

Reflections on the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research

A poetics of research... deepens research and makes it richer by attending to the images in the ideas, the fantasies in the facts, the dreams in the reasons, the myths in the meanings, the archetypes in the arguments, and the complexes in the concepts. (Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 12)

A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (not 'method') aims to open up possible meanings and captures the way a phenomenon is concretely lived in an embodied, relational, and contextual way. Lived experience is the starting point and the end point of phenomenological research. Lived experience is thematized through language and understood by being refracted through a variety of lenses – philosophical, theoretical, literary and reflexive. Hermeneutic phenomenologists recommend engaging artful modes beyond the scientific: for example, art, literary prose, dance, poetry... There is no one way to *do* phenomenology, there is not one method. It emerges as part of a process.

In the guidelines below, I draw particular on the approach and writing adopted by van Manen and Churchill (who link into the philosophical work of Heidegger), as well as my own version.

The term "lived experience" is derived from the German *Erlebnis*, the active-passive living through of experience within the flow of life (Heidegger, 1927/2010). While hermeneutic phenomenology prioritizes rich description, it also acknowledges the inevitable role of interpretation (van Manen, 1997, 2014). As Heidegger (1927/2010) put it, the act of description always involves prior interpretation. Interpretation is a precondition for all understanding, and understanding is inseparable from life and experience.

Gathering empirical material

Descriptions of lived experience, from which underlying patterns and structures of meaning might be drawn, can be obtained through many means (van Manen, 1997; Finlay, 2011). Commonly, unstructured 1:1 interviews are used though some researchers choose semi-structured version or engage in focus group dialogues. The key is to ask the participant to focus on a concrete instance or moment of the experience. The point is to avoid a distanced, intellectualized account which merely obtains reflective understandings. As the aim is to touch pre-reflective experience, something more immediate is called for. Throughout the interview, the researcher attempts to keep the participant close to the topic being explored while at the same time maintain a sense of an ordinary conversation, reflecting a back and forth dialogic movement.

Beyond interviews, participants may be asked to produce a piece of writing, e.g. where they write a concrete account of a particular experience. Alternatively, other texts can be used, for instance, exploring published narratives. Finally, more creative approaches can be used including the use of poetry, drama, art, photography and also using psychotherapeutic techniques such as two-chair work. Anything goes providing it offers a window onto lived experience. The point is to explore experiential material towards understanding the meaning of everyday-life experiences from the perspective of the participant and perhaps probing what happens relationally between participant and researcher.

Dwelling

The phenomenon slowly manifests itself through patient phenomenological reflections. This is the start of the analytical process. This includes an open attitude of wonder where we dwell with horizons of implicit meaning (Finlay, 2012). The meanings initially buried and invisible, need in a sense to be mined. The researcher follows intuition where there is a sense of something “more” in the data, something ineffable in the depth of the situations being described. Through dwelling with the data, out of a waiting silence, the researcher resonates with the “more” of what the participants’ descriptions are pointing to. The phenomenal description functions as a medium through which the latent meanings of the phenomenon come to the fore.

Churchill (2018) explains this process with reference to the Heideggerian (1927/1962, p. 24) concepts of *Befragte* (the “object”; what is being interrogated) and *Gefragte* (the “subject”; what is being pointed to). The researcher works with the data about the “object” which illuminates the “subject” of a phenomenological study. The research phenomenon itself is something that researchers cannot know quite so clearly at the beginning of an investigation; it is easier to talk about the *situation*, that is, the “lived experience” that we wish to have described for us. It is this experience – communicated to the researcher by the participant’s descriptive experiential testimony – that is the “object” of study, whereas the “subject” of study is often something that is only slowly revealed. (Churchill, 2018)

Dwelling with the participants’ descriptions, hermeneutic researchers ask: What possibilities of meanings of support are not yet seen and understood? The individual contexts - the idiographic dimension - probing each person’s “project to-be” (what the person aims for, dreams for, wants for his or her life) and their lived relationships function as a backdrop for phenomenological analysis. Here, each participant’s particular situation gave the research its deepest, most evocative existential meanings. Highlighting this context supports researchers to remain faithful to the participants’ lifeworld, and not get lost in philosophical abstractions. Churchill (2018) points to the Latin term *capta*, to refer to what researchers take or capture from data. In this process from *data* to *capta*, there must be a transformation. In these ways the research phenomenon gradually emerges.

