

What is Phenomenological Research?

By Marilyn K. Simon and Jim Goes

Includes excerpts from Simon (2011), *Dissertation and Scholarly Research: Recipes for Success*. Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success LLC

Find this and many other dissertation guides and resources at www.dissertationrecipes.com

One of the most popular qualitative methodologies used in doctoral dissertations is phenomenology. According to Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) the primary objective of a phenomenological study is to explicate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon. The phenomenologist attempts to understand human behavior through the eyes of the participants in the study. This has been called *verstehen*, which is German for the interpretive understanding of human interaction. A phenomenologist's worldview is in line with the belief that all perceptions and constructions are ultimately grounded in a particular perspective in time and space. Phenomenology does not begin with a theory, but, instead, begins with a phenomenon under consideration.

Any manner in which participants can describe their lived phenomenal experience can be used to gather data in a phenomenological study. Although the most common means of data collection in a phenomenological study is through in-depth interviews to gather the participants' detailed descriptions of their experience, participants' written or oral self-reports, or even their aesthetic expressions (e.g. art, narratives, or poetry) can also be evaluated.

Moustakas is considered the founder of phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) posited that research should focus on the wholeness of experience and a search for essences of experiences. Moustakas viewed experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of a phenomenon with the person

experiencing the phenomenon. There are strong links between phenomenology and constructivism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996), which is concerned with how the world appears to a particular person based on their personal views and experience.

Moustakas (1994) described a heuristic process in phenomenological analyses that includes:

- Immersion: the researcher is involved in the world of the experience
- Incubation: a space for awareness, intuitive or tacit insights, and understanding
- Illumination: active knowing process to expand the understanding of the experience
- Explication: reflective actions
- Creative synthesis: bringing together to show the patterns and relationships.

Pereira (2012) investigated *thoroughness* in phenomenological research and concluded that “to be judged valid, a phenomenological study must take into consideration methodological congruence (rigorous and appropriate procedures) and experiential concerns that provide insight in terms of plausibility and illumination about a specific phenomenon” (p. 19).

The central research question in a phenomenological study is often of the form:

1. What are the lived experiences of (a group) around (a specific phenomenon)?;
- or
2. What are the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experience of (a specific phenomenon) by (individuals experiencing the phenomenon)?

During the data analysis process (which should begin with the collection of the first source of data) the focus is on understanding the meaning of the description of the phenomenon. To get at the essential meaning of each individual’s experience, a common approach is to use the methodology of reduction, and analysis of specific statements to tease out overarching themes. The participants

themselves need to ensure that no misinterpretation of their views and comments takes place. This can be accomplished through an audit trail and member checking. An audit trail is a transparent description of the steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. These records explain all that what was done in an investigation. Member checking is the process of providing participants with transcripts or summaries of interviews to allow them to correct any inaccuracies. To ensure that a participant will not be identified, the use of pseudonyms is often given to the participants, enabling responses in their own words while maintaining confidentiality. Through interviewing, the participants' in-depth feelings and attitudes toward the phenomenon can be revealed.

Schools of Phenomenology

Apelgren (2010) suggested that the different schools of phenomenology can be described as a divergence between classic phenomenology, which is more closely tied to the philosophy of Hegel, and empirical phenomenology, which is more closely tied to psychology, and the works of Husserl. According to Laitinen, Arto and Sandis, Constantine (2010), Hegel perceived of the classical phenomenological journey as going from natural consciousness to philosophical wisdom, or absolute knowledge. Husserl was more concerned with the 'whatness' of a thing. His supporters regard intuition and logical thinking as the primary means to reach an understanding of a phenomenon.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is in line with this empirical direction.

Hermeneutical phenomenology, as described by Van Manen (1990), is a means to combine hermeneutics with phenomenology, and is thus both interpretive *and* descriptive.

Whereas Husserl saw the task of phenomenology to be that of describing the lived world from the viewpoint of a detached observer, existential

phenomenologists insist that the observer cannot separate him or herself from the world. Consequently, for existential phenomenology, the modalities of conscious experience are also the ways one is **in** the world. This shift of the notion of the *Lebenswelt* (lived-world) to the emphasis upon being-in-the-world expanded phenomenology in a way that allowed it to consider the totality of human relationships in the world in terms of the individual's concrete existence.

By contrast, *transcendental phenomenology* is more in line with the hermeneutic view, and requires that the researcher set aside prejudgments through bracketing, and by using systematic procedures for analyzing data. Setting aside prejudgments is called “epoché,” a Greek work meaning to refrain from judgment. Thus, the process is transcendental because the researcher sees the phenomenon newly, as for the first time, and is open to its entirety.

For more information on transcendental phenomenology check out:

http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_2/pdf/moerer.pdf

References

- Apelgren, B.M. (2005). Research on or with teachers? Methodological issues in research within the field of foreign language didactics. In E. Larsson Ringqvist & I. Valfridsson, *Forskning om undervisning i främmande språk*. Växjö: Växjö University Press. (pp. 35-45)
- Christensen, L. B., Johnson, R. B. & Turner, L. A. (2010). *Research methods, design, and analysis* (11th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Chiari, G. & Nuzzo, M. L. (1996). Psychological constructivisms: a metatheoretical differentiation. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 9, 163-184. DOI:10.1080/10720539608404663

Husserl, E. (1913/1931). *Ideas*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Laitinen, Arto & Sandis, Constantine (2010). *Hegel on Action*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pereira, H. (2012). Rigor in phenomenological research: reflections of a novice nurse researcher. *Nurse Researcher*, 19 (3), 16-19.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Canada: The Athlone Press.