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The Use of Phenomenology for Family Therapy Research: The Search for Meaning

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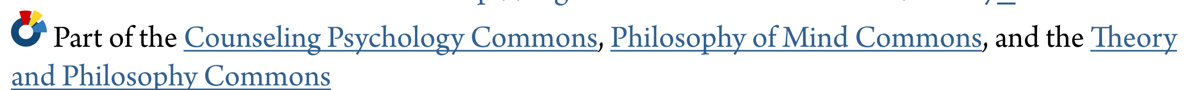
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CHAPTER 4

The Use of Phenomenology for Family Therapy Research

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

CARLA M. DAHL
PAULINE BOSS

BACKGROUND

Are cows pink? "No," says the positivist, "they are black and white or brown—and sometimes combinations thereof." But those who have had direct experience with cows know they can be pink. We have seen them. At sunset, when the sky over a Wisconsin field is rosy and glowing, cows are pink. At that moment and in that particular context, the description of pink for cows is really true. This is phenomenology. True knowledge is relative.

We define a phenomenon—in this case, cows—by describing its essential impact on our immediate conscious experience (Becker, 1992). Artists, musicians, and poets have for ages recorded their interpretations of life by using the phenomenological approach. In this chapter, we focus on the phenomenology of everyday life—particularly marriage and family—to familiarize family therapists with a method of investigation and description that is compatible with their already developed skills of observation, creativity, intuition, empathic listening, and analysis.

What is clear is that the phenomenon of phenomenology itself has different meanings to different people. Deutscher (1973) refers to the term broadly as a tradition within the social sciences concerned with "understanding the social actor's frame of reference" (p. 12; see also Bruyn, 1966; Psathas, 1973). Others use the term more narrowly to refer to a European school of thought in philosophy (see, e.g., Schutz, 1960, 1967). Phenomenology has also been called the "microsociology of knowledge" by Berger and Kellner (1964; see also Kollock & O'Brien, 1994). Today many might argue that the original meaning of "phenomenology" has become ambiguous or has been lost altogether.

More critical, however, than one agreed-upon definition of phenomenology is what we believe about the world and the people in it, so our discussion (after a brief

history) focuses on eight philosophical assumptions of phenomenology and the ways they shape research, as well as on what phenomenology is *not*. We then discuss the process of doing phenomenological research, including ethical issues that are particularly relevant.

Because marriage, family, and close relationships are such integral parts of everyday life, phenomenologists believe they should be studied as phenomena *in that context*—in the neighborhood, at home, at mealtime, during rituals and celebrations. To be sure, empirical findings have emerged from studying families in controlled laboratory settings or from large-sample surveys; however, phenomenologists believe that the phenomenon of interest, regardless of what it is, should be studied *where it naturally exists and from the actor's own perspective*. In family research, which has multiple perspectives, this means that we must either consider and describe diverse views, or explicitly label our work as restricted to one person's perspective of how a family or couple works. Either is acceptable, as long as it is labeled, because the phenomenologist's focus is on *whose* perspective is represented at that time and in that context.

Historical Roots and Development

Two theoretical perspectives are recommended for studying marital and family interactions: the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead (1934) and the phenomenological analysis of the social structuring of reality, especially the work of Schutz (1960, 1962, 1967) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). Although this chapter focuses on phenomenology, symbolic interactionism represents a compatible theoretical perspective.

Phenomenology originated well over 50 years ago in Europe; the University of Chicago subsequently became the initial base for U.S. consideration of this European tradition. Theoretical perspectives that therapists frequently associate with phenomenology are Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) sociology of knowledge. Other perspectives are found in labeling theory, existential sociology, sociology of the absurd, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. Scholars disagree as to how much these perspectives differ from each other and in what ways.

In this chapter, we present phenomenology as interpretive inquiry and emphasize the cultural and political contexts that influence the interpretation of meanings. Also, we do not eschew positivism. This sets us apart from Martin Heidegger's phenomenology and places us more in line with his students and successors: Popper, Adorno, Mannheim, Freud, Klein, Arendt, Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer. They survived Nazism but were not sullied by it, as was Heidegger. In 1945, he was tried as a collaborator with the Nazis and banned from teaching, but he continued to avoid taking responsibility for his complicity. The question for the critical reader is this: Can we separate this man's actions, or inaction, from his philosophy when that very philosophy is "being is doing"? For us, the *meaning* of Heidegger's philosophy cannot be separated from his Nazi affiliation in the *context* of the Holocaust (many of his colleagues—including his mentor, Husserl—were Jews). (See Collins, 2000; Philipse, 1998; Ree, 1999.)

Phenomenology survives primarily through Heidegger's uncompromised students and successors who left Germany to escape Fascism: Popper, Freud, and Klein ended up in London; Adorno and Mannheim at Princeton; Hannah Arendt and Karen

Horney in New York. The Frankfurt Institute reconvened on the American West Coast; in New York, the New School for Social Research became the center of thought with Levi-Strauss, Arendt, and Schutz (who linked Husserl's phenomenology to Weberian sociology).

During the postmodernism of the 1990s, phenomenology enjoyed a renaissance. Family researchers of both pre- and postmodern ilks became increasingly interested in how family members experience their everyday worlds and how their perceptions of what they experience lead to differing meanings. During this decade, researchers as well as therapists began increasingly to go into families' homes—into what Hess and Handel (1959) had earlier called the "family world." In this world, according to Hess and Handel, interactions between individuals in a family must be viewed in the context of how the individuals define one another as relevant objects. Today Gerald Handel is joined by Jane Gilgun, Judith Stacey, Linda Burton, and many others who reaffirm that people should be studied wherever they live their lives—in the home, in the neighborhood, in the car, at work, in school, in institutions, at the mall. To a phenomenologist, then, the important reality is what individuals, couples, or families perceive it to be; their "real" world is not likely to be found in the laboratory or clinic, but where they naturally interact in their daily lives.