Engaging a hermeneutic process

Attempting to stay faithful to the phenomenological process, the researcher engages the “epoche” and “reduction”, taking up an attitude of openness, wonder, engaging a radical, reflective attentiveness to the way in which the participants – and researchers - experience the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Finlay, 2008).

The wonder of that thing takes us in, and renders us momentarily speechless . . . From this moment of wonder, a question may emerge that addresses us and that is addressed by us. It should animate one’s questioning of the meaning of some aspect of lived experience. It also should challenge the researcher to write in such a way that the reader of the phenomenological text is similarly stirred to the same sense of wondering attentiveness to the topic under investigation. (van Manen, 2002b)

However, in this ‘reduction’, researchers needed to go beyond any predilections which would prevent them from seeing and listening to the deeper meanings to be found. van Manen (2017) explains the couplet of the epoché-reduction thus:

It is a method of reflection on the unique meaning of the phenomenon that one is studying to gain an eidetic grasp, fundamental understanding, or inceptual insight into the phenomenological meaning of human experience (moment or event). (p.819)

Inceptual thinking contrasts from conceptual thinking, and it involves coming upon an inceptual thought. Van Manen (2014, pp. 235-238) highlights how Heidegger in his *Contributions to Philosophy* (1999) makes a distinction between *Begriff* and *Inbegriff*. While, *Begriff* can be straightforwardly translated as concept, *Inbegriff* is more opaque. Various translations of Heidegger’s work suggest “in-grasping” and “incept” are equivalent English terms for *Inbegriff* (van Manen, 2014, p. 237). With inceptual insight or thinking, there is an initial “covered-up-ness” which is eventually disclosed through the hermeneutic investigation. Once revealed in a meaningful moment, meaning insights have to be wrestled with to gain depth and clarity, and their complexity often requires further insights (van Manen, 2014). They are not grasped once and for all but are in a constant interplay between self-showing and concealment. Here they comply with the ancient Greek term for truth “Aletheia”, meaning disclosure, unconcealment, withdrawal, and openness as Heidegger (1988/ 2013) explained in his 1931-2 lectures.

Phenomenological enquiry involves a method of leading back (*reducere*) to the way the phenomenon is experienced before the experience is conceptualized or theorized (van Manen, 2014, p. 220). But pre-reflective experience in the moment of “now” is already gone. Researchers encounter this moment retrospectively through the participants descriptions while also returning to their own understandings, experience, imaginings, sensings and memories. Hermeneutic phenomenologists argue that researchers cannot help but bring themselves into the research. All understandings are inevitably based upon one’s situatedness (unique personal history and circumstances) and current understandings and

these constitute both the researcher's 'closedness' and 'openness' to the world: they are the basis of any experiencing.

Researchers need to be present as researchers (Churchill, 2018) and to their impact on the direction of the analysis where their own interpretations inevitably play a role. In other words, hermeneutic principles come into play more deeply when researchers try to sense and make sense of the meanings within. For Heidegger, interpretation is not an additional procedure, it constitutes an inevitable and foundational structure of being-in-the-world (Finlay, 2003). Instead of setting preunderstanding and prior knowledge aside, which is not possible, the process is to follow Heidegger's (1927/2010, p. 144) recognition that all understanding has the structure of "something as something" – that is, prior interpreted understanding. These fore-structures of prior understanding can be seen as a circle of understanding, where new understanding arises from and is nurtured by what is already understood. Rather than freeing oneself from preunderstanding or fore-structures, and risk that they are given by chance, researchers need to use them partly as a lens to reflect on them critically and let them inform and motivate the inquiry (Churchill, 2018).

