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inquiry: Philosophical and methodological issues**

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# **Researching entrepreneurship through phenomenological inquiry: Philosophical and methodological issues**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, the field of entrepreneurship has witnessed an emerging body of research that operates within an interpretive paradigm. In contributing to this research tradition, this article explicates an interpretive, phenomenological form of inquiry, described by Thompson et al (1989) as the 'phenomenological interview'. Particular attention is paid to the ontological and epistemological foundations of this approach, illustrating the evolution from philosophy to methodology. The article demonstrates how a phenomenological commitment to research translates into a set of issues that provide the methodological context for these in-depth, unstructured interviews. The application of this method is then demonstrated with reference to case study research that was conducted with six practising entrepreneurs, which utilised phenomenological interviews as the primary research tool. The article concludes with a discussion of some important caveats that surround the use of the phenomenological interview.

Key words: interpretive, phenomenological, philosophy, methodology, interview.

## **Introduction**

The term 'phenomenological inquiry' is widely used within the social sciences and is often employed to describe a research perspective that is distinct from, and set in opposition to, more positivistic forms of inquiry (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). Although phenomenology is firmly located within a broad interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994), this article aims to clarify the relationship between 'phenomenology' as a philosophy and 'phenomenological inquiry' as a stance or approach to conducting entrepreneurship research.<sup>1</sup> Patton (1990) emphasises this point when he states that the term phenomenology has become so popularised that its meaning has become confused. As he asserts, 'sometimes

phenomenology is viewed as a paradigm, sometimes as a philosophy or as a perspective, and it is sometimes even viewed as synonymous with qualitative methods or naturalistic inquiry' (Patton, 1990; p68).

This article explicates a particular form of phenomenological inquiry, described by Thompson et al (1989) as the 'phenomenological interview'. To clarify the philosophical assumptions that underlie this methodology, it is important to consider the primary tenets of phenomenology; canons that define the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of phenomenological forms of inquiry. This reflects the desire to demonstrate how a philosophy such as phenomenology can be *translated* into an interpretive method that can be employed by entrepreneurship researchers. To provide such an illustration, this paper will draw on case study research conducted with six practising entrepreneurs, which utilised phenomenological interviews as the primary research methodology (Cope, 2001; Cope and Watts, 2000).

### **The philosophy of phenomenology**

Phenomenology is not a rigid school or uniform philosophic tradition. Rather, there exists a great diversity of phenomenological thought encapsulated within the 'phenomenological movement'. The philosophy of phenomenology was first developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), whose seminal works were later extended and developed by Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), as well as by existential-phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

The term itself derives from two Greek words: *phainomenon* (an "appearance") and *logos* ("reason" or "word") (Pivcevic, 1970). In literal terms, phenomenology means the 'study or description of phenomena' (Pettit, 1969); where a 'phenomenon' is simply anything that appears or presents itself to someone in consciousness (Moran, 2000). Consequently, Hammond et al (1991) refer to phenomenology as the 'description of things as one experiences them, or of one's experiences of things' (p1). The aim of phenomenology is to bring out the 'essences' of experiences or appearances (phenomena), to describe their underlying 'reason' (Pivcevic, 1970).

Although the diverse nature of phenomenology makes a summary of the major phenomenological tenets a challenging task, this article will provide a brief outline of

its major themes. The purpose of this discussion is to illustrate the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guide the phenomenological researcher and provide the philosophical context for the phenomenological interview.

### **Paradigmatic issues associated with phenomenological inquiry**

The selection of an appropriate research methodology can be conceptualised as an iterative process, where decisions made at an ontological level inform one's epistemological stance and similarly create the context in which research is actually conducted.<sup>2</sup> As Easton (1995) points out, many researchers busy themselves with the practical issues of research and in so doing often obscure the fact that 'assumptions have been made and values smuggled into the decisions without the decision maker being aware of the process' (Easton, 1995; p1). Grant and Perrin (2002) confirm this tendency in their review of recently published articles within the field of entrepreneurship and small business, illustrating that it is often impossible to be certain about an author's ontological and paradigmatic position.<sup>3</sup> In addressing these fundamental issues directly in this article, it ensures that entrepreneurship researchers considering the use of phenomenological interviews do not make such philosophical choices implicitly or merely 'by default' (Easton, 1995).