Historically, this view for studying families represents the antithesis of logical positivism and empiricism; it challenges the assumption that the scientific method is *the* one way to accumulate truth and knowledge. Phenomenologists have criticized logical positivists in the areas of (1) verification (phenomenologists say that science needs common sense as well as method); (2) operationalism (phenomenologists recognize an inevitable gap between concepts and devices to measure those concepts); (3) invariance (phenomenologists see probabilistic conclusions as useful—even knowledge obtained without the scientific method is useful); (4) positive knowledge (negative findings are equally important, according to phenomenologists); and (5) lack of reflexivity (phenomenologists see a need to regularly examine their own feelings and perceptions—an idea akin to therapists' concerns regarding countertransference).

When we use a phenomenological approach, our a priori assumptions about how families work or do not work become the core of our inquiry, because no one method is prescribed in phenomenology. Our focus in this chapter, therefore, must necessarily be on assumptions shared by most phenomenologists. Any of the methods discussed in Part II of this volume could conceivably be used with a phenomenological approach, but *only* if the investigators accept certain assumptions.

Philosophical Assumptions of Phenomenological Family Therapy Researchers

The following list summarizes our basic assumptions as phenomenological family therapy researchers. Three assumptions relate to how we know, two to what we need to know, and three to where we locate ourselves in the research process.

How We Know

1. *Knowledge is socially constructed and therefore inherently tentative and incomplete.* Truth remains forever relative and elusive. The use of the scientific method, despite its apparent emphasis on conclusions, does not obviate this assumption.

2. Because knowledge is constructed, *objects, events, or situations can mean a variety of things to a variety of people in a family.* Chronic illness, for example, can mean "punishment from God" or "a challenge from God to show one's love in a new way"—both in the same family. Multiple perceptions of the same event or situation are therefore important to hear. Although we can observe and code family acts, "it is not appearance *per se*, but rather what appears to be that is critical. . . . Indeterminacy derives from varied interpretations, which in turn is constituted by and through language" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993, p. 654).

Experiences, objects, events, or situations can mean different things to different family members (see, e.g., Boss, Beaulieu, Wieling, Turner, & LaCruz, 2003; Frankl, 1984). Just as family therapists do, phenomenological family researchers must elicit the perceptions and views of all family members to get the total picture of a particular family. Although this makes research more complicated, it realistically reflects the diversity of gender, generation, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and culture inherent in family life. Today, in this era of frequent divorce and remarriage, it can even be difficult to get agreement in couples' reports about existing child custody arrangements (Rettig & Dahl, 1993). Other, more intangible experiences are even more likely to be perceived in radically differing ways (e.g., Dahl, 1994; SmithBattle, 1996).

It is critically important, then, for us as family therapy researchers using the phenomenological approach to listen to and observe the "whole." We must not repeat the mistake of many researchers who interview mothers primarily (because they are most readily available) to gather data about children or families. We must attempt to hear the "family conversational voice" as a whole or to observe the "family world" as a whole. This cannot be done if we talk to only one family member (see, e.g., Boss et al., 2003; Garwick, Detzner, & Boss, 1994; Pollner & McDonald-Wikler, 1985/1994; Reiss, 1981/1994).

3. *We can know through both art and science.* We believe that important knowledge can be gained from folk stories, folk songs, and folk art. For example, richly detailed family-of-origin stories abound in the embroidery of Hmong refugee women in Minnesota, who, with needle and thread, have recorded their families' harrowing escapes from their homeland in Southeast Asia. Another example is Pablo Picasso's painting *Blue Family*, which shows parents and child in cold blue color, arms around only themselves, eyes all downward, no connection between family members. This painting depicts the same phenomenon described by David Reiss (1981/1994) as a "distance-sensitive family." Reiss, however, illustrated "distance" with an empirically based technical drawing of small separated circles, while Picasso painted on canvas what he felt were symbols of distance and a lack of familial connection. Both scientist and artist depicted the same phenomenon; both represented a reality of human families, but from their own experience, within their own discipline, and through their own mode of expression. Thus both depicted a form of true knowledge. Phenomenologists see their inquiries as both art and science.

What We Need to Know

4. *Common, everyday knowledge about family worlds is epistemologically important.* Phenomenologists are intensely curious about the "taken-for-granted" aspects of family life; everyday routines like bedtime are as interesting as life cycle rituals like weddings and funerals. The sacred and the mundane, the ordinary and the extraordi-

nary, are equally intriguing. Understanding everyday life is as necessary for comprehending how families work as is understanding the unique, spectacular, even catastrophic events families experience (e.g., Boss, 2002a, 2002b; Boss et al., 2003). If we investigators only gather data at special times of crisis or stress, our knowledge will be skewed. Family therapists most often witness family processes at times of stress or crisis. For research, it would be worthwhile to visit with families at times when they are not in need of professional help.

5. *Language and meaning of everyday life are significant.* Rather than referring to the science of linguistics, "the study of family discourse highlights how language serves to assign meaning to objects and social conditions" in everyday life (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993, p. 653). The family's language offers a source of information that is symbolically rich in meaning and information. The qualitative analysis of whole-family conversations for themes and patterns is therefore worthwhile (see Blumer, 1969; Garwick et al., 1994; Patterson & Garwick, 1994). Language remains the primary symbol of human interaction and needs to be studied where it takes place *naturally.* Neither the laboratory nor the therapy room is a natural setting, so we must get away from our offices to observe and interact with families in their natural settings (see, e.g., Burton, 1991, who actually spent time in high-risk neighborhoods researching child care; see also Henry, 1973; Liebow, 1967; Stacey, 1990).

