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Un[bracketed]: Phenomenological Polyethnography

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Abstract

Purpose

Because of limitations to the purpose and practice of both phenomenological and duoethnographic research methodologies, our purpose in this paper was to propose phenomenological polyethnography as a hybrid qualitative methodology, which would guide skilled researchers in conducting phenomenological exploration of an emergent experience as insiders.

Design/methodology/approach

A hybridization approach to phenomenology and duoethnography as two distinct qualitative research traditions.

Findings

Employing a poststructuralist perspective, researcher-participants with relevant difference co-investigate a phenomenological question together. Borrowing elements from both hermeneutic phenomenology and duoethnography, this methodology involves the consideration of a phenomenon, the use of authors with relevant difference who have both special insight into that phenomenon as participants and skill as qualitative researchers, the intentional collection of prereflective data while all researcher-participants are experiencing the phenomenon or immediately after, the subsequent reflection upon and interpretation of the phenomenon as it was similarly and differently experienced by the researcher-participants, and the description of both the essence and meaning of the phenomenon.

Research limitations/implications

This new, hybrid qualitative methodology will enable researchers to more efficiently analyze and

disseminate the research of insider knowledge on emergent phenomena in higher education and

other settings.

Originality/value

As a new methodology, it may be used to investigate events and provide rich, thick description in

a way not before seen.

Keywords

phenomenology; duoethnography; hybrid qualitative methodology

Article classification

General review

Joe Norris (2012), one of the creators of duoethnography, acknowledged that the emergent nature of duoethnography meant that researchers would need to adapt it to their various circumstances. While we engaged in our duoethnography (Olt and Teman, 2018), we came to believe that the methodology did not fully meet our purpose and best illuminate the phenomenon of synchronous online education. We wanted to convey to the readers what the experience of synchronous online education was like from our differing insider perspectives, and duoethnography only partially served this end. This phenomenological goal, however, could not be met through our use of phenomenology proper, as it requires the bracketing, bridling, or epoché by the researchers (van Manen, 2016). Thus, we propose phenomenological polyethnography as a hybrid approach, borrowing from both duoethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology.

Whereas duoethnography generally considers data in the past and reflection in the present, phenomenological polyethnography places both in the present for the researcher-participants to illuminate a phenomenological question. Data of both descriptions and reflections are collected as a phenomenon is being experienced by the researcher-participants, with further reflection occurring after the experiences have passed. We began the title of this manuscript with the term "unbracketed," as within this methodology we believe it most appropriate to completely set aside the concepts of bracketing and epoché (van Manen, 2016), bridling (Vagle, 2016), and bracketing in (Norris, 2012) while incorporating many other principles from hermeneutic phenomenology into the general framework of duoethnography.

Phenomenological Polyethnography as a New Methodology

Duoethnography, like all qualitative research, is focused on studying phenomena, and it borrows heavily from phenomenological traditions. However, the two methodological

approaches to qualitative research are quite distinct—insider participant versus outside researcher, bracketing out versus bracketing in, and describing and interpreting the essence of something versus explicating the life pedagogy of specific individuals. Like Norris and Sawyer's (2012) duoethnography, we desire to "examine lived-experiences through an emic lens" (p. 11); however, we do not believe that we necessarily must focus on how the researcher-participants are changed. Also like van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology, we desire to explore "experiences as we live through them" in order to "grasp the exclusively singular aspects...of a phenomenon or event" (p. 27), but we do not want to do so from an etic perspective. Here, we propose a marrying of the two, capturing key aspects from each, to develop a methodology tailored to researching phenomena as they are being experienced by the researchers. Thus, we have borrowed elements from each duoethnography and phenomenology.

Duoethnographic Heritage

Duoethnography is a dialogic method involving two researchers (Norris and Sawyer, 2012), which was later extended to three researchers in a trioethnography (Breault et al., 2012). Arthur et al. (2017) simplified the question of number by proposing the term polyethnography for a number of authors greater than one engaging in this method. Duoethnography uses the researchers as the site of the research, emphasizing the personal impacts of the research topic and reflexivity of the researchers (Norris and Sawyer, 2012).

As a methodology, duoethnography focuses on the phenomenon with the researchers as the site of research, as opposed to autoethnography where the researcher is the subject of research (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). Despite this focus on a phenomenon, duoethnography is separate from phenomenological research. The most notable difference is that, while duoethnography uses the researchers as participants (Norris and Sawyer, 2012),

phenomenological researchers attempt to bracket themselves and their experiences out of the

research (van Manen, 2016) or restrain the impacts of pre-understandings through bridling

(Vagle, 2016).

In contrast to many other qualitative traditions, duoethnography has emerged within the

current millennium. Sawyer and Norris (2015) recalled that it developed out of their

dissatisfaction with the ability of external researchers to effectively represent the perceptions and

situations of their research subjects. As in the method we propose, where the researchers are

appropriate subjects, it made sense to allow them to present their own voices. Thus, they

developed duoethnography, which simply stated is

> a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference
>
> juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world. Rather than
>
> uncovering the meanings that people give to their lived experiences, duoethnography
>
> embraces the belief that meanings can be and often are transformed through the research
>
> act. (Norris and Sawyer, 2012, p. 9)

In the following sections, we provide a summary of the nine key aspects of duoethnography

drawn directly from the work of Norris and Sawyer (2012), categorized by those we have

retained completely or slightly modified and those we have omitted. A similar approach will then

be used with phenomenology.