### **The rejection of the dualism between consciousness and matter**

One of the major themes of phenomenology regards the nature of the real and the ontological dichotomy within many areas of philosophy between an inner world of 'private' experience and an outer world of 'public objects'. (Hammond et al, 1991). This dualism between the realm of objective 'reality' and the realm of subjective 'appearance' was reinforced by the seventeenth-century scientific revolution and the elevation of physical science as the supreme method for resolving all human questions. This is described in phenomenological terms as 'scientism', the philosophical corollary of which is positivism (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974). Husserl observed this shift towards the examination of all rational endeavours through empirical statements i.e. statements that could be verified or falsified through 'objective' methods of investigation. As Stewart and Mickunas (1974) state, 'Man was interpreted as another "object" to be investigated by the same methods used in the physical sciences. This signaled a kind of radical reductionism in which all human

functions were reduced to physically observable characteristics' (p18). Scientism portrayed reality as something that lay 'behind' or 'beyond' the realm of mere appearances (phenomena) in which the world is experienced in everyday perception (Hammond et al, 1991).

It is this perceived ontological separation between consciousness and matter, reality and appearance, which phenomenologists actively reject. Unlike many other areas of philosophical inquiry, phenomenology makes no clear distinction or contrast between the notions of 'appearance' and 'reality'. No assumptions are made about what is or is not real; rather descriptions of phenomena begin with how one experiences things. As Moran explains (2000), 'the whole point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity' (p15).

### **The intentionality of consciousness**

To understand why phenomenology rejects the dividing up of reality into separate categories such as minds and bodies or subjects and objects, one must examine a key concept behind phenomenological thinking - the intentionality of consciousness. As Sokolowski (2000) explains, phenomenology's portrayal of consciousness as intentional is another way of saying that consciousness is always directed toward an object. In simple terms, this concept infers that the description of experience shows it always to be the experience *of something*. Moran (2000) uses the term 'aboutness' to characterise the intentionality of conscious experiences. As he goes on to illustrate, 'every act of loving is a loving *of something*, every act of seeing is a seeing *of something*' (p16). From a phenomenological standpoint, it is impossible to divide one's experience from what it is that is experienced.

The implications of Husserl's intentionality of consciousness is that any attempt to describe an external, 'objective' reality is futile without pertaining to the inner, subjective world of private experience, as the two are intimately related.

'Ontologically, the world constitutes a stream of consciousness; it is experiential; the subjective is the source of all objectivities' (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; p233).

Thus, there is no independent, objective reality that is waiting to be discovered through rational, empirical, ‘scientific’ methods. For the phenomenologist, the only ‘real’ world that can be described with adequacy is that which is pre-scientifically experienced (Hammond et al, 1991).

### **A presuppositionless philosophy**

A third major theme of phenomenology and one of the prime motivating factors behind Edmund Husserl’s work was the desire for a philosophy that was free from presuppositions. As Stewart and Mickunas (1974) illustrate, every rational activity begins within assumptions; assumptions about the nature of its activity, the object being investigated and the method appropriate to conduct such an inquiry. In the physical sciences, it is presupposed that reality is composed of physical objects that exist and can be investigated through empirical means. As a reaction to such presuppositions regarding the nature of reality, Husserl felt that it should be philosophy’s task to question all such presuppositions. As a result, a cornerstone of phenomenology became the rejection of all presuppositions concerning the nature of the real, where any judgments about such matters should be suspended until they could be founded on a more certain basis (Pettit, 1969).

Another motivating principle behind Husserl’s presuppositionless philosophy can be understood at an epistemological level, in that the task of phenomenology is to explore and reveal the essential types and structures of experiences (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). To provide a careful and authentic description of ordinary conscious experience, Husserl argued, it is necessary to suspend all prior scientific, philosophical, cultural and everyday assumptions and judgments (Moran, 2000). It is only then that one places oneself ‘in the sphere of “absolute clear beginnings”, in which one can perceive the things themselves as they are in themselves and independently of any prejudice’ (Kockelmans, 1994; p14). It was Husserl’s belief that previous philosophers has either ignored such description altogether or had allowed their prior values, beliefs and philosophical commitments to distort and misconstrue the description of phenomena. As Hammond et al (1991) explain, Husserl felt that previous accounts of perceptual experience were inherently biased, influenced more by what it ‘should’ be like than by what it was actually like. In contrast, a central tenet

of phenomenology is that explanations should not to be imposed before the phenomenon had been understood 'from within' (Moran, 2000).

### **The suspension of the natural attitude**

To be free from such presuppositions, Husserl asserted that it was necessary to suspend what he described as the 'natural attitude' and move to a 'philosophical attitude'. The philosophical attitude is also sometimes called the 'phenomenological attitude' or the 'transcendental attitude' (Sokolowski, 2000). A brief clarification of this terminology is necessary in order to understand the basis of phenomenological description. Stewart and Mickunas (1974) offer a succinct explanation of the 'natural attitude':

[The] prephilosophical attitude toward the world Husserl called the "natural attitude" or "natural standpoint". The man who plants his crops and reaps his harvest is not dealing with the world in any philosophical sense. It never occurs to him to question the reality of the world in which he lives or to inquire into its rational basis. In fact, the essential attitude of human life is this natural standpoint. Whenever one is conscious, he is always related to this natural world which includes matters of fact, processes, practical aspects, values, other persons, cultural creations...The natural standpoint constitutes the most basic web of all human relationships to the world and to other persons' (p24).