Where We Locate Ourselves in the Research Process

6. *As researchers, we are not separate from the phenomena we study.* Social inquiry is influenced by our beliefs about how the world works. Our feelings, beliefs, values, and responses (about things like equality, patriarchy, matriarchy, mastery over nature, acceptance of nature, communitarianism, and individualism) influence the research questions we ask, as well as our interpretation of data. Subjectivity (rather than objectivity) is therefore recognized as our research reality and is paramount in the study of families and couples. A continuing and explicit process of self-reflexivity and self-questioning (preferably not in isolation) is therefore a necessary part of phenomenological inquiry and often leads to midstream changes in procedure if we believe that those changes would be more productive or ethical.

7. Because of the desire for understanding this range of family experiences, the phenomenological approach also assumes that *everyday knowledge is shared and held by researchers and participants alike.* There is little or no hierarchy about who is an expert. All persons—common and celebrated, researcher and participant, therapist and client—are considered epistemologists (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993). As researchers, we listen to stories, we observe interaction, we note feelings (theirs and ours); we ask questions because the families, not we ourselves, will accurately describe the phenomenon we are studying. For example, we could study the varying meanings of death or ambiguous loss in families by documenting their stories, just as Sedney, Baker, and Gross (1994) and Boss and colleagues (2003) used stories as an assessment device, as an initial intervention, and as a gauge of the progress of treatment in bereaved families.

The boundaries between when we are doing research and when we are doing therapy are more blurred in doing phenomenological inquiry than when we conduct positivist research. That is, the positivist roles of expert researcher and subject give way to a less hierarchical mindset in which phenomenological researcher and participant

work together to gain meaning about a particular phenomenon. Although an inherent power differential may exist, as in therapy, we engage in a collaborative process that minimizes the impact of that power differential as much as possible. Caution must be used to protect families from our potential conflict of interest. While we are doing therapy, we cannot put the gathering of research data first; while we are doing research, we need to recognize that we are not doing therapy. The contract is different when the intent differs. This is an issue of ethics (Boss, 2003, 2005).

8. *Regardless of method, bias is inherent in all research and is not necessarily negative.* Bias must be made explicit at the beginning. Rather than pretending to be objective, we investigators should state, at the start of the project, what we believe in and value. The content of those beliefs and values, at least for purposes of research, is less important than our being open and straightforward. Alvin Gouldner, a sociologist of the rebellious 1960s, foreshadowed present postmodernism when he said that social sciences were not value-free and that traditional practices and assumptions of objectivity and neutrality were inconsistent with emerging social conditions. Gouldner called for a reflexive science that would be self-consciously self-critical. He insisted that scholars "raise their flag" early in their work to let others know explicitly their values and assumptions (Gouldner, 1970). We currently see this "raising of the flag" by clinical scholars using hermeneutics and critical theory (Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, & Walker, 1990; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988; Welter-Enderlin, 1994; M. White, personal communication, March 1994).

Peeling Away the Onion: What Phenomenology Is Not

IS PHENOMENOLOGY DIFFERENT FROM DECONSTRUCTIONISM?

Although there are similarities, especially in rejecting the scientific method, phenomenology and deconstructionism are not the same. Both approaches recognize the indeterminacy of meaning, and many from both camps believe that regularity, order, and social organization exist—somewhere. For example, Gubrium and Holstein (1993) say, "The same meanings are not always attached to things, but there is regularity in the attachment process" (p. 654). Yet other phenomenologists, as well as deconstructionists, make no assumptions about regularity and order; nor are they interested in social organization. They are instead interested in patterns that connect through symbols of interaction. The phenomenon of interest to them is *meaning*, not object or structure.

In the end, the difference may be that deconstructionism allows the observer greater privilege because it is based on the *researcher's* reality, whereas phenomenology is a study of someone else's reality, albeit through the observer's eyes (P. C. Rosenblatt, personal communication, 1994). Also, in deconstructionism there is no emphasis on the need for self-reflection, as in phenomenology. *Feminist* deconstructionism, however, is an exception, because feminist scholarship requires self-reflection. The work of Rachel Hare-Mustin (1992, 1994) is an example.

IS PHENOMENOLOGY DIFFERENT FROM LOGICAL POSITIVISM?

Some say that phenomenology is theorizing with a sample of one. One person's perception is the truth for that person and in that context. "The appeal to context is more fundamental than the appeal to fact, for the context determines the significance of the

facts" (Dreyfus, 1967, p. 43). In general, phenomenologists believe that reality is within a person's private perceptions—within his or her feelings, intentions, and essences. Most important, phenomenologists recognize a priori events. Fact and essence correlate. Edie (1967) summarizes the matter: "The 'essential' is thus what the human mind understands when it understands something in the flux of experience; what the mind adds to the world of fact is 'the necessary' or 'the essential'" (p. 9).

It becomes obvious that the quest for universal order is not as important to the phenomenologist as it is to the logical positivist. They are alike, however, in that both feel strongly about method, different though these methods are. *Instead of the scientific method of deduction, phenomenologists use the method of reduction.* The investigator begins with a generalization or a hunch, and peels layers away (like an onion) until he or she gets closer and closer to the essence of the phenomenon. The investigator keeps rejecting *what it is not* in order to get closer to *what it is.* This process of reduction, or "bracketing," continues as the researcher and the participant are in dialogue. They decide together when and how to "peel the onion."

It is apparent that reduction theorists (phenomenologists) and deduction theorists (positivists) represent two opposite points of view. There are relative strengths and weaknesses in both. Positivist researchers require theory building to be more empirically based. Parameters are clearly defined; concepts are operationalized; technical language is used. But what good is it to have a rigorous, tight methodology if an investigator is missing the point and busily, though methodically, going down a blind alley? Logical positivists' primary aim to generalize may make them miss critical individual differences. Generalizations or laws may be useful in the physical sciences, but they are less useful in family therapy research. The human mix is not as reliable as minerals and even more complex than chemicals.

IS PHENOMENOLOGY DIFFERENT FROM FEMINIST RESEARCH?

