



Provided by the author(s) and NUI Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	An overview of interpretive phenomenology as a research methodology
Author(s)	Tuohy, Dympna; Cooney, Adeline; Dowling, Maura; Murphy, Kathy; Sixsmith, Jane
Publication Date	2012-10-08
Publication Information	Tuohy D, Cooney A, Dowling M, Murphy K, Sixsmith J (2013) 'An overview of interpretive phenomenology as a research methodology'. Nurse Researcher, 20 (3):17-20.
Publisher	RCN Publishing
Link to publisher's version	https://dx.doi.org/10.7748/nr2013.07.20.6.17.e315
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/14727
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.7748/nr2013.07.20.6.17.e315

Downloaded 2022-08-04T20:26:41Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



Tuohy, D., Cooney, A., Dowling, M., Murphy, K. & Sixsmith, J (2013) 'An overview of interpretive phenomenology as a research methodology'. *Nurse Researcher*, 20 (6), 17-20

Aim: This article provides an overview of the different types of phenomenology and adds to the discussion on which phenomenological approach to choose when undertaking phenomenological research.

Background: Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research approach. As a research approach it is utilised extensively in nursing. Different types of phenomenological approaches are used in nursing research. It is important to understand the differences and similarities between these when choosing an approach for research.

Discussion: The aims, origins and philosophical basis of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology are described and discussed. The exploration of phenomena of “lived experience” is integral to both types of phenomenology. The contrasting positions of objective description of “lived experience” within descriptive phenomenology with that of interpretation and understanding of “lived experience” within a situated context of time, place, person and extraneous influences of prior knowledge, perception and understanding in interpretive phenomenology are discussed.

Conclusion: By understanding the core concepts of both descriptive and interpretive phenomenological approaches, researchers can choose the most appropriate approach for the research question being asked.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Descriptive, Interpretive, Hermeneutic, Research methods.

Introduction

Phenomenology can refer to a philosophy or a research method (Dowling, 2007). A central tenet of phenomenology both as a philosophy and a research methodology is the value of 'lived' experience. There are related but different parallel streams of phenomenology stemming from the works of Husserl and Heidegger and these "streams" have been understood and applied in different ways by researchers in nursing and in human and behavioural sciences (Mackey, 2005). Essentially there are two schools of phenomenology, descriptive and interpretive, although Cohen and Omery (1994) do refer to a third school, the Dutch School, which is described as a mixture of both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. This paper aims to provide an overview of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. Both approaches are compared and contrasted. This paper will inform readers of the similarities and differences of the aims and philosophical basis of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. It will assist readers who are trying to decide which phenomenological approach to choose for their research studies

Origins of Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl is generally acknowledged to be the father of phenomenology having introduced this movement at the beginning of the 20th century as a way of "doing philosophy" (Moran, 2000). Phenomenology as a philosophy is seen as a way of returning to and exploring the reality of life and living. It is commonly referred to as a study of the life-world or lived experience, it explores what an experience is like pre-reflectively (Dowling, 2007). It is a way of describing phenomena as they appear to the person experiencing those phenomena. A core element of phenomenology is to put aside extraneous factors e.g. religious, cultural, thoughts, beliefs etc which may influence how phenomena are understood before the phenomena have been

understood in their purest sense, i.e. understood from within. The aim is to describe phenomena according to how they appear to consciousness (Moran, 2000). Many well known philosophers (e.g. Heidegger, Gadamer, Arendt, de Beauvoir, Levinas, Sartre, Merleau Ponty, Derrida, Ricoeur) have been influenced by Husserl's work and as a result have developed their own and often diverse interpretations of phenomenology and even different philosophies e.g. structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism, existentialism, feminism and culture critique (Moran, 2000). Therefore, phenomenology as a philosophical movement and as a method of qualitative research inquiry has many different strands, interpretations and followers.

Descriptive Phenomenology

An Overview

Descriptive or eidetic phenomenology is guided by the work of Husserl (Dowling, 2004). Husserl's work has influenced many of today's phenomenological scholars and researchers. This has led to the development of not only different types of descriptive phenomenology but has also influenced work on hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology. Life-world phenomenology is very much influenced by the philosophies of both Husserl and Merleau Ponty (Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2004:269). The Duquesne Phenomenological Research Method is also based on Husserl's phenomenological philosophical perspective and was developed by Giorgi of the Duquesne University (Giorgi, 2008). Van Kaam and Colaizzi are also associated with this school. Interestingly, Garza (2007) illustrates the complexity and futility in trying to provide one clear definition of what phenomenology is, by stating that research undertaken in the University of Dallas has its origins in the Duquesne tradition while

also including aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology. Therefore understanding descriptive phenomenology is essential to understanding the other strands of phenomenology.