The primary feature of this natural attitude is that it is not concerned with philosophical inquiry into the basis of the world of experience. To move to a philosophical or phenomenological attitude requires the questioning and suspension of all one's presuppositions about the world adopted within the natural attitude. In this sense, Husserl's phenomenology is often described as 'transcendental', in that one must 'go beyond' the natural attitude in order to reflect upon it in a philosophical way, as Sokolowski (2000) explains.

'When we move into the phenomenological attitude, we become something like detached observers of the passing scene or like spectators at a game. We become onlookers. We contemplate the involvements we have with the world and with things in it, and we contemplate the world in its human involvement. We are no longer simply participants in the world; we contemplate what it is to be a participant in the world and its manifestations' (p48).

Husserl used several metaphors to describe this change in attitude, namely the 'phenomenological epoche', 'phenomenological reduction' and 'bracketing'. Within

Husserl's works these terms can be viewed as synonymous, for Husserl used them interchangeably and all three terms have very similar meanings. Thus, the phenomenological epoche involves the suspension or 'bracketing' of certain commonly held beliefs until they can be established on a firmer basis, in order to open oneself to a phenomenon and view each experience in its own right. In this way, attention is narrowed or 'reduced' to the essential elements of the phenomenon in question.

### **The Lebenswelt**

The final major theme of phenomenology discussed here concerns the notion of the 'lived-world', described by Husserl as the Lebenswelt. The lived-world, or Lebenswelt, represents the world of ordinary, immediate experience and is the background for all human endeavours, the concrete context of all experience. Husserl's description of the Lebenswelt proved highly significant in terms of the evolution of phenomenology, as it provided a point of departure for later existential-phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre.

Existential phenomenology developed the concept of the Lebenswelt, emphasising the importance of the being-in-the-world, thereby enabling phenomenology 'to consider to totality of human relationships in the world in terms of the individual's concrete experience' (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974; p64). The basic premise of existential phenomenology is that human beings cannot be studied in isolation from the concrete world-context (lived-world) in which they interact and live.

'The total ensemble of human actions – including thoughts, moods, efforts, emotions, and so forth – define the context in which man situates himself. But, in turn, the world-context defines and sets limits to human action' (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974; p65).

In contrast to Husserlian phenomenology, existentialist philosophy emphasises that the investigation of human existence is not one of bracketing the world through the suspension of the natural attitude. In trying to describe the lived-world from the viewpoint of a detached observer, a stance achieved through the phenomenological epoche, one becomes too removed from the inherent situatedness of human existence. As Thompson et al (1989) assert, 'existential-phenomenologists do not seek to study individuals separate from the environments in which they live or the interaction of the



two (which implies separation); rather, the study is of the totality of the human-being-in-the-world' (p135). Existential phenomenology, therefore, is viewed here as a particularly important development within phenomenological thinking, for it builds on Husserl's earlier work and emphasises the need to 'describe experience as it emerges in some context(s) or, to use phenomenological terms, as it is "lived"' (Thompson et al, 1989; p135).

Together, these major themes of phenomenology represent the philosophical platform for specific forms of phenomenological inquiry such as the phenomenological interview. To understand the progression from philosophy to methodology, the following section will explore the implications that these tenets have for conducting phenomenological research and how they translate into broad methodological issues that surround the use of the phenomenological interview.

## **Methodological issues surrounding phenomenological inquiry**

### **Adopting an interpretive stance**

The aim of phenomenological inquiry is to understand the subjective nature of 'lived experience' from the perspective of those who experience it, by exploring the subjective meanings and explanations that individuals attribute to their experiences. Patton (1990) defines such a phenomenological 'focus' quite simply as describing 'what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience' (p71). The methodological implication of this focus on lived experience is that an individual's interpretation of the experience is an essential part of the experience itself (Patton, 1990). Bogdan and Taylor (1975) summarise this phenomenological stance.

'The phenomenologist views human behaviour - what people say and do - as a product of how people interpret their world. The task of the phenomenologist, and, for us, the qualitative methodologists, is to capture this *process* of interpretation...In order to grasp the meanings of a person's behaviour, *the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person's point of view*' (p14).