By itself, a researcher's choice of method cannot tell us whether or not the researcher is a feminist. Both positivism and phenomenology can be used for feminist inquiry; likewise, both can be used in ways that are biased against women or other disenfranchised groups. Rather than relying solely on method as the clue to a researcher's values and perspectives, we recommend looking critically at the researcher's stated (or unstated) assumptions regarding the context of the inquiry, the modes of inquiry, the questions asked, and the beneficiaries of the research. Simply concluding that feminists do only phenomenological study is incorrect. It is also incorrect to conclude that only feminists use this approach.

IS PHENOMENOLOGY DIFFERENT FROM CONTENT ANALYSIS?

Content analysis is a technique that allows a researcher to identify or "code" themes and patterns that emerge in qualitative data. Whereas phenomenological researchers *may* use content analysis, it is not necessarily their only approach to managing their data. Some, for example, may provide richly detailed accounts of their inquiry, known as "thick description," out of which only the reader draws conclusions. Some phenomenologists eschew any connection to techniques and refuse to talk of methodology. Conversely, some researchers who use content analysis techniques do so in nonphenomenological ways—in order to provide some kind of frequency count, for example, or to test hypotheses (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993).

METHODOLOGY

Within the phenomenological perspective, family therapy is perceived more as conversation than as intervention (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993). A phenomenological researcher who is also a family therapist extends the family's natural conversation, which is already taking place as the family and its individual members construct meaning and maintain that construction. Because family conversation takes place against a "taken-for-granted" backdrop within the everyday world, phenomenological inquiry—whether by a researcher or a therapist—involves making explicit and "reflectively bringing into nearness" (van Manen, 1990, p. 32) that which is implicit or obscured by its very taken-for-granted quality.

As with therapy, we might view the research process itself on two levels: one concerned with the principles by which the *family* has constructed its everyday world and with the contents of that everyday world, and one concerned with the principles by which the therapist-researcher and the family *co-construct* meaning and interpretations within whatever is taken for granted in the therapy setting. Gubrium and Holstein (1993) note that "family is a 'project' that is realized through discourse" (p. 655); family therapy research as well as family therapy can be similarly defined, providing two levels of inquiry for the phenomenological therapist-researcher.

In both research and therapy, the phenomenological inquirer is interested in stories. Defining therapy and research as storytelling and story listening changes the emphasis from problem solving to meaning construction. In this process, both the family and the therapist are brought into a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the everyday world and of that one family's lived experience. Thomas Moore (1992) notes that family therapy "might take the form of simply telling stories of family life, free of any concern for cause and effect or sociological influence. . . . We might imagine family therapy more as a process of exploring the complexity of our sense of life than of making it simple and intelligible" (pp. 28–29). These stories will often include paradox and contradiction. The phenomenological therapist or researcher does not need to "smooth out" discrepancies or inconsistencies, but rather looks for the meaning within them. What positivists call "anomalies" and statisticians call "outliers," phenomenologists call "reality," even though the sample size is small or the time spent together brief. Examples of this are the work on rituals developed by Imber-Black and Roberts (1992); the work of White and Epston (1990); and the work with New York families of persons missing after the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001 (Boss, 2005; Boss et al., 2003).

Research Questions

Phenomenological research questions are questions of meaning designed to help the researcher understand the lived experience of the participant. For family therapists, these kinds of questions are familiar because they are often part of family therapy. Family therapists who wish to pursue phenomenological inquiry in a research mode might pursue any family phenomena of interest to them.

Generally, phenomenological researchers avoid questions that include such predetermined categories as "normal," "dysfunctional," "pathological," "deviant," and so on. They are more likely to ask participants to define the phenomenon in question than to define it for them. Positivists and phenomenologists take on different kinds of

problems and seek different kinds of answers; thus their inquiry demands different methodologies. The positivist adopts a natural science model of research and searches for causes by using questionnaires, inventories, and scales to produce numerical data that can be statistically analyzed. In contrast, a phenomenologist seeks understanding through qualitative methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and other methods that yield descriptive data, and then works to extract the various truths and meanings from what Moore (1992) refers to as "the hard details of family history and memory" (p. 32). The phenomenologist looks for what Max Weber (1949, 1968) called *verstehen*, or "understanding." *Verstehen* refers to understanding "on a personal level the motives and beliefs behind people's actions" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 2).

"Phenomenological questions are *meaning* questions" (van Manen, 1990, p. 23; emphasis in original). The therapist-researcher and the family members, by understanding the meaning of complex phenomena more deeply and fully, are enabled to act with greater awareness and consciousness. To put it another way, they are enabled to be more "thoughtful," which van Manen (1990) defines in the following way: "To be full of thought means not that we have a whole lot on our mind, but rather that we recognize our lot of minding the Whole—that which renders fullness or wholeness to life" (p. 31). Within this context, then, issues such as extramarital sexual behavior, deciding to divorce, providing care for an elderly parent, or choosing to have a baby or adopt a child become questions to be understood and lived, not "solved" and put away.

Two levels of phenomenological inquiry are available to a therapist-researcher: the dialogue *within* a family about a particular phenomenon, and the dialogue *between* the family and therapist-researcher about that phenomenon. At both levels, the "facts" of the situation take on far less importance than the *meaning* of that situation. Therapists who wish to pursue phenomenological inquiry at both levels find themselves in what van Manen (1990) calls the "attentive practice of thoughtfulness. . . . a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life" (p. 12).

As phenomenological researchers, we have focused some of our work on questions that hold deep meaning for families: boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2002a, 2003, 2005), and the definition and expression of spirituality within families (Dahl, 1994). Our experiences as clinicians and researchers have both informed and invited further exploration in how families construct meaning in these areas.

Sampling and Selection Procedures

The phenomenological approach lends itself to small-*N* studies, in that it requires in-depth description of the experiences of each participant. The purposes are accurate understanding of meaning and establishment of possibilities, rather than generalization of findings. Randomness, therefore, is less important to a phenomenologist than to a positivist. A phenomenologist may develop a sample that is basically homogeneous, with the hope of amplifying differences that may exist, or one that is basically heterogeneous, with the hope of amplifying similarities that may exist.