As researchers dwell with and probe their phenomenon, new insights and interpretations emerged which had not been apparent previously; as one proceeds on the basis of this new understanding, yet another interpretation evolved. Interpretations (both participants' and researchers') arise out of the research context which involves a meeting of persons in a particular, situated, shared space. In the process of understanding another's world, researchers attune empathically to them and this attunement occurs in a shared, embodied, intersubjective space. As subjectivity is a tool for perception, then it is the intersubjective sharings that allow the possibility of empathy and understanding what something is like for another.

The interpretive, hermeneutic process can be understood as a cycle of: having a fore-understanding...meeting a "resistance" when interrogating experience... an interpretive revision of the fore-understanding...and so on. At each stage researchers need to search, sense and make sense; moving between reviewing, resonating and reasoning. Throughout it is important to recognize the researcher's part in actively co-creating knowledge through the back and forth dialectic between (pre-reflective) experiences and awareness (Finlay, 2003, 2011). By reflecting on the researcher's experience as researchers, alongside the phenomenon being studied, it is possible to move "beyond the partiality and investments of our previous understandings" (Finlay, 2003, p.108).

Although the aim of phenomenological research is to better understand a particular phenomenon, it should be acknowledged that such research is always tentative, partial, provisional and incomplete; there will always be *more* to be seen. Understanding is always open to further description and interpretation. The language used to describe is only a substitute for meaning and cannot fully capture the experience as it is lived in its entirety. Nor can it describe how all people will experience the particular phenomenon (van Manen, 2014).

Writing the meaning

The writing process passes through numerous iterations and dialogues (external and internal). Beyond that there is no specific 'method' that must be followed. At a pragmatic level, thematic statements can be formulated as "units of meaning" in concert with the analytic-reflective methods described above, to help point to the unique and invariant aspects of meaning that belong to the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). These thematic statements can be used to structure the research texts. Anecdotes can be constructed from the data gathered and refined to attend to the subjective aspects of experience, to assist the researchers and to evoke for the readers of the research a sense of what 'nourishing communion' means (van Manen, 1989). Researchers are released from making an effort to verify whether a description of a situation was in keeping with the way things actually happened, as the aim is to arrive at plausible descriptions of human experiences.

The iterative writing-up process thus becomes an embodied lived experience in itself. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a textual form of qualitative inquiry where writing is closely fused to the research process (van Manen, 1997). It is an artful *reflexive activity* itself. The ambition of phenomenological writing is contact; to touch the lived meaning of a phenomenon and to be able to be touched by it. In the process of writing and rewriting, a space that belongs to the unsayable is created, and further it may evoke immediate understandings that otherwise lie beyond their reach (van Manen, 2002, 2014). "To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic way but in a deep collective sense. To write phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself" (van Manen, 1997, p. 132).

Researchers need to search for, and savour, words, perhaps drawing on etymological meanings, metaphors, imagery... The art is to play with the words and draw on one's bodily felt sense to ensure the words chosen are a good enough fit. As the phenomenon is explicated various themes and narratives emerging become the intermediate reflective tools for further phenomenological inquiry and reflective writing.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for a phenomenological researcher is how to produce the findings in a way that portrays participants' experience in all their complexity. How are researchers to develop descriptions that are faithful to the phenomenon and can evoke the embodied lived world? How to express our findings in ways that are graceful, poignant and elegant (Polkinghorne, 1983) yet achieve communicative resonance? How might researchers offer relevant arguments to convince a wider audience of the value and interest of the work? Alternatively, what is a 'good enough' piece of work?

Our challenge, says Halling (2002), is how to communicate effectively with one's readers at both an intellectual and personal level. More than this, phenomenological writing needs to describe well. How this is done is up to the researcher, for instance, whether themes, narratives, or other more creative media are employed are all possibilities. The key is to be attentive to the ways findings are expressed. A phenomenological text is most successful, van Manen declares, 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...To write phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself. (van Manen, 1990, pp. 129, 132)

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