

But Is It Phenomenology?

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This issue of *Qualitative Health Research* (*QHR*) features several articles under the flag of “phenomenology.” But what does that mean? The term *phenomenology* occurs in a confusing abundance and range of qualitative studies and publications. For some, it simply means that a study deals with “experience.” But, of course, that is misleading as many other qualitative methodologies are also concerned with human experiences. Some, look to phenomenological research for improving psychological health, steps for self-development, personal growth plans, experimental clinical designs, and approaches to therapeutic healing. But one has to be cautious here as well. Phenomenology is not to be confused with therapy or self-improvement psychology. Others employ phenomenology to examine how a particular group of individuals in a certain place or institutional context have certain experiences, for example, how certain residents in certain nursing homes in a certain place experience or suffer from chronic pain or undergo some other illness or treatment. But, phenomenology is not to be confused with case studies, ethnographies, narrative inquiries, or empirical studies that aim to generalize their findings to a certain group or population, and so forth. Therefore, for the sake of this editorial, I will make some comments that may help to distinguish phenomenology from other kinds of qualitative inquiry. The lines may not always be perfectly clear, but it should be helpful to consider, whether what is listed on the menu is indeed cooking in the kitchen.

There exist many methodological programs and paths that are branded as “interpretive, descriptive, or hermeneutic phenomenology” and that are supposed to engage phenomenological method and phenomenological practice. Some programs clearly contradict others in their methodologies and assumptions. So, repeatedly the question arises, “But is it phenomenology?” Or, “Is this good phenomenology?” If a journal editor receives a manuscript that is submitted for review as a phenomenological research text, then the reviewer or editor might ask whether the study is commensurate with the general scholarly accepted idea of phenomenology? To consider this question, one might justifiably turn to some exemplary explications of phenomenology from the literature. Husserl’s (2014) aim for phenomenology was to capture experience in its primordial origin or essence, without interpreting, explaining, or theorizing. And Martin Heidegger’s (1962) famous definition of phenomenology was “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the

very way in which it shows itself from itself” (p. 58). Heidegger’s approach is more ontological, but not inconsistent with the fundamental idea that phenomenology is concerned with what gives itself. More recently, a leading phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion (2002) stresses again that phenomenology is the study of how things show or give themselves. He points out that things do not show themselves because we turn to them—When things show themselves, they can only do so because they have already given themselves to us. In other words, Marion warns against constructivist approaches to phenomenology where meaning is (pre-) determined, constructed, or attributed to a phenomenon or event by the subject.

Similar to these authoritative explications, many other phenomenologists have implicitly or explicitly defined phenomenology as the study of what it is that appears in consciousness; or what is the *eidos* (unique meaning) of *what* shows itself or gives itself in lived experience; or the study of *how* things (phenomena and events) give themselves to us; or the quest for originary understandings and insights into the phenomenality of human experiences. Of course, we need to be aware as well that one should distinguish between concrete phenomenological studies, and studies that address the methodology at a methodological meta-level and possibility of doing phenomenology in the first place.

The first response to the question, “But is it phenomenology?” could indeed be, *Are the questions and objectives phenomenological?* Is the meaning aimed for in this study phenomenological understanding or phenomenological insights? It should not be difficult to distinguish phenomenological meaning from psychological, (auto) biographic, ethnographic, narrative, theoretic, case study, general qualitative, or conceptual meaning. Numerous human science phenomenologists have implicitly or explicitly dedicated themselves to phenomenology as the study of how things appear, show, or give themselves in lived experience or in consciousness. Here follow some phenomenological questions, in no particular order, that

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have been pursued by well-known and by lesser known phenomenological scholars. Martinus Langeveld (1983), “What is the secret place like in the world of the child?” Frederik Buylendijk (1988), “What is the first smile of the newborn like?” Martin Heidegger (1995), “What is it like to be bored?” Edith Stein (1989), “What is it like to experience empathy?” Jean-Luc Nancy (2012), “What is it like to experience a heart transplant?” Jan Linschoten (1987), “What is it like to experience insomnia and falling asleep?” Catherine Adams (2016), “What is the gesture of digital writing? Michael van Manen (2017 in this issue), “What is it like for a child to live with ventricular assist device (VAD)?” Erika Goble (2016), “What is it like to experience the sublime through images?” and so forth. I deliberately formulated the questions in a phenomenologically generic form: “What is this lived experience like?” “What is it like to experience this phenomenon or event?” Or, “How do we understand or become aware of the primal meaning(s) of this experience?” Of course, in actual publications, the phenomenological text may be presented with more inventive titles. For example, Nancy titled his study of the experience of heart transplantation as *L’Intrus* [*The Intruder*], which gets at the heart of the experience of a heart transplant experience.