For example, in Dahl's (1994) research on family spirituality, she wanted to understand the ways families construct meanings about spirituality, and so she developed

the following criteria for a purposeful sample. A minimum of three persons were interviewed from each family system represented; when possible, at least one member of each of three generations was interviewed. At least one member had to have a child over the age of 5 years, so that there would be some element of the individual's past and present experiences of participating in rituals with the child, communicating about spirituality to the child, and co-constructing meaning with the child. The resulting subsample used for the final analysis consisted of three family systems, each from a different external demographic context.

Because of the likelihood of small samples and the deeply personal nature of meaning questions, confidentiality becomes an especially relevant issue in phenomenological research. Using pseudonyms, altering demographic details, and allowing participants to withdraw at any stage of the process, including the presentation of results, can provide participants some protection from uncomfortable or unwanted exposure.

Data Collection Procedures

What Are Considered Data?

All data are words about experiences and meanings. Data for the phenomenologist can therefore be obtained from family stories, family secrets, family rituals, ordinary dinner table conversations, behaviors, letters, diaries, photographs, and patterns in family behaviors or conversations. The primary focus of the researcher lies in the participants' meanings contained within the data. Creativity and intuition lead us to the phenomenon about which we are curious. In fact, for phenomenologists, intuition becomes an asset rather than something to suppress (Boss, 1987, 2005). But once there is a shift to what the researcher has observed, phenomenologists say that the focus is on the *researcher's reality*. Thus it becomes important to remain immersed in the *family's reality*.

What Procedures Are Considered Useful?

In phenomenological inquiry, any means of collecting information can be used that might allow the researcher access to the experience of another. These might include, for example, open-ended interviews; analysis of letters, diaries, oral histories, or narratives; or examination of photographs or videos. The methods phenomenological researchers use must adequately and accurately represent the "expressed daily life conditions, opinions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge base of the respondents" (Cicourel, 1986, p. 249). Phenomenological methods of data collection *allow participants to define phenomena for themselves*, and to describe the conditions, values, and attitudes they believe are relevant to that definition *for their own lives*. For example, Linda Coffey at the University of Chicago gave inexpensive disposable cameras to children in housing projects to record the relationships they believed were important to their well-being (L. Coffey, personal communication, June 1994).

An Example of Data Collection

With her family spirituality research sample, Dahl (1994) collected family stories about spirituality through the use of in-depth, focused interviews conducted at the par-

ticipants' homes, in neutral locations, and in one case by telephone. Interviews ranged from 2½ to 4 hours in length, with an average length of just under 3 hours. She taped and transcribed the interviews, yielding 284 single-spaced pages. In addition, during the interviews she took notes of certain comments, self-reflection, and probes for further information.. These field notes totaled 108 pages after transcription. She also kept a journal throughout the study, noting her affective responses to the interviews and to the analysis process, thoughts about connections and linkages among and between families, and observations from her teaching and clinical practice that related to the study.

The Person of the Researcher as Instrument

If paper-and-pencil or other instruments are used at all for data collection in phenomenological inquiry, they must be carefully and thoughtfully chosen. Interview schedules must be developed in ways that allow participants to define the phenomenon being studied. But these means of collection are not the only instruments in a phenomenological study. We believe that the person of the researcher also becomes a major instrument in phenomenological research. Although the researcher is subject to stress, fatigue, confusion, and bias, the losses due to these factors are "more than offset by the flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 113). We see similarity between this idea and Whitaker and Keith's (1981) ideas of "the person of the therapist" as central in family therapy.

The interpretations and theoretical links developed by phenomenological therapist-researchers are inevitably influenced by their own personal biography and family history. Clinicians call this "countertransference," a phenomenon that is not absent in phenomenological research (Boss, 1987). To increase awareness of the impact of the researcher as instrument, the therapist-researcher might keep a journal detailing experiences, emotions, insights, and questions resulting from the data collection process (see the description of Dahl's journal, above). Patton (2002) and Reinharz (1983) note that these are also legitimate and valuable parts of the data.

A prerequisite to "good" data collection is prior recognition of the content being discussed by respondents. According to Gergen and Gergen (1988), telling a story is the result of a mutually coordinated and supportive relationship between teller and listener. Furthermore, knowledge about the culture contained in a respondent's texts can only be expanded on when the researcher brings into the analysis what else is known about the participant and his or her circumstances (Mishler, 1986). This prior knowledge, however, must be evaluated against new learnings, just as new information must be integrated into prior knowledge. Otherwise, the researcher risks letting preconceptions guide and possibly obscure the process of discovering meaning in the moment.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

A psychologist who turned to phenomenology to study human behavior, Amedeo Giorgi (1985), offers a data analysis method for those who insist on more structure. His method contains four essential aspects (the quotes are from Giorgi, 1985, p. 10):

1. *"Sense of the whole."* In this first step, the researcher reads the entire description of an observation or experience many times in order to gain a general sense of the whole.

2. *"Discrimination of meaning units within a psychological perspective and focus on the phenomenon being researched."* Once the sense of the whole has been grasped, the researcher goes back to the beginning and reads through the text once more, with the specific aim of discriminating "meaning units" from within a psychological perspective and with a focus on the phenomenon being studied. Meanings change as the interaction between narrative and reader progresses and the context changes; meaning units reflect these shifts and progressions. Researchers acknowledge that the selection of what stands out from the text depends on their own perspectives.

3. *"Transformation of subject's everyday expressions into psychological language with emphasis on the phenomenon being investigated."* Once meaning units have been delineated, the researcher goes through all the meaning units and expresses the psychological insight contained in them more directly. This is especially true of the meaning units most revelatory of the phenomenon under study.

4. *"Synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of learning."* In this step, the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject's experience. This step is usually referred to as the "structure of the experience" and can be expressed at a number of levels.