This desire to understand the actor's definition of a situation and to seek the meaning attributed to experience locates phenomenological inquiry within a long established interpretive tradition (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Holstein and Gubrium, 1994), reflecting Heidegger's recognition that all description *involves* interpretation (Moran,

2000). Although phenomenology is often described as a ‘programme of description’ (Hammond et al, 1991), it is important to remember that phenomenological inquiry is an ‘uncompromising interpretive enterprise’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; p264).<sup>4</sup>

Although a well-established interpretive tradition exists within the social sciences, it is only in recent years that interpretive research in entrepreneurship has emerged (see, for example, Bouchikhi, 1993; Chell and Pittaway, 1998; Costello, 1996; Hines and Thorpe, 1995; Johannisson, 1995; Rae, 2000; Rae and Carswell, 2000; Steyaert, 1998; Steyaert and Bouwen, 1997). As Grant and Perrin (2002) illustrate, small business and entrepreneurship research remains dominated by objectivist, functionalist approaches. They go on to argue that greater paradigmatic experimentation, engagement and debate is required to move beyond this single, ‘paradigmatic cage’ and thereby develop new perspectives of entrepreneurship. Phenomenological inquiry offers one such alternative approach.

### **Utilising a qualitative approach**

Phenomenological inquiry is inherently qualitative in nature. As Thompson et al (1989) argue, the world of ‘lived experience’ does not always correspond with the world of objective description because objectivity often implies trying to explain an event or experience as separate from its contextual setting. To try and provide predictive knowledge through the construction of generalisable laws that remain ‘true’ across time and space is seen as untenable in phenomenological terms. This is primarily because such as process of ‘context stripping’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) does not embrace the idea that the meaning of experience is always contextually and temporally situated. Van Mannen (1983) provides a description of the qualitative method that resonates clearly with the objectives of phenomenological inquiry.

‘It is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world’ (p9).

### **Providing a ‘photographic slice of life’**

Inquiring into the world of lived experience brings its own complexity, and a significant issue when conducting phenomenological inquiry is the ability to translate

the interpretive accounts that individuals give of their experiences. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) point out,

‘Subjects, or individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why. No single method can grasp the subtle variations in ongoing human experience’ (p12).

A key aspect of phenomenological inquiry, which differentiates it from more positivistic and functionalist methods, is the *explicit* recognition that any explanations given of phenomena ‘are at best “here and now” accounts that represent a “photographic slice of life” of a dynamic process that, in the next instant, might represent a very different aspect’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; p155). It is important to realise that the same person may well interpret things differently at different times and in different contexts. An individual’s perspective of an event or experience, therefore, can change over time (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

In phenomenological terms, Thompson et al (1989) explain this issue in terms of the figure/ground metaphor, where experience is conceptualised as a dynamic process in which, at any given moment, certain events stand out (become figural) whilst others become background for the experience. In addition, the figure that stands out is never independent of its ground, and so,

‘...experience emerges in a contextual setting, and, therefore, cannot be located “inside” the person as a complete subjectivity nor “outside” the person as a subject-free objectivity’ (Thompson et al, 1989; p136).

Phenomenological research is thus firmly located in a particular context at a particular time. This reflects the existentialist concern for understanding the human-being-in-the-world, where human existence is defined by the current experiential context in which it occurs.

### **Interacting with participants**

The complexity surrounding the phenomenological description of phenomena also renegotiates the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The inherent situatedness and subjectivity of phenomenological inquiry questions the ability of the investigator to be a neutral, impartial and detached observer. As discussed earlier, the critique of Husserl’s conception of phenomenology by existential-phenomenologists

rested on the notion that the observer is inextricably linked to the lived-world (Lebenswelt) in which phenomena occur.

In methodological terms, this means that what is known (predominantly by the researcher) is created through a personal and interactive relationship between the investigator and the subject/object of investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In this respect, the phenomenological description of phenomena presented by the researcher represents a personal interpretation of the interpretations of the researched. Schwandt (1994) describes this as a 'second-order' interpretation of an individual's process of *Verstehen*.<sup>5</sup> Put simply, it is important to be aware that any interpretations offered by researchers engaged in phenomenological inquiry are, *in themselves*, the result of an interpretive process in which individuals under investigation make sense of their experiences.

### **Working within the 'context of discovery'**

One of the defining factors of phenomenological inquiry is that it is firmly located in the 'context of discovery' rather than the 'context of justification' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994; Symon and Cassell, 1998). This issue relates to the presuppositionless character of phenomenology, where any prior values, beliefs and philosophical commitments are suspended in order to provide descriptions of phenomena that are free from prejudices. Such a methodological approach stands in direct contrast to the 'scientific method', which focuses on the verification or confirmation of nomothetic propositions through deductive means. As Despande (1983) argues, it is the over-reliance on such hypothetico-deductive methods that restricts the ability of researchers to *discover* or generate rich substantive theory about social phenomena.

Phenomenological inquiry emphasises that a priori theoretical propositions and hypotheses should be suspended or 'bracketed' in order to describe phenomena from the perspective of those who experience it. It is only then that investigators can develop an authentic and holistic appreciation of a phenomenon *in its own right*, without being influenced by any theoretical presuppositions about what it 'should' be like rather than what it is actually like.