The second response to the question, “But is it phenomenology?” could be, *Does it look like phenomenology?* The question is not does it *copy* other phenomenological studies? But rather, does it *emulate* the scholarly and reflective methods and thoughtfulness of the practices of the epoché and reduction of other exemplary phenomenological studies? Does it look like the studies of the phenomenological literature as exemplified in the writings of well-known phenomenologists? Some qualitative research projects are not driven by insights into phenomenological meaning but rather by an interest in other kinds of qualitative meanings, outcomes, and knowledge. They may be inspired by phenomenological concepts such as “lived experience” and “intentionality” but, their goals (however fascinating and worthwhile) are oriented to different qualitative ends.

The third response to the question, “But is it phenomenology?” could be, *Are the results of the study originary phenomenological insights and understandings?* If the interpretive descriptions of a phenomenological study do not contain phenomenological insights and understandings, then that is surely the most damaging or incriminating negative judgment whether a manuscript should be accepted as phenomenology in a scholarly sense. Reviewers generally measure a study by the proper employment of a recognized qualitative methodology, but they should have the courage as well to point out that the outcomes of a study are superficial, cliché, or shallow. It is not sufficient for an author to list some dubious themes that are primarily rephrased texts from interview transcripts as research “findings” as is only too often done. The topmost coveted

prize of phenomenological human science research is indeed the promise of depthful understanding and meaningful insight. So it should be highly frustrating and disappointing when phenomenological undertakings fail to produce results that are composed of illuminating, meaningful, and/or thoughtful insights and understandings. Wherein lie some of the factors of this failure?

Some Basic Tenets

I realize that my attempt in this editorial to offer responses to the question “But is it phenomenology?” may be regarded as too constraining or even too pretentious. I am sorry if that is the impression. But in my defense, I want to say that I am so motivated and committed to the century-old philosophical and methodological scholarship of phenomenology that I regret it to be misused and poorly understood. So here I outline some brief tenets (of possible misconceptions and issues) that may prompt a discussion of some of the basic criteria of phenomenological inquiry.

First, what are some prevalent misconceptions of phenomenological inquiry and research?

- a. *If it is the study of experience then it must be phenomenology.* Not true. All kinds of qualitative methodologies study various kinds of human experiences for the purpose of understanding different kinds of meaning: psychological, ethnographic, narrative, theoretic, conceptual meaning, and so on. But phenomenology is the study of the primal, lived, prereflective, prepredicative meaning of an experience.
- b. *Phenomenological questions will emerge in the conduct of unstructured interviews.* This is a dangerous assumption. If the researcher is not clear about what phenomenological question is being researched, then one will not be able to gather the right kinds of experiential materials such as lived experience descriptions. Without the basic guidance of a well-grasped phenomenological question, it is unlikely that one will be able to focus on the lived meaning of a human phenomenon that is experientially recognizable and experientially accessible.
- c. *Phenomenology is the study of how individuals make sense of their own experiences.* Unfortunately, this is a common misconception that confuses phenomenology with psychology. When individuals make sense of their personal experiences, they are engaging in psychological sense-making or reflection. Therapists and other psychologists may be interested in examining how people interpret their own personal experiences. But this is not phenomenology.

- d. Phenomenological understandings, themes, or insights will automatically emerge when going through the prescribed steps of interpretive phenomenological data analysis. This is the most dangerous assumption of phenomenological research. There is no step-by-step model that will guarantee phenomenological insights and understandings.
- e. *Outcomes of phenomenological research are (a list of) interpretive themes.* Not true. Themes are only the intermediate reflective tools for phenomenological inquiry and reflective writing. The outcomes of phenomenological research are full-fledged reflective texts that induce the reader into a wondering engagement with certain questions that may be explored through the identification, critical examination, and eloquent elaboration of themes that help the reader recognize the meaningfulness of certain human experiences and events.

Second, what are some of the possible challenging and confusing methodological questions in phenomenological studies?