The purpose of analysis in phenomenological research is not to tie all loose ends together, but rather to describe and understand (as in *verstehen)* the experience of the participants. In this kind of phenomenological inquiry, data analysis and data collection go hand in hand (Patton, 2002; Reinharz, 1983; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). Each informs the other in a dynamic, reciprocal, nonlinear process of questioning, reflecting, and interpreting. Hess and Handel (1959, 1967) describe this as a back-and-forth movement from one kind of data to another, from one participant's stories to another's, and from one family's themes to another's—all the while looking for *meanings that connect* and *meanings that differentiate.* The only rule of analysis is to remain vitally connected to individual and family conversations and stories.

Hess and Handel (1967) outline three assumptions regarding data gathered through phenomenological research. First, researchers must attempt to connect the data with useful ideas about the data. Although phenomenological researchers attempt not to impose *realities* on those of the participants, they definitely impose *structure* on them, which incorporates ideas that may be useful in accurately understanding them. Second, these data are to be taken at more than face value; they provide information about what specific meanings families give to reality and information about how they do that assigning. Third, individual family members' stories are accurately understood only within the family context and are illuminated by other stories in that context.

Accurate understanding of participants' experiences may come through a line-by-line analysis of a story or a frame-by-frame analysis of videos or photographs. It may come through conducting a search for significant words or phrases. It may come through gathering a more global impression of thoughts and themes that occur. The significant hallmark of phenomenological analysis is that the researcher makes every effort to stay connected to the experience of the participants. This may involve checking with the participants at several points in the collection, analysis, and reporting pro-

cess, and letting them have input into the meaning being constructed by the researcher to see whether the interpretation is on target (Boss et al., 2003; Dahl, 1994).

In Dahl's (1994) analysis of data regarding family spirituality, immersion in the family stories happened through a series of listening experiences. She listened to the stories not only during the initial interviews, but also while transcribing them, reading the transcripts, and color-coding them to identify themes that began to emerge. Following Brown and Gilligan (1992), she listened first of all for the story itself, paying attention to metaphors, images, inconsistencies, and plot twists, as well as to her feelings about all of those. She listened again with attention to the family processes and dynamics described within the stories, and then again with attention to indicators of social or cultural context, especially those that might overpower or constrain a family's voice. The stories about family spirituality from each individual were analyzed for categories and themes; the stories of individuals within a given family system were analyzed with regard to one another; and the "meta-stories" of the three family systems were compared and contrasted.

This analysis resulted in a rich collection of stories. Some were extended ones describing death, loss, or particularly powerful experiences of spirituality as defined by a participant. Some were shorter, detailing an event or reporting a belief. And some were deceptively brief, simply a phrase or sentence holding much more than its size suggested: "My mother was a frequent flyer in the Catholic Church." "He died just when I started paying attention to him." "I left me."

In the end, Dahl's analysis of these stories reflected a number of intriguing ways families define and express spirituality. For example, families appear to be better able to sustain competing worldviews within their meaning-making processes than laboratory experiments have suggested they might be. Also, conversation and ritual are significant, reciprocally influential dimensions of family spirituality. In addition, contrary to the typical use of the word, "fundamentalism" can characterize a family's meaning-making process as well as any particular set of beliefs. And finally, as one participant concisely and confidently stated, "Families, whether they know it or not, come together to work out their spirituality." In phenomenological inquiry, these kinds of findings are not endpoints, but places to begin asking new questions.

The process of analyzing phenomenological data, regardless of type, must include immersion in the data to observe and define what is there and to notice what is not there; it must include incubation and reflection to allow intuitive awareness and understandings to emerge; and it must include creative synthesis that enables accurate and meaningful communication of the participants' experience (Patton, 2002; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). The process must also include consideration of the researcher's intuition, because "discovery . . . happens not with the scientific method, by magic, or by luck, but through openness to heeding one's senses and responding to one's intuition. . . . We make ourselves discovery-prone by listening, being open to feelings, and recognizing apprehensions and emotions. This state does not happen by chance; it requires the willingness to open one's mind and feelings, to make oneself prone to discovery" (Boss, 1987, p. 154).

Brown and Gilligan (1992) refer to this openness as locating both the speaker and oneself as researcher in the narrative. Rather than a goal of "objectivity" during this listening, therapist-researchers pursue the goal of connection with an internal reality different from their own experience. It is precisely this *connection* that provides a "way of knowing, an opening between self and other that creates a channel for discov-

ery, an avenue to knowledge" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 28; see also Allen & Walker, 1992).

Hare-Mustin (1994), however, raises a critical question: How does the researcher know that [his or her] mind and feelings are open? There is the problem that researchers may be imposing their own meanings and distorting rather than connecting. By pointing out that family therapists and researchers are influenced by the "dominant discourse of the time," or *zeitgeist*, Hare-Mustin draws our attention to the limitations of any one person's phenomenological view. As family therapist-researchers, we hope to be more reflexive and open to discourse than the average person; however, we must *always* be vigilant about what we bring to the research questions we ask and to our interpretations of the words and stories we hear. Human subjectivity is an important procedural item in data analysis and interpretation, and a critical point relating to "the person of the researcher" as previously discussed.

Ethical Issues in Phenomenological Inquiry

Given that the phenomenologist explores basic components of humanness and aspects of family, it is reasonable to assume that some participants will disclose information about sensitive issues. Survivors of sexual abuse, for example, may describe the effect that this experience has had on their experience of other aspects of life. The story of a participant's journey may include behaviors (past or present) that for him or her are shameful or embarrassing, or that may be considered illegal or immoral by others. Informed consent and confidentiality thus become important issues for both participant and researcher. For participants, assurance must be given that responses will be kept private and will be reported in a way that will not identify them. But Patton (2002) and Doherty and Boss (1991) also caution that interviewers must be clear about instances when breaches of confidentiality might be legally mandated (e.g., cases in which abuse of children or vulnerable adults is revealed during interviews).