### **Creating thematic descriptions of experience**

Given that phenomenological inquiry works within the context of discovery, it is important to examine how this research perspective enables researchers to generate theory that is both useful and credible. As touched upon already, phenomenological research is inherently inductive rather than deductive, where theoretical propositions *emerge* from the descriptions of experience given by individuals under investigation. As Thompson et al (1989) explain, the ‘research focus is on experience as described from a first-person view, where researchers seek to apprehend a pattern as it emerges. The research strategy is *holistic* and seeks to relate descriptions of specific experiences to each other and to the overall context of the life-world. The research goal is to give a *thematic description* of experience’ (p137). Rather than trying to confirm or disconfirm existing theories, the aim of phenomenological research is to develop ‘bottom-up’ interpretive theories that are inextricably ‘grounded’ in the lived-world.<sup>6</sup>

From a phenomenological perspective, knowledge is created through repetitive reinforcement and cumulative evidence, where the strength of a theory rests on the variety of circumstances and contexts to which it holds some descriptive power.<sup>7</sup> As such, description plays an important role in inductive theory building, for as Mintzberg (1983) reflects, ‘theory building seems to require rich description, the richness that comes from anecdote’ (p538).

Together, these methodological themes represent the contextual parameters within which phenomenological research is performed. The following section demonstrates how these phenomenological commitments have shaped a piece of entrepreneurship research, both in terms of the aims of the study and how it was conducted i.e. through the methodology of the phenomenological interview.

### **Utilising phenomenological interviews within the field of entrepreneurship**

The use of phenomenological interviews within the field of entrepreneurship is still in its infancy. One recent example is the work conducted by Cave, Eccles and Rundle (2001), which involved a comparative study of the attitudes towards entrepreneurial failure between US and UK entrepreneurs. In particular, phenomenological interviews

were used to develop and enrich findings from a larger quantitative study. In contrast, the research reported here utilised phenomenological interviews as the primary research methodology to explore the experiences of six practising entrepreneurs (Cope, 2001). As the focus of this article is the explication of an interpretive methodology, it is beyond the remit of this discussion to present the theoretical background and the main findings from the study, which have already been presented elsewhere (Cope and Watts, 2000). Before describing how the interviews were conducted, it is important to explain the aims of the research and how they were shaped by the desire to study entrepreneurship from a phenomenological perspective.

### **Aims of the research**

The primary aim of the research was to explore the nature of entrepreneurial learning from a phenomenological viewpoint i.e. from the level of lived experience. Of particular importance was the desire to explore the role of critical incidents within the entrepreneurial learning process.<sup>8</sup> It was an exploration of the personal learning that may be derived from these periodic opportunities and problems that formed the central research objective. The study sought to comprehend how the six participants felt they had *responded* to the challenges of small business ownership and the perceived impact that these experiences had had on them, both as entrepreneurs and as individuals. To explore the concept of learning, the objective was to obtain reflective accounts of how the participants felt that they had changed, what they did differently as a result of their experiences and what they would do differently, on reflection, if they were confronted with similar situations again. The importance of a phenomenological commitment was that the emphasis was placed firmly on the participants and what it felt like to experience, first-hand, the trials and tribulations of starting and managing a small business.

The research was concerned with creating theoretical propositions that were deeply grounded in the experiences of the participants rather than detached, analytical abstractions. A key objective was to ensure that the research remained authentic and identifiable to the six entrepreneurs represented. In the first instance, it was deemed vital to provide sufficient phenomenological depth to enable interested parties to achieve a certain level of understanding and empathy in relation to each participant. In order to create theory that was both useful and credible, however, the aim was to

produce theoretical propositions that were deeply enmeshed within, but also extended beyond, the immediate context of the six cases. The primary aim of the research was to go beyond mere description and work towards an interpretive explanation that would help account for the phenomenon of entrepreneurial learning, thereby ensuring that description was balanced by analysis and interpretation (Patton, 1990). Geertz (1973) articulates this intimate relationship between theory and data.

‘Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don’t make much sense or hold much interest apart from them. This is so, not because they are not general (if they are not general, they are not theoretical), but because, stated independently of their applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant’ (Geertz, 1973; p25).

The phenomenological interview was deemed the most suitable methodology to achieve these objectives. As Thompson et al (1989) state, it affords sufficient descriptive detail to illustrate how individuals live this experience and, just as importantly, provides an experientially based understanding of the phenomenon in question. The study of critical incidents was also particularly beneficial in phenomenological terms, as ‘focusing on specific events enables the participant to provide a fuller, more detailed description of an experience as it was lived’ (Thompson et al., 1989; p138). In eliciting rich, descriptive and contextual narratives of the challenges that managing a small business can create, the research could then work towards an inductive, emergent conceptualisation of entrepreneurial learning within the context of organisational growth.

