

Writing up and evaluating phenomenological findings

The process of writing and rewriting aims to create depth: multiple layers of meaning are crafted to lay bare certain truths while retaining the ambiguity of experience. To write phenomenologically is to write poetically, says van Manen. It is the “untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself” (1991, p.132). Whatever method of writing up is used, the key is to try to capture the complexity and ambiguity of the lived world being described.

Perhaps more than with any other form of qualitative research, phenomenological writing needs to describe, and describe well. As phenomenologists, we are required to attend scrupulously to how we express our findings. How can we develop rich descriptions faithful to the phenomenon which evoke the ambiguously lived embodied world? How can we enact both scientific and communicative concerns?

Languaging – the final stage of analytic endeavour- involves crafting and creating our final research product. Equipped with some explicated meanings, we now sit down to write, aware that three challenges lie before us: achieving some degree of scientific credibility; expressing the phenomenon evocatively; and integrating phenomenological concepts within our writing.

Researchers embracing phenomenology as a human science (following Husserl’s project of philosophy as a rigorous science) aim to ensure research is conducted in systematic, verifiable ways. In descriptive phenomenology research steps are made explicit and sequential, which allows them to be replicated by other researchers. Thus, Applebaum (2012) argues that idiosyncratic, variable, and/or artistic forms of writing tend to be incompatible with claims to scientific status. Phenomenological research reports tend to demonstrate their scientific rigour and trustworthiness by offering examples and quotations from the data to illustrate points made bringing readers into a closer relationship with the phenomenon (Halling, 2002). Examples and quotations make transparent the evidentiary base of any analytical claims. Smith et al (2011), for instance, recommends presenting an evidence trail open to audit to demonstrate the density of evidence (e.g. for N=1-3, quotations are needed from every participant per theme; for N=4-8, quotations are needed from at least three participants per theme).

Even as a scientific approach is adopted, however, a phenomenological sensibility still needs to be retained. Inadvertent use of language such as “bracketing to ensure objectivity” or “researcher bias” signals residual attachments to natural scientific concerns and shows a misunderstanding of the nature of bracketing and the phenomenological attitude concerned with (inter-)subjectivity.

Researchers also need to consider how their research is expressed, whether in writing or through a spoken presentation. For those hermeneutic phenomenologists specifically championing a humanities, rather than scientific, approach to phenomenology this is a priority. Following the Utrecht phenomenological tradition, van Manen advocates the inclusion of an artistic dimension so as to “stir our pedagogical, psychological or professional

sensibilities” (2007, p. 25). A phenomenological text is most successful, he argues, when readers feel directly addressed by it: “Textual emotion, textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement” (1990, pp. 129). A ‘researcher as author’ aims for a concrete but evocative text which has such intensity and tone that it is potentially transformative (van Manen, 1997).

Todres (2007) seeks to restore to academic writing a poetic heart which balances both concerns for ‘structure’ with those for ‘texture’. Embodied understandings can be facilitated, he argues, by evoking lived experience in a lively, engaged way. Descriptions need to be ‘humanized’ and made ‘habitable’, communicating an empathic sense of being-there. As part of engaging ‘texture’, Todres suggests engaging a poetic and metaphoric sensibility. But always, there is recognition that the analysis remains tentative, emergent and incomplete; there is always more to say. In his book on *Embodied Inquiry*, Todres (2007, p.19) follows Heidegger and engages the mysterious relation between language and Being.

The “unsaid” (i.e., implicit meanings), lives always exceedingly as that which the “said” is about. Speech in a broad sense is pregnant with this excess . . . the shape of understanding is first ‘wet through’ by the insight of intimate participation and this can come to language in tentative ways.

Vedder (2002, pp.206-207), drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, describes of how metaphors can create meaning and so have the capacity to represent being:

In metaphor it is thus not about describing what is on hand in an empirical reality, but rather about making visible in a being something that was not previously seen...The poem produces the image...a coming to be of an expression and a coming to be of being.

The quality of any phenomenological study can be judged in its relative power to draw the reader into the researcher’s discoveries allowing the reader to see the worlds of others in new and deeper ways. Polkinghorne (1983) offers four qualities to help the reader evaluate the power and trustworthiness of phenomenological accounts: vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance. Is the research vivid in the sense that it generates a sense of reality and draws the reader in? Are readers able to recognise the phenomenon from their own experience or from imagining the situation vicariously? In terms of richness, can readers enter the account emotionally? Finally, has the phenomenon been described in a graceful, clear, poignant way?

Other researchers offer different criteria. The key is to recognise how choices of criteria are linked to epistemological assumptions such as whether the researcher is adopting a realist or more critical realist or relativist position. In hermeneutic variants, for example, it doesn’t make sense to argue for a fixed view of reality; instead multiple meanings are possible.

Many qualitative researchers embrace the use of *participant validation* as a way to ‘prove’ the validity of their research. When the participant agrees with the researcher’s assessment, it is seen as strengthening the researcher’s argument. Such confidence,

however, would be contested by researchers supporting a more 'relativist' or 'hermeneutic' position which recognises how findings have emerged in a specific context. Another researcher, or a study undertaken at another time, they would argue, would unfold a different story. In his critical exploration of participant validation, Ashworth (1993) supports it on moral-political grounds but warns against taking participants' evaluations too seriously: it may be in their interest to protect their 'socially presented selves'. As he notes, "Participant validation is flawed nevertheless, since the 'atmosphere of safety' that would allow the individual to lower his or her defences, cease 'presentation', and act in open candour (if this is possible), is hardly likely to be achieved in the research encounter." (Ashworth, 1993, p.15).

While scholars and researchers continue debate – sometimes vociferously - how best to operationalize their project, they are joined in their commitment to the special, attentive, dwelling phenomenological approach of openness and wonder which requires discipline, practice and patience through all the iterative phases. They are joined in their project to capture something of the nature of the inter-animation of body-world in lived experience. The reward comes with beguiling moments of disclosure where the phenomenon reveals something new about itself.