LaRossa, Bennett, and Gelles (1981) delineate two broad categories of ethical concerns that are relevant for phenomenological research: informed consent and establishment of a risk–benefit equation. The first category of issues can be addressed by clearly explaining the participant's rights, both in the initial contact letter and consent form and at the time of the actual data collection. Because it is impossible to know in advance just where a participant's reflection may lead in any given interview (Doherty & Boss, 1991; LaRossa et al., 1981; Patton, 2002), explicit mention should be made of the right to withdraw from the project, to end the interview, or to ask that any form of taping stop at any time. Even with that option clearly established, phenomenological researchers need to be aware of the ambiguities inherent in the setting (often a participant's home) and the role (insider-outsider, therapist-researcher) (Gilgun, 1992; LaRossa et al., 1981; Olson, 1977). They should also be able to offer participants a selection of helping resources, should the interviewing process raise deeply unsettling issues (Boss, 1987; Gilgun, 1992).

Assessing potential risks and benefits is more complicated. LaRossa and colleagues (1981) encourage researchers to keep clearly in mind the potentially embarrassing nature of everything connected with family life, which is in our society considered "private business." Public exposure, then, can be disturbing for participants. Even if data are carefully disguised or not widely disseminated, an individual's *feeling*

of self-exposure is another consideration. Family therapists who do phenomenological research are often already skilled in the development of rapport; supportive, empathically neutral responses throughout the interview; and postinterview debriefing—all of which can help alleviate this discomfort.

Phenomenological inquiry is useful to generate new hypotheses or new constructs, because its purpose is to gather understanding from patterns in the data. The research design is thus emergent. As investigators, we begin, like artists or novelists, with only preliminary ideas. As we proceed, things become clearer and new areas become subject to scrutiny. Here is where ethical dilemmas arise: Although the participants were informed and gave consent at the beginning of the study, this original consent may become invalid as new curiosities take us researchers in new directions. How can participants give informed consent when we keep changing method and focus? How can we as phenomenologists meet the criterion for informed consent when there is no allegiance to one method or goal?

When the general intent and scope of the research do not change, most human-subjects committees or local institutional review boards (IRBs) do not require a new informed consent procedure for every change in method or direction. Nevertheless, we recommend that researchers err on the conservative side and inform their IRB each time they change direction or sample to make sure that a new informed consent procedure is *not* needed. For each change, participants must know what is happening and that they can withdraw at any time, without prejudice.

We recommend obtaining such informed consent from all who participate in the study, regardless of their cognitive capacity. This may seem like a conservative position, but again, our goal is to do no harm. Patients with dementia have told us that they appreciate being asked about videotaping. So have children. We go beyond the legal requirements of obtaining consent from adults and those with power of attorney, and include everyone because it is more respectful. Everyone should be included in the process of informing and consenting.

This more conservative approach to informing and consenting is especially important in phenomenological studies, because this type of inquiry is by its very nature more personal. Investigator and participant get to know each other more closely than with positivist research. Usually even minors and other disenfranchised people want to know what is going on and why they should participate.

In phenomenological studies, issues of confidentiality also become more complicated. Researchers should always ask participants whether they agree with the plan for maintaining confidentiality. When one family was asked, they said they would give consent *only* if their full names were used in any reports of the study (Fravel & Boss, 1992). This was a couple whose three boys had been missing for more than 30 years. Both parents wanted their names used "just in case one of the boys was still out there somewhere." Betty and Kenny Klein of Monticello, Minnesota, taught the researchers never to take for granted what participants' perceptions are regarding confidentiality. A request for this amount of disclosure is rare, but it is not unusual to find families wanting varying degrees of confidentiality. Again, we recommend erring on the conservative side. That is, we recommend using strict confidentiality in studies of couples and families, because family members may not all agree on the need for it or may change their minds at a later date. There is less chance of doing harm as researchers if we proceed conservatively.

These ethical considerations must be part of a researcher's awareness. Patton (2002) describes the necessity of having "the utmost respect for these persons who are willing to share with you some of their time to help you understand their world" (p. 417). At the same time, however, researchers must also remember that in-depth interviews may have a therapeutic effect on families, and that the changes that may result may be desired by a family. "Our sensitivity to the costs should not obscure an equal sensitivity to the benefits that research may bring to the family as well as to us [the researchers]" (Boss, 1987, p. 152). As one participant in Dahl's study of family spirituality said, when asked what it was like to talk for several hours about her construction of meaning in times of great loss, "It's not often that I really get to talk like this. . . . and it's been finer [*sic*] than I thought it would be" (1994, p. 137). Asking families to share their stories also empowers them, because it indicates that we researchers value their knowledge and their potential contribution to the knowledge base of a larger system.

Reporting Findings

The descriptions of experience form the essence of phenomenological inquiry. In these descriptions, therapist-researchers present both patterns that are present and exceptions to those patterns. Consistent with the "onion-peeling" nature of this approach, the research report includes both what the phenomenon under study *is* and what it *is not*. For example, in the stories shared with Dahl (1994) about family spirituality, most participants were careful to distinguish between family "spirituality" and family "religiosity"—a distinction that proved important in both analyzing and reporting the findings.

In reporting and discussing the results of phenomenological research, therapists might follow the format suggested by Gilgun (1992). Supporting data for each pattern or exception are provided. The discussion is set in the context of previous research and theory. Such linkages enhance validity, as discussed previously. They also highlight ways in which findings "enhance previous knowledge, as correctives, as new knowledge, or both" (Gilgun, 1992, p. 26).

It is nearly impossible to describe a "typical" report of phenomenological inquiry. Because the nature of knowing is both artistic and scientific, we find that some reports comprise art, music, and literature that in the end describe the truth about people's experiences. Phenomenological inquiry, perhaps because of its respect for and valuing of stories, seems to hold a near-intuitive appeal for almost any audience. Phenomenological researchers may find receptive audiences among persons who have a particular interest in the phenomenon that was studied—scholars, students, professionals in larger systems (such as education, law, religion, or health care), policymakers, or community members.