The Aim of Descriptive Phenomenology

The aim of descriptive phenomenology is to describe phenomena's general characteristics rather than the individual experiences (Giorgi, 2008) so as to determine the meaning or essence of the phenomena (Crotty, 1996). This type of phenomenology is influenced by the positivist paradigm in that there is an effort to maintain some objectivity (Dowling, 2004; McConnell-Henry et al, 2009) The influence of the positivist perspective, which values objectivity, is seen in the inclusion of bracketing. Consciousness, intentionality and bracketing are important concepts in descriptive phenomenology.

Consciousness and Intentionality

Consciousness is described as the medium between people and the world (Giorgi, 2005). Husserl believed that consciousness has to be the focus of phenomenological philosophy and that it is only through consciousness that people are open to the world (Giorgi, 2005). The objective of descriptive phenomenology is to "describe things as they appear to consciousness" (Moran, 2000:6). Consciousness and intentionality are linked i.e. there is intentionality to consciousness and this is always directed and related to something (Rapport and Wainwright, 2006). Thoughts are always directed to objects of which the mind is conscious (Crotty, 1996; Reed and Ground, 1997). Crotty (1996: 39) further describes intentionality as being "the idea that...every thought is a thought of *something*, every desire is a desire of *something*, and every judgement is an acceptance or rejection of *something*". Of note is that time and space, (important concepts in interpretive phenomenology) are put aside in descriptive

phenomenology and concentration is solely on the consciousness i.e. the experience alone while disregarding the context of the experience (McConnell-Henry et al, 2009).

Bracketing

Husserl felt it was necessary to put aside one's pre suppositions or pre-conceived ideas so as to generate valid pre-reflective data. This is achieved through a process known as 'bracketing out' or 'epoché' or 'reduction'. Objectivity is seen as crucial to the process. The aim in descriptive phenomenology is to set aside the natural attitude i.e. the "everyday taken for granted assumptions" so as to get back to the pre-reflective state. The point being that the phenomenon must be described in its purest form as it occurred before being corrupted by attitudes, prejudices and other influencing factors. Therefore the natural attitude must be set aside or suspended through bracketing. There is some considerable argument about whether bracketing in the manner in which Husserl envisaged it, can actually occur in reality. Can anyone completely put aside all that has influenced and fashioned their beliefs and understandings? Some help with this central phenomenological issue is provided by Finlay (2008) who states that the concept of the 'phenomenological attitude' is of central importance in phenomenology. The phenomenological attitude focuses on the uniqueness of a phenomenon (van Manen and Adams, 2010). The phenomenological attitude occurs when researchers goes beyond their natural attitude by suspending or bracketing their pre-suppositions. This involves the researcher "engaging a certain sense of wonder and openness to the world while at the same time, reflexively restraining pre-understandings" (Finlay, 2008:2). In order to achieve this, reduction/bracketing must occur, as researchers must be aware of their biases and try to set them aside as much as possible (Finlay, 2008). The way in which researchers acknowledge and manage

these preconceptions and influences is relevant in both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. The manner in which interpretive phenomenologists manage these is discussed later.

In summary, the aim of descriptive phenomenology is to describe phenomena in the pre-reflective state. In order to get back to this original state so as to understand the phenomena, researchers need to adopt a phenomenological attitude. This is done by suspending/ bracketing pre-suppositions through a series of steps. The aim of descriptive phenomenology is to be able to describe things as they are revealed to consciousness

Interpretive Phenomenology

An Overview

Interpretive phenomenology often referred to as hermeneutics is influenced by the interpretative paradigm (Dowling, 2004). Central to interpretive phenomenology is understanding and interpreting participants' experiences. Interpretive phenomenology has many influences e.g. Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur and particularly Heidegger (McCance and Mcilpatrick, 2008). The aim of interpretive phenomenology is to describe and interpret experiences. There are a number of key concepts within interpretive phenomenology, namely: being-in-the-world (dasein), fore-structures, the hermeneutic circle and life-world existential themes.

