
PHENOMENOLOGY

In the literature, phenomenology is often contrasted with positivist inspired approaches in research. Positivism is associated with the idea of their being objective, independent realities which we can investigate using scientific methods. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is rooted in a philosophical tradition in which it is argued meanings attached to our lived-experiences in the world are social creations, and that perceptions of reality are social constructions. Viewed through this lens, the social world exists only through the way it is experienced and interpreted by people, including researchers. Furthermore, it opens up the possibility of people and groups of people seeing things differently at different times in different circumstances, and a realisation that perceptions of reality vary from situation to situation and culture to culture. In other words, we create personal, shared and sometimes-competing perceptions of reality when interacting with one another in social settings.

The notion, therefore, of phenomena being independent of human sense making, which we can investigate using scientific methods, is challenged from a phenomenological viewpoint. Instead, phenomenologists focus their attention on the perceptions of people concerning their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them, their attitudes and beliefs, and their feelings and emotions in the light of those experiences.

As with any of the approaches used in qualitative research, there are many versions of phenomenology, and arguments over what can, and cannot, be described as 'true' versions. Commenting on these arguments, Denscombe (2010) identifies two basic traditions in phenomenology: a European and a North American version.

The roots of the European version are to be found in the discipline of philosophy, and, in particular, the work of Edmund Husserl. The 'transcendental' phenomenological approach advocated by Husserl (1931) aims to uncover the underlying fundamental aspects of human experience. Although different in a number of ways, the traditions of 'existential phenomenology' (Sartre, 1956) and 'hermeneutic phenomenology' (Heidegger, 1962) share the same concern with investigating the *essence of human experience*. Traditionally, this European approach is concerned with fundamental philosophical questions about 'being in the world' and the meaning of everyday life. It is for this reason that investigations into individual instances of lived experience are often treated as the starting point for, or are part of, a wider investigation that is about getting a clearer understanding of the essential qualities of particular experiences, which exist at a more general level.

In contrast, the North American version of phenomenology is rooted in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, education, business studies and health studies, and the tradition of social phenomenology (Shultz, 1962, and 1967). Within this tradition, the focus of attention is on the mental processes through which people make sense of their experiences. This approach is concerned with the way we interpret and assign meanings to our experience rather than with discovering the essence of human experience, as in the European tradition.

Unlike the European approach in phenomenological research, the practice of describing individual experience and what it means to that person, rather than attempting to uncover the more general essence of the experience, is accepted in North American phenomenology. According to Denscombe (2010), in this version of phenomenology:

The experiences of the individual are taken as significant data in their own right, not something to be put to one side in order to identify the universal essence of the phenomenon

The importance of the differences between the two approaches in phenomenological research means the researcher should always be clear about the purpose and ultimate goal of the investigation and the way in which the phenomenon of human experience will be described

WHAT PHENOMENOLOGIST'S DO

The researcher's task is to try to penetrate, as deeply as possible, the participant's internal, personal world, and to try to understand their experiences as completely as possible (Hayes 2000:188). Understandably, this involves establishing a trusting relationship so that the participant can feel comfortable when openly talking about their experiences and the meanings they attach to them.

The preferred method when gathering data is to use tape-recorded, unstructured interviews (Denscombe 2010). Typically, in phenomenological research, interviews take one hour or more to complete, and this is necessary when the object is to explore matters in depth. This length of time means there is usually sufficient opportunity for the interviewee to talk about issues which he, or she, feels are important, and to provide an account of their experiences. In a lengthy interview, there is also time for the researcher to check, when necessary, that he, or she, is hearing what the interviewee actually wants to put across.

Once the data has been collected and transcribed, the analysis is conducted using a four-stage process (Hayes 2000:189-194). The first step for the researcher is to reflect on and acknowledge his, or her, prior knowledge, presuppositions and biases concerning the phenomenon, and to put them to one side so that the analysis can uncover the meanings of the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. This process is called bracketing, and when working in this way, it is not possible to be totally free of bias. However, consciously bringing to the surface and acknowledging

one's prior knowledge and presuppositions does mean the researcher can take steps to control its influence. According to Hayes (2000:189) bracketing frequently:

Leads to the focus of the research being reformulated, and it often helps the researcher to clarify their own perceptions in a helpful way.