- a. *What is the difference between philosophical phenomenology and human science phenomenology?* In the past, several authors have made distinctions between transcendental phenomenology, ontological phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and other forms of phenomenology that may be more empirical, concrete, or practical. Such distinctions are becoming increasingly problematic when reading the variety of works by leading philosophical phenomenologists and social science phenomenologists who work in academic and professional fields. But it may be helpful to note that human science-oriented phenomenological researchers tend to make more frequent use of social science techniques or methods such as interview, observation, soliciting written descriptions, and so on.
- b. *What, if anything, is the basic method of phenomenology that is essential to its philosophical and human science practice?* Phenomenological writings (implicitly) display a phenomenological reflectiveness that constitutes the epoché and the reduction. This is a method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence. Phenomenology sets out to grasp these exclusively singular meaningful aspects of a phenomenon or event.
- c. *Why are the epoché and the reduction so critical for phenomenological inquiry?* The epoché and the reduction are the devices that orient to phenomenological meaning. The epoché opens up the

space for the possibility of discerning phenomenological meaning and the reduction aims for phenomenological meaning to appear, give, or show itself.

Qualitative researchers of various cloths are attracted to using phenomenological concepts such as lived experience, intentionality, and thematic analysis to pursue problems, programs, and interests that aim at empirical understandings, problem solutions, comparative determinations, or generalizing empirical findings that lie methodologically outside the reach of phenomenological understanding or knowledge. In other words, not all qualitative research inspired by phenomenology is phenomenology. Pointedly, one must ask whether a study that makes claims to phenomenology actually practices the method of the *époque* and the reduction implicitly or explicitly in a philosophically appropriate or valid manner. It should be acknowledged that the various qualitative research methods that are inspired by phenomenology may be undeniably important and relevant and yet are not to be confused with genuine phenomenological methods and phenomenological research approaches.

An Example: Is IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) Phenomenology?

In the 1990s, Jonathan Smith published half a dozen papers with the phrase “case-study” in the title. In 1994, he published “Towards Reflexive Practice: Engaging Participants as Co-Researchers or Co-Analysts in Psychological Inquiry” (1994b) and an article titled “Reconstructing Selves” (1994a). But it is obvious that he was searching for a more interesting label for his work as reflected in the *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (Smith et.al. 1995) volume published in 1995. In 1996, the first article appeared with “interpretive phenomenological analysis in health psychology” in the title (Smith 1996). From the beginning, the focus of most of Smith’s work reflects an obvious psychological occupation with personal change, psycho-therapy themes, personal identity struggles, addiction recovery, and other personal experience issues. No doubt Smith’s research history in psychology is impressively presented in well over 100 publications. So, when he changed the name of his method from “psychological inquiry” to “phenomenological inquiry,” we need to ask whether this indicates indeed a fundamental redirection of his research from a psychological focus to a phenomenological focus (Smith et al., 2009). I do not believe it does.

When Smith describes the participants of his research in the mid-nineties as “co-analysts,” he remains very much a therapy-oriented psychologist who requests that his clients describe and interpret their experiences. The

client is asked to recount experiences that mattered to them and next they are asked to interpret these experiences. Subsequently, it becomes the professional task of the psychologists to interpret the clients' interpretations. This is what psychologists do. Psychologists want their clients to tell and make sense of their experiences and then it is the psychologist's responsibility to make sense of the sense that their clients reveal. But this is also exactly the course that Smith describes in his definition of phenomenological analysis. He says, "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). Smith wants to substitute the ordinary role of the psycho-therapist into a phenomenological researcher role when he repeatedly points out throughout his text that "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to her/him" (p. 190). At the same time, Smith says, the researcher is trying to make sense of the client's psychological "problem" by, for example, assessing the "symptoms" (p. 123). This pronounced intent shows very clearly that the IPA of Smith is really interpretive *psychological* analysis, as he had in fact called and pursued it in the beginning of his IPA endeavor.