The exemplars listed at the end of this chapter reflect other ways of reporting findings, perhaps more familiar to those accustomed to quantitative research reports. Despite the diversity of format, they illustrate two basic elements we consider characteristic of phenomenological research reports: the explicit location of the researcher in the work, and the explicit location of the participants in the data. The members of the audience—whether readers or viewers, one or many—are given direct access to the words of the participants, enabling them to engage in the co-construction of meaning.

DISCUSSION

Reliability and Validity

In phenomenological inquiry, it does not make sense to search for traditional kinds of measurement reliability and validity. Rather, this approach makes subjective relevance and adequate description of greater concern (Daly, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 1993). Despite the tentativeness and openness inherent in phenomenological inquiry, such research must also be evaluated by the concept of "adequacy" (McLain & Weigert, 1979; Schutz, 1962). That is, readers or listeners must see in the description of the data the validity and applicability of any concepts presented by the researcher, and participants must also agree that the analysis is an accurate reflection of their perceptions. To foster this kind of validity, participants might be asked at the time of data collection whether they would be willing to be contacted subsequently to clarify meanings, comment on findings, or participate in further data collection.

A common challenge to this kind of research from more quantitative researchers involves the issues of representativeness and generalizability (Allen & Gilgun, 1987; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). Given the complexity and diversity of a particular family's experience, phenomenological research is more interested in accurately reflecting a given family's experience than in generalizing about families. We must ask enough questions and involve enough family members to hear some differing perspectives, because in the microworld of even *one* family, there is always diversity in their gendered and generational perspectives—and often also differences in life experiences, socialization, class, beliefs, and values. Phenomenological research provides data that reflect this diversity, in addition to enabling identification of commonalities.

In order to ensure a greater degree of validity, the researcher must stay connected to those experiences of the participants and continue the back-and-forth movement between data collection and data analysis that is vitally important in phenomenological research. In addition, movement among present study, previous research, and theory development provides linkages that enhance validity (Boss, Kaplan, & Gordon, 1994; Fravel & Boss, 1992; Gilgun, 1992). Above all, the researcher must continue in dialogue with the individuals of interest. It would not be unusual for a phenomenological study to have the individuals of interest participate in the formation of questions, as well as in the interpretation of their answers. For example, Boss and colleagues (1994) asked Native American women to collaborate with them in formulating research questions and subsequently in interpreting answers and writing up results.

If, as a phenomenological researcher, you say you are studying families, whole families are what you must study. If you say you are studying couples (gay, lesbian, or heterosexual), those are precisely what you must study. If you say you are studying who looks after the children, you may have to look beyond the biological parents. In all cases, the issue is one of validity. We must study what we say we are studying.

In similar ways, traditional understandings of reliability are affected by the philosophical assumptions of phenomenologists. Whereas interrater reliability or test–retest reliability may matter in a particular way to a positivist researcher, phenomenologists would expect that different researchers—locating themselves differently in the process, given their unique sets of experiences, values, and personal meanings—may well explore somewhat different aspects of the same phenomenon and arrive at somewhat different descriptions of meaning. It is the explicit location of the researcher in the work that makes this possibility a strength, rather than a limitation. In addition, we would

expect participants to find that phenomenological inquiry invites them to reflect on their own lived experiences by co-constructing meaning with one another and with the researcher. We would also expect that such reflection would result in new or different meanings at another time.

Bridging Research, Theory, and Practice

The goal of phenomenological inquiry is to produce a deep, clear, and accurate understanding of the experiences of participants and of the meanings found in or assigned to those experiences. Researcher and audience share a commitment to understand a phenomenon more clearly, often for a purpose such as personal, familial, institutional, or community change. To facilitate change, the presentation of phenomenological findings should be set in the context of previous research and theory. Such linkages enhance validity.

Polkinghorne (1989) summarizes the potential benefits of the clearer understanding derived from phenomenological research: increased sensitivity to the experiences of others, corrections and amplifications of empirically derived knowledge, and improved responsiveness of public policy to the realities described by participants. He encourages phenomenological researchers to maximize the effectiveness of these consequences by always including in their presentation of results the *implications* of those results for practitioners and policymakers. Here is where a therapist doing phenomenological inquiry can influence other therapists. A case in point is the work of the University of Minnesota's New York Ambiguous Loss Team working with families of missing labor union members after September 11, 2001 (Boss et al., 2003).

CONCLUSION

An old method of inquiry, phenomenology is enjoying a resurgence and has an intuitive appeal among family therapy researchers because it is the study of the phenomena of everyday family processes, both in good times and in bad times. In 1946, Edmund Husserl said that we should go back to the things themselves. The "things" were perceptions, feelings, memories, behaviors—in sum, the stuff of family life. Whether phenomenology becomes simply a place to start family therapy research or your continued research method of choice, rigor is necessary in how you proceed. Because that rigor depends much less on method than on philosophical assumptions, assumptions are the centerpiece of this chapter. They remain the essential guide for doing family therapy inquiry as a phenomenologist.

In the final analysis, we need both phenomenology and logical positivism. There is a place for the creativity of dreamers and storytellers, as well as for the methods of empiricists. Both have value, and both can produce information about family processes, but each needs the other. We still haven't finally defined families, let alone how they function and how they change across the life course. We need to ask new questions and ask old questions in a new way. This requires effort on our part to seek holistic, rather than microscopic, pictures of family life. In doing this, we should avoid static, noncontextual, and method-bound inquiries (Cowan, Field, Hansen, Skolnik, & Swanson, 1993). Phenomenological approaches can help.

The renaissance of phenomenology in family therapy research indicates a new acceptance of diversity in epistemology and methodology. Such acceptance is much needed, because diversity is increasing in family structures and functions to a point where we can no longer, with validity or fairness, claim a norm. Phenomenological inquiry helps us to see multiple ways that families can and do remain resilient despite increasing complexities.

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