The second stage is when the researcher needs to decide which parts of the experience to concentrate on, and which not to concentrate on, in the study. Other choices have to be made as well during this stage. This involves decisions over which experiences should be the focus of attention and included, and which methods to use when structuring the participant's experiences and recording them. This is why the earlier process of bracketing is so important. The insights and understandings gained during that early stage are necessary when decisions are taken about the continued direction and structure of the research. For example, becoming aware of the importance of a particular part of the experience, as described by the participants, may result in the researcher deciding to focus on that aspect of the participant's experience.

The third stage of the analysis is about *intuiting* which involves the researcher deciding on and adopting a particular mental approach when interacting with the data. Putting to one-side previous assumptions and beliefs, the researcher sets out to explore the phenomenon in as open-minded a way as possible. Commenting on this process, Hayes (2000:190) suggests it is about acknowledging the importance of the participant's subjective experience, which cannot be understood from the outside, and, therefore, investigated using objective means:

The researcher needs to be able to feel what it would be like to be that person, or rather, to live in that person's world.

The phenomenologist's stance is that these experiences can only be uncovered and appreciated as far as possible when using a combination of intuition, empathy, imagination and open-mindedness (Hayes 2000:190). The process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts is an iterative one. Over time, the aim is to develop a sense of understanding of the person's point of view. In terms of organisation, the process of coding and analysing the data and uncovering themes can be similar to the one used in grounded theory analysis (see the course notes on grounded theory).

In the final stage of the analysis, and working in a way similar to the one used by an ethnographer, the phenomenologist uses the participant's descriptions of the experiences in such a way that they are drawn together to make intuitive sense to other people. This is a way of testing whether the researcher's descriptive insights concerning the meanings people ascribe to their experiences are appropriate or not. Another test is to check with the respondents to see whether or not they feel the account of their experiences is valid or not.

In phenomenological research there are *internal* and *external* tests of validity. **Internal validity** involves comparing the researcher's account of the participant's experiences with what the participants have said during the interviews to see whether they match, or not. **External validity** is

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achieved when the research participant considers whether or not the researcher's final account of their lived-experiences is a true reflection of how they see things. Obtaining the participant's subjective agreement concerning the validity of the account is entirely consistent with the principles of phenomenological research.

EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH USING A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Examples of experiences, which can be explored using a phenomenological approach, are investigating the experience, *the essence of*:

1. being bullied, focusing on the essential features of that experience;
2. a learning disability;
3. terminal illness;
4. anorexia;
5. exam stress;
6. finding a job and starting a career after graduation.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Denscombe (2008:85-86) lists the following advantages and disadvantages when using this approach:

ADVANTAGES

- It offers the prospect of obtaining authentic, in-depth accounts of complex phenomena as experienced by individuals and group of people;
- It is a humanistic style of research that pays attention to the lived-experiences of people in the everyday world;
- It is suited to small-scale research because it is reliant on in-depth interviews which can be undertaken in specific localities; such as, hospitals, schools or businesses, and when funding is short and the researcher is the main resource;
- The resulting descriptions of people's experiences are potentially of interest to a wider range of readers.

DISADVANTAGES

- It is claimed the approach is subjective and lacks scientific rigor. Since the approach is, by definition, a way of delivering subjective accounts of people's lived-experiences, there are no objective measures of reliability or representativeness for the researcher to use when working in this way;
- Critics claim it is primarily concerned with providing descriptions rather than explanations-;

- Because phenomenological research tends to be concerned with small rather than large number of instances, generalisations based on the findings cannot be drawn;
- Critics claim the approach causes researchers to focus on mundane, trivial and relatively unimportant subjective issues rather than the big issues of the day;
- Critics argue that it is not possible for us to suspend entirely our presuppositions when considering the views and opinions of other people.

REPORTING APPROACHES: GENERAL STRUCTURE OF STUDY

- Purpose – describing the “essence” of the experience
- Introduction (problem, questions)
- Research procedures (a phenomenology and philosophical assumptions, data collection, analysis, outcomes)
- Significant statements
- Meaning of statements
- Themes of meanings
- Exhaustive description of phenomenon

REFERENCES

- Denscombe, M. (2010) *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects*, 3rd edition. Maidenhead: OUP/McGraw-Hill Education.
- Hayes, N. (2000) *Doing Psychological Research: Gathering and analysing data*. Buckingham: Open University Press.