Obviously, Smith has gained a huge following among beginning psychology and health science researchers who are attracted to the kinds of psychological self-investigations that concern psychologists in the first place. I am not criticizing Smith for doing interpretive *psychological* analysis. This was his original research project. But I believe that it was not helpful to change the nomenclature "psychological inquiry and analysis" to "phenomenological analysis," even though it may have given him more readers keen on finding a foothold in phenomenology. Again, psycho-therapists may be interested encouraging their participants to make sense of their traumatic or major life experiences. That is what therapists do. But that is not what phenomenologists do. While Smith briefly cites several phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty in his IPA book, he interprets their phenomenological terms such as "lived experience," "being," and "back to the things themselves" in a psychological manner. "When people are engaged with 'an experience' of something major in their lives," says Smith,

they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections. So an IPA researcher might be interested in looking in detail at how someone makes sense of a major transition in their life—for example, starting work, having a first child, losing a parent. (p. 3)

Smith focuses on the "person" and on the personal experience of a participant and on his or her views and understandings, rather than on the phenomenon itself. Smith

admits that "IPA has the more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people" (p. 16). In contrast, the phenomenologist wants to explore the eidetic or inceptual meaning structures or aspects that describe the singular meaning of a certain phenomenon or event.

In his article on "Evaluating the Contribution of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," Smith (2011) reviews nearly 300 papers and selects the ones that he considers good examples of his IPA method. To be sure, some of the research questions are formulated in a promising manner: "What is the meaning of diabetes to patients who have the condition?" "What is it like to experience a heart attack?" However, rather than exploring the phenomenological meaning of these questions, they are approached in a psychological manner. According to Smith (2011), "IPA wants to learn about the participant's cognitive and affective reactions to what is happening to them . . . and how they are making sense of their experience" (p. 10). The point is that this is a psychological concern. For example, when Smith cites "vivid" insights that he finds particularly exemplary of the way that patients experience living with a ventricular assist device, he quotes themes like this: "To think that that thing is keeping me alive is alarming" and "I used to walk down the corridor and there was no ticking and I felt alone and I was scared" (p. 20). However, feeling "alarmed" and "scared" are emotional reactions that are experienced with many different kinds of illnesses and medical technologies. These are psychological themes and not eidetic phenomenological themes. Psychological themes as cited by Smith do not get at the primal meanings of the experience of the VAD. As well, Smith points out that the themes that he finds exemplary are supported with data from over half the participants. But again, such are empirical psychological measures, but not of phenomenological evidential quality.

I hasten to point out that the reviews which Smith evaluates highly may indeed be commendable research studies. But IPA research papers that fail to provide genuine phenomenological understandings and insights should not be accepted for publication as phenomenological studies. An IPA study that is inspired by phenomenology but that does not aim for phenomenological outcomes should be reviewed and evaluated as a psychological research study. The problem is that "emotional psychological themes" of an IPA study tend to be assessed as superficial and shallow from a phenomenological perspective.

In Praise of Phenomenology

"But is it phenomenology?" expresses my concern that readers question and hopefully appreciate what phenomenology as a method uniquely offers: originary understandings and

insights into the phenomenality of human experiences. It soon becomes clear, however, to the beginning researcher that arriving at, and putting into written language, phenomenological understandings and insights is an enormous challenge. So, it is not surprising perhaps that the general qualitative methods literature offering of data analysis programs, technologies, and procedures has become hugely popular. A great variety of methodological schemes, programs, as well as computer-assisted software in the aid of qualitative methods are offered to guide researchers through generating, analyzing, and converting raw data (interviews, observations, writings, expressing opinions, views, interpretations) to qualitative themes and insights. In the field of hermeneutic phenomenology too, the constant demand for help with data-analysis is the strongest indicator that the most central and most difficult part of phenomenological research is the problem of generating insights into the structures of lived human experience. But the serious student of phenomenology should be cautious and shy away from simplistic schemes, superficial programs, step-by-step procedures, and cookery book recipes that certainly will not result in meaningful insights.

Phenomenology, if practiced well, entralls us with insights into the enigma of life as we experience it—the world as it gives and reveals itself to the wondering gaze—thus asking us to be forever attentive to the fascinating varieties and subtleties of primal lived experience and consciousness in all its remarkable complexities, fathomless depths, rich details, startling disturbances, and luring charms. Genuine phenomenological inquiry is challenging and satisfying precisely because its meaningful revelations must be originary and existentially compelling to the soul. I use the qualifiers “genuine” and “original” as a focus to distinguish such variety of phenomenological authors, thinkers, and researchers from the many others who use the terminology, concepts, and discursive practice of phenomenology to practice various forms of qualitative inquiry that may be qualitatively interesting and important but that differ from phenomenological insights, knowledge, or understandings. Genuine phenomenological research is not easy. The realization that phenomenology is the pursuit of insight into the phenomenality of lived experience should strike fear in the heart of anyone who hopes to practice it. Yet, the sheer satisfaction of experiencing moments of meaningfulness is worth the effort.

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