlin's (1996) approach where the body is recognized as having a "felt-sense" involving body sensations that have meaning. "What one feels is not 'stuff inside' but the sentience of what is happening in one's living in the outside" (Gendlin, 1973). The aim is not simply to be present to our mutual non-verbal behavior; it is also about inhabiting and exploring our embodied inter-subjective

relationship. The focus is on the somatic duet lying beneath and between verbal interaction where significant implicit meanings arise in a “more-than-verbal” way (Todres, 2007). Here, the body acts as a sensor, a detector of meaning which helps us empathize with, interpret and understand participants’ experiences. If we’re alert, physical sensations and our own felt-sense arising out of the relational space between can provide crucial cues.

**For more information on variants of phenomenology and the phenomenological research process please see these two articles:**

**Finlay, L. (2013). Unfolding the phenomenological research process: Iterative stages of "seeing afresh", *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 53(2), pp.172-201.**

**Finlay, L. (2009) Debating phenomenological research methods, *Phenomenology & Practice*. Volume 3, 6-25.**