### **The theoretical context for the phenomenological interviews**

Before engaging in an explanation of how the phenomenological interviews were carried out, it is useful to describe the theoretical context in which the interviews were conducted. To reiterate, of utmost importance was inductive and emergent theory building, reflecting the phenomenological desire to understand and describe the phenomenon of entrepreneurial learning as it is ‘lived’. To achieve this objective, it was essential to ‘bracket’ any theoretical presuppositions regarding the nature of learning in order to approach the interviews free from any assumptions or ideas about what entrepreneurial learning ‘should’ be like. A key aim was to *discover* what it was like to face the challenges of small business ownership and what possible learning may be derived from such experiences, rather than impose any explanations from the

expansive literature on how individuals are thought to learn. Consequently, deciding upon the necessary level of prior exposure to extant literature proved to be a difficult aspect of the fieldwork process, an issue discussed in the methodological reflections section of this article.

Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, no specific theories, hypotheses or constructs were developed prior to engagement with the participants. In accordance with academic inquiry, however, it was necessary initially to explore the growing literature on entrepreneurial learning and the wider literature on individual learning in order to generate broad research questions that would contribute to extant knowledge. During the construction of the research framework these existing theories and ideas were then purposefully ignored to ensure that these preconceptions were not taken into the field. It was seen as vitally important to keep a degree of naïvety regarding how individuals learn in order to concentrate on the experiences of the participants and make sense of their personal learning within the unique context of their particular businesses.

### **Conducting the interviews**

In conducting the interviews, the description of phenomenological interviewing as first proposed by Thompson et al (1989) provided clear direction. They specify that the goal of the phenomenological interview is to gain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience, where the course of the dialogue is set largely by the participant. The role of the interviewer is to provide a context in which participants feel free to describe their experiences in detail. Although Thompson et al (1989) recognise that there are other methods for conducting phenomenological research, they emphasise that the phenomenological interview 'is perhaps the most powerful means of attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experience' (p138). Methodologically, the phenomenological interview is ideographic, in the sense that it 'stresses the importance of letting one's subject unfold its nature and characteristics during the process of investigation' (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; p6).

Following a phenomenological interview approach, the six interviews (one with each of the six participants) were highly unstructured and lasted approximately one and a half hours.<sup>9</sup> The interview focused on the developmental history of the business and



how the participant came to enter into small business ownership. As Thompson et al (1989) state, with the exception of an opening question, the interviewer must have no a priori questions concerning the topic. Consequently, the only structure that the interview had was that the participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that the focus of the research was on their personal recollections of what stimulated them to start a small business and what was going on in their lives at that time. The conversation then naturally moved onto what it felt like to open and run their own business. The wish to explore critical incidents ‘at some point’ during the interview was also made explicit, but this request was phrased in more familiar terms. The participants were asked to focus on the best and worst times that they had experienced *as they emerged* within the wider story of how the business developed.

To ensure clarity of questions, theoretical language was avoided and more everyday terms were used (Patton, 1990).<sup>10</sup> After this introduction, any descriptive questions asked flowed ‘from the course of the dialogue and not from a predetermined path’ (Thompson et al, 1989; p138). Throughout the interview, the discussion focused on what experiences felt like at the time and then, on reflection, what lasting impression or effect these experiences had. It was hoped that by focusing both on what the lived experience was like but also, through reflection, what significance the experience had for the entrepreneur, this would give some indication of what the participant had ‘learned’ from the experience or critical incident.

### **Methodological reflections**

The purpose of this article has been to illustrate a phenomenological methodology that can be used by entrepreneurship researchers and, in particular, to demonstrate the philosophical underpinnings of this particular form of inquiry. As with any research method there are caveats to consider and it is important to reflect on the use of phenomenological interviews to understand both the strengths and possible limitations of this approach.

### **Researcher and participant in positions of equality**

What must be emphasised at the outset of this discussion is that the phenomenological interview can be an extremely powerful and valuable methodology that produces an unusual depth and richness of data. It is also a methodology that respects and values

the experiences of the participants, prioritising their interpretations of their experiences rather than trying to confirm or refute existing theoretical propositions. As Thompson et al (1989) stress, the ‘interviewer does not want to be seen as more powerful or knowledgeable because the respondent must be the expert on his or her own experiences’ (p138). For the participants, such a non-directive and unstructured approach to exploring their experiences can also be emancipatory. This is because the phenomenological interview enables the participants to speak their mind and explore their experiences in their own way. This methodology allows them to tell their own story, free from the constraints of a restrictive and inhibitive set of interview questions. Several of the participants in the research very much enjoyed being able to talk about their experiences in this way, and for the majority it was the first time that they had ever narrated the whole story of how their business developed. One participant went so far as to describe the interview as a ‘pleasant therapeutic session’.