Being in the world: Dasein

Reed and Ground (1997:49) state that Dasein (being-in-the-world) means "being human is ...a situated activity, a situation in which things are encountered and managed". Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world means that we are "always already embedded in a world of meaning" (van Manen and Adams, 2010:450). The focus of interpretive phenomenology is on exploring the lived experience and it is

considered important to recognise that people's realities are influenced by the world in which they live in and that the researcher needs to understand that experiences are linked to social, cultural and political contexts (Flood, 2010).

According to McConnell-Henry et al (2009) bracketing has no place in interpretive phenomenology as the researcher is seen as part of the research i.e. seen as 'being-in-the world' of the participant, the researcher's prior understanding and previous knowledge or 'fore-structure' helps interpretation. But it is not as simple as that and the issue of bracketing/reduction does need to be addressed within the context of interpretive phenomenology.

Finlay (2008) suggests there is a common misconception about what bracketing is and how it should be done. Perhaps, if bracketing is understood from a pure Husserlian perspective, then one could argue that it does not 'fit' within interpretive phenomenology, as it is impossible to set aside all conscious and unconscious thoughts, beliefs and influences. Therefore the term bracketing within interpretive phenomenology may be a misnomer because of how it is traditionally understood. However, Finlay (2008) states that in order to understand, we must recognise what has influenced our understanding and view of the world. Rather than setting these aside, we need to bring them to the fore to be recognised as influences and biases, and through this acknowledgement be open to the other person's meanings. This acknowledgement of influences and biases is a type of reduction or bracketing (Finlay, 2008). Thus we need to reflect on our pre-understanding of being, as the first part of beginning to understand as far as possible the pre-reflective experience. In a way then, this notion of bracketing is not incompatible with interpretive phenomenology because while no one can not, not be influenced by factors in their

lives, the aim is to be aware of them and realise that they may influence how we understand or interpret something.

When addressing how to acknowledge and bring to the fore one's pre-understandings, different scholars use different terms e.g. Husserl uses the phrase bracketing (Moran, 2000); Gadamer, questioning (Finlay, 2008) ; van Manen, reductions (van Manen, 1990); Dahlberg, bridling (Finlay, 2008). That is not to say of course that all these different methods are the same, more so to highlight that most approaches to phenomenological research try to address pre-understanding according to their individual philosophical perspectives.

Fore-structure

Fore-structure is referred to as “prior awareness” that which is known or understood prior to interpretation. Fore-structure stems from past experiences (Standing, 2009). Fore-structure is also referred to as fore-conception or pre-awareness or pre-understanding. A core aspect of interpretive phenomenology is that the researcher is “considered inseparable from assumptions and preconceptions about the phenomena under investigation” and that these must be acknowledged and integrated into the research findings (McCance and Mcilpatrick, 2008:235). According to Flood (2010) researchers cannot rid themselves of what they know or think. This knowledge can be a valuable guide to enquiry and he (Flood) brings up the notion of co-constitutionality i.e. meanings are a blend of the meaning of both the participants and the researcher, this was termed by Gadamer as ‘a fusion of horizons’

Life-world Existential Themes

According to van Manen (1990) there are four fundamental life-world existentials or themes to be considered which enable phenomenologists to reflect on how people

experience the world. These themes are important as people's past experiences of these can and do influence and shape present and future experiences. The existential themes which originate from the work of Merleau-Ponty, include lived time (temporality), lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality) and lived human relation (relationality) (van Manen and Adams, 2010). **Lived Space** grounds the person in a location (Mackey, 2005). van Manen (1990) refers to lived space as felt space i.e. the space in which we are located affects us e.g. the size and type of building, being in the city or countryside and so on. There is a difference in how we feel in the space that is our home compared to a more impersonal space such as that for work or business. **Lived Time** is referred to as subjective time as opposed to objective clock time (van Manen, 1990). Subjective time or lived time can seem to speed up (when we are busy or enjoying ourselves) or slow down even drag (when we are bored or waiting for something). According to Mackey (2005), understanding can only be achieved if grounded in time. The way in which we interpret or ascribe meaning to events that occur at a particular time in our lives may influence understanding or perceptions e.g. positive experiences of education/ health care system may positively influence our approach to these services as an adult. **Lived Body** is the concept of embodiment i.e. we are always in our body (van Manen, 1990). When we meet people, we (them and us) both reveal and conceal something about ourselves, both consciously and unconsciously. van Manen (1990) states that one's body can change because of an encounter with another e.g. become animated, awkward etc. **Lived Human Relation** is "the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them" (van Manen, 1990:105). This relationality or relationship we have with others includes how we all in a communal way experience our world. It is the notion that because of our relationships with

others in our communal world, others influence our experiences and we in return influence their experiences.