### **A methodology unrestrained by preconceptions**

As a researcher, a further strength of phenomenological forms of inquiry such as the phenomenological interview is the emphasis on suspending one’s theoretical presuppositions prior to engagement with the phenomenon under investigation. A common criticism of some other forms of qualitative inquiry, such as case study research for example, is that any attempt at theory building is limited by the investigator’s preconceptions (Eisenhardt, 1989), as case study researchers ‘find what they want to find’ (Hartley, 1994). Phenomenological interviews do not provide a perfect solution to this potential problem, as will be discussed shortly. However, the purposeful bracketing of one’s preconceptions in order to understand phenomena *from the perspective of those who experience it* is a powerful way of tackling any potential theoretical bias in entrepreneurship research.

### **A methodological risk?**

As with any methodology there are caveats to be considered by entrepreneurship researchers when considering the use of phenomenological interviews. One particular issue is that the researcher does not impose any rigid or pre-existing framework on the interview process. This represents a significant methodological risk, as participants are given a significant amount of control during the interviews. Apart from an opening question, the interview has no structure and ‘is intended to yield a

conversation, not a question and answer session' (Thompson et al, 1989; p138). Consequently, the research process is largely indeterminate and must be 'played by ear' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In particular, such an approach can have significant implications in terms of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, as Eccles (2000) found in her phenomenological interviews with addictive consumers.

'By adhering to the spirit of existential phenomenology, the direction of any conversation has to be participant-led - a move away from most other research methods. The researcher is therefore required to relinquish *her* control. Having decided upon and organised all other elements of the research, the researcher at this stage has to allow the participant to control and dictate the progress, and to an extent, the process of the interview' (p137-138).

It is important to remember that the freedom given to the participants can be a daunting prospect for the researcher, particularly in terms of entering the interview rather exposed and 'empty-handed'. However, as already discussed, such an uninhibited conversation enables the participant to relax and narrate their experiences more fully, providing an unparalleled depth of information about the phenomenon in question. This issue of control is particularly significant in phenomenological terms, for the researcher *has* to relinquish control in order to open himself/herself to the phenomenon in its own right.

### **Recognising the existence of an 'hidden agenda'**

The issue above introduces an important contradiction that is apparent in the use of phenomenological interviews. On the one hand, the researcher makes a commitment to allow the participant to tell their own story from their own perspective and in their own way, with as little interference as possible. On the other hand, the researcher is interested in discussing certain issues and experiences that are broadly related to the underlying questions driving the inquiry; otherwise it proves difficult to produce any meaningful conclusions that are also *relevant*. These implicit research objectives go against the grain of phenomenological research, as the researcher should not enter into the fieldwork process with any preconceptions or any specific issues that need to be addressed. Rather, the discussion is guided, to a large extent, by what the participant feels is important - it is the participant that sets the course of the dialogue (Thompson et al., 1989).

In practice, it can be very difficult for the researcher to maintain such a passive role, as the research questions driving the inquiry need some kind of answers in order to produce work that can make a genuine contribution to knowledge about the phenomenon in question. As Eisenhardt (1989) concedes, it is impossible for researchers to start with a 'clean theoretical slate'. As the research has demonstrated, one's perceptions of the phenomenon are influenced, both explicitly and implicitly, by exposure to extant theory prior to engagement with the participants. Methodological decisions naturally involve assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and this is an inescapable aspect of conducting research. Primarily, this is because research questions are formulated, in part, through comprehensive literature reviews that serve to identify the limits of current knowledge.

Consequently, an important methodological reflection from the research is that maintaining a 'pure' phenomenological approach often proves difficult.<sup>11</sup> In terms of reflexivity, it is extremely important that researchers using the phenomenological interview recognise the implicit, 'hidden agenda' that they bring to the research process, *even though* the primary aim is to explore phenomena from the level of lived experience and not to explore or confirm one's own perceptions, ideas or theories. Within the interview, the most important thing is to be aware of these issues in order to find an acceptable balance between interfering as little as possible whilst, at the same time, trying to maintain a conversation that has some bearing on the inquiry. What must be recognised is that such in-depth, unstructured interviews are demanding yet ultimately highly worthwhile. As Eccles (2000) recognises, 'the reality of this interview approach requires great flexibility, concentration and patience on the part of the researcher' (p135).