Hermeneutic circle

Rapport and Wainwright (2006:233) describe the hermeneutic circle as "the manner in which interpretation through understanding is achieved by the circular process of continuous re-examination of propositions". The aim is to ask relevant questions so as to ascertain the meaning of being. This reciprocal process involves back and forth questioning which leads to an expanding circle of ideas known as the hermeneutic circle and through the use of this circle, the researcher tries to discover the true meaning of the experience (McConnell-Henry et al, 2009). Gadamer's fusion of horizons i.e. understanding occurs when the researcher and the text (the participants) meet through dialogue and openness (McConnell-Henry et al. 2009)

To summarise, the aim of interpretive phenomenology is to understand and interpret lived experience so to ascertain the meaning of being. Core philosophical concepts include dasein (being-in-the-world), pre-understandings (the need for researchers to acknowledge and bring to the fore their knowledge, biases and influences of the experience), the life-world existentials (including: lived body, lived time, lived space and lived human relations) and the hermeneutic circle (cycle of understanding).

Conclusion

When choosing a phenomenological approach to research it is important that the research can articulate what exactly is the aim and focus of the research question. An interpretive phenomenological approach is a suitable approach for research that aims

to understand and interpret participants' experiences so as to determine the meaning of the experience. A descriptive phenomenological approach may be chosen for research if the aim is to describe the participants' pre-reflective experience. Regardless of which specific approach is undertaken, what is of central importance is "the significance of *thinking* phenomenologically while *doing* phenomenology" (Berndtsson et al 2007:257).

References

Berndtsson, I, Claesson, S, Friberg, F, Ohlén, J (2007) Issues about thinking phenomenologically while doing phenomenology. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* .38, 256-277.

Cohen MZ, Omery A (1994) Schools of phenomenology: implications for research. In: Morse J M (Ed.) *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks CA, 136-156

Crotty, M (1996) *Phenomenology and Nursing Research*. Churchill Livingstone, Melbourne.

Dahlberg, KME, Dahlberg, HK (2004) Description vs. Interpretation-a new understanding of an old dilemma in human sciences research. *Nursing Philosophy*. 5, 268-273.

Dowling, M (2004) Hermeneutics: an exploration. *Researcher*. 11, 4, 30-39

Dowling, M (2007) From Husserl to van Manen. A review of different phenomenological approaches. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*. 44, 131-142.

Finlay, L (2008) A dance between the reduction and reflexivity: explicating the “phenomenological psychological attitude”. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*. 39, 1-32.

Flood, A (2010) Understanding phenomenology. *Nurse Researcher*. 17, 2, 7-15.

Garza, G (2007) Varieties of phenomenological research at the university of Dallas: An emerging typology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 4, 313-342.

Giorgi, A (2005) The phenomenological movement and research in the human sciences. *Nursing Science Quarterly*. 18 (1) 75-82.

Giorgi, A (2008) Concerning a serious misunderstanding of the essence of the phenomenological method in psychology. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*. 39, 33-58.

Mackey, S (2005) Phenomenological nursing research: methodological insights derived from Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*. 42, 179-186.

McCance, T, Mcilpatrick, S (2008) Phenomenology. In: Watson, R, McKenna, H, Cowman, S, Keady, J (Eds) *Nursing Research Designs and Methods*. Edinburgh, Churchill Livingstone, Elsevier, 232-240.

McConnell-Henry, T, Chapman, Y, Francis, K (2009) Husserl and Heidegger: Exploring the disparity. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*. 15, 7-15.

Moran, D (2000) *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Routledge, London.

Rapport, F, Wainwright, P (2006) Phenomenology as a paradigm of movement. *Nursing Inquiry*. 13, 3, 228-236.

Reed, J, Ground, I (1997) *Philosophy for Nursing*. Arnold, London.

Standing, M (2009) A new critical framework for applying hermeneutic phenomenology. *Nurse Researcher*. 16, 4, 20-30.

Van Manen, M (1990) *Researching Lived Experience Human Science for An Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. The Althouse Press, London Ontario.

Van Manen, M, Adams, CA (2010) *Phenomenology International Encyclopedia of Education*. 6, 449-455.