### **The participant's expectation of an 'interview'**

Finally, another important issue to be aware of when contemplating the use of phenomenological interviews is the social and cultural expectations of the participant and the preconceptions they have of what an 'interview' consists of. The very notion of an 'interview' has certain meanings and connotations, particularly the expectation that the interviewee will be asked a series of questions during the interaction with the interviewer. A phenomenological interview does not fulfil such expectations, as the

participant is required to play a very active role during the interview, as the dialogue generated during the discussion forms the basis for any subsequent questions that are asked by the interviewer (Thompson et al., 1989). As Thompson et al (1989) state, 'the ideal interview format occurs when the interviewer's short descriptive questions and/or clarifying statements provide an opening for a respondent's lengthier and detailed descriptions' (p139). In practice, the fluidity of the discussion tended to fluctuate during many of the interviews. At times, questions and answers flowed quite naturally and easily, whilst at other points the interview came to a sudden halt and a new issue began to be explored. The interview often went off in a completely new direction as a result and the chronology of events therefore often became quite disjointed. Phenomenological interviews, therefore, can often be messy and appear to lack coherence but it is important to remember that describing the lived experience of a phenomenon is, in itself, a messy and complex business. As such, any methodological approach that seeks to obtain such descriptions will inevitably become embroiled in this complexity.

## **Conclusion**

Although interpretive research within the entrepreneurship domain is growing, as evidenced by Chell and Allman's (2001) recent comparison of functionalist and interpretivist approaches to entrepreneurship research, inquiry within this paradigm is still very much emergent. In illustrating the phenomenological interview as a useful and credible interpretive method, it is not the intention to set this particular form of inquiry in direct opposition to, or in competition with, dominant functional approaches to understanding entrepreneurship. Rather, this article provides an illustration of a philosophically coherent methodology that makes a different yet equally valuable contribution to our understanding of entrepreneurship. In this respect, this article aims to contribute towards the proliferation of diverse research perspectives and greater paradigmatic experimentation with the entrepreneurship domain (Grant and Perrin, 2002).

In setting out the ontological and epistemological foundations of the phenomenological interview, this article reflects the desire to provide greater transparency in terms of the philosophical assumptions that underpin methodological choices (Easton, 1995). In so doing, this article clarifies the contextual parameters that

surround this interpretive enterprise. It is only by providing a ‘thoughtfully articulated philosophical position’ (Grant and Perrin, 2002; p201), that entrepreneurship researchers contemplating the use of the phenomenological interview can be clear of the substantive basis of their knowledge claims. Ultimately, the phenomenological interview represents a challenging yet highly rewarding methodology, providing a rich and unique insight into the activities and perceptions of entrepreneurial individuals.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Burrell and Morgan (1979) offer a comprehensive discussion of four sociological paradigms; namely the 'functionalist', the 'interpretive', the 'radical humanist' and the 'radical structuralist'. Refer also to Guba and Lincoln's (1994) interesting commentary on what they describe as four 'dominant' paradigms in the social sciences; namely 'positivism', 'postpositivism', 'constructivism' and 'critical theory'.

<sup>2</sup> See Burrell and Morgan (1979), chapter one, for a concise discussion of the terms ontology and epistemology.

<sup>3</sup> As Grant and Perrin (2002) concede, it is difficult to draw the boundaries between entrepreneurship and small business research, as these areas tend to overlap and blur into one another.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of phenomenology as an interpretive practice, refer to Burrell and Morgan (1979), chapter 6. In addition, refer to Holstein and Gubrium (1994) and Schwandt (1994).

<sup>5</sup> As Patton (1990) explains, *Verstehen* means "understanding" and refers to the human capacity to make sense of the world. First introduced into the social sciences by Max Weber, the *Verstehen* doctrine presumes that human beings have a unique type of consciousness, and so the study of human phenomena will be different from the study of other forms of life and nonhuman phenomena. The tradition of *Verstehen* places emphasis on the human capacity to know and understand others through empathic introspection and reflection based on direct observation of, and interaction with, people.

<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to make a distinction here between 'grounded' theories that emerge from the data and a more structured, procedural 'grounded theory' approach, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

<sup>7</sup> Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasise that the objective of such interpretive practice is to develop a 'trustworthy' account of the phenomenon in question. The terms 'credibility', 'transferability', 'dependability' and 'confirmability' are offered as interpretivist equivalents to the positivist demands for 'internal' and 'external validity', 'reliability' and 'objectivity'. See chapter Lincoln and Guba (1985), chapter 11, for a detailed discussion of these terms.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to distinguish the concept of 'critical incidents' from the more popular notion of crises, which is typically perceived in more negative terms. Critical events that were perceived in positive terms by the participants, as well as more negative events, were explored during the phenomenological interviews.

<sup>9</sup> Participants were told at the beginning of the interview what the focus on the discussion was and were asked if it was possible to audiotape the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were also assured and the participants were informed that their real names would not be used in the reporting of the research. All six participants gave their agreement willingly.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'learning' was avoided unless the participant actually used the term in relation to a specific issue or experience that was then explored further.

<sup>11</sup> The word 'pure' is used in the sense that the conversation is allowed to flow naturally and the researcher does not interfere with the participant's narrative of their lived experience or guide the discussion to more specifically relevant and pertinent research issues.

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