The following aspects of duoethnography were retained for this hybrid methodology:

currere, polyvocal and dialogic, disrupts metanarratives, difference, audience accessibility, and

trust.

Borrowing from Pinar's (1975) concept of currere, duoethnography approaches the topic

under study by utilizing the researcher's life as a curriculum (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). The

researchers examine their past, present, and perceived future in regard to the topic, leading to reconceptualization. The researcher then is the site, rather than the topic, of the study. In our previous study (Olt and Teman, 2018), we utilized currere to better illuminate the phenomenon of synchronous online education from the perspectives of both faculty member and graduate student. While each of us had an awareness of the topic, neither had previously experienced it. We considered our preconceptions, our present experiences, and how we anticipated the experience to evolve, then synthesizing those experiences for meaning and impact on our own learning. If juxtaposed against phenomenology, much of currere would overlap with what is bracketed out; however, duoethnography brackets in (Norris, 2012). Since the researchers were the site of the research, our own learning and development were brought to the forefront to aid the reader in understanding the experience of the phenomenon.

Duoethnography does not result in one co-constructed narrative; rather, it recognizes each author's voice and stories separately, while those voices interact among each other through dialogue (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). The presence of individual voices is essential to the further development of difference. Bringing together disparate voices allows for the presentation of a phenomenon as viewed from multiple angles, a reality that would be obscured if blended into one voice. These individual voices, however, then can engage with each other to hone thinking and dig deeper.

Metanarratives adopt the assumption of truth from a single point of view, rather than embracing constructivism (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). Duoethnography is used to disrupt those metanarratives and demonstrate the co-construction of knowledge. Not only is the writing polyvocal, but it does not take sides. As the different researcher-participant voices come from differing backgrounds and perspectives, they are each given equal footing in the conversation.

Within duoethnography, it is expected that the authors be different in at least one key

aspect related to the study (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). This is perhaps the most important

retained aspect of duoethnography within our hybrid methodology. We believe that, to best

understand a phenomenon or investigate a phenomenological research question, it is essential to

gather the experience from each associated major point of view involved. Depending on the

circumstances of a study, difference may manifest itself in either simple or complex form. In our

previous study (Olt and Teman, 2018), we presented the two sides of synchronous online

education—faculty member and graduate student. This is simple difference, wherein there is

only one aspect of relevant difference. Though there were other students present in the course,

they were not central participants to our shared experience of synchronous online education.

Simple difference among researcher-participants would generally manifest when investigating a

phenomenon of a small scale and tightly bounded system. By way of example, in a setting

different from ours, one might explore what it is like to experience the contentious hiring of a

non-traditional president at a university. Relevant voices to be represented would be those both

affirming and dissenting of the hire, as well as those from each layer involved in the decision-

making process: trustees, administrators, tenured faculty, and tenure-track faculty. This would

represent complex difference among the researcher-participants, as more than one layer of

difference would be relevant—affirming trustees, dissenting trustees, affirming administrators,

dissenting administrators, and so on. Complex difference is inevitable to fully investigate a

phenomenon that affects a large number of diverse people or in an open system.

We believe that all qualitative research should be accessible to its intended audience;

however, we especially believe in the power of stories to promote understanding. Utilizing the

researcher-participant model, less is lost in translation by an external researcher, making the

writing more authentic and a better representation of perceived realities. This interplays with the phenomenological concept of using prereflective experiences as discussed later in this paper.

In our study, we trusted each other enough to boldly share our perspectives with each other. However, we do not believe that this must imply a friendship or huge degree of trust among researcher-participants. For example, under potential applications of this research methodology, we suggest that it has great potential for the insider study of emergent, contentious phenomena. Because the need for study may emerge with little time to prepare and different viewpoints are encouraged, the degree of trust may initially be only based on collegiality and a willingness to work toward a research goal. There is obviously a need for enough trust to consider and begin such a study, but it need not be deeper than this willingness to engage in dialogue.

While most of the tenets for duoethnography were important to be retained in this hybrid methodology, several were not aligned with its purposes and applications—dialogic change and regenerative transformation and trustworthiness found in self-reflexivity.

Because the emphasis of phenomenological polyethnography is upon understanding a phenomenon and not upon the researchers themselves, this effect upon the researcher-participants is not necessary or necessarily expressed, though it may occur.

Though certain elements of this aspect overlap generally with qualitative research and specifically phenomenology, this method more closely aligns with phenomenological standards for trustworthiness and validity, as the core purpose is phenomenological understanding. We discuss this further in the next section.

Phenomenological Heritage

All qualitative studies must be firmly and properly rooted in some view of

phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). However, phenomenology as a specific methodology is letting "that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (Heidegger, 1927, p. 58). As a philosophical approach, Heidegger (1927) pushed phenomenology as the study of being and the sole means of ontological discovery. Central to that approach is the epoché, or reduction to the phenomenon whereby the researchers set aside themselves, preconceptions, and foreknowledge (van Manen, 2016). However, the idea that one can simply set aside such key parts of one's own being in phenomenological ontology—perhaps a truly ironic suggestion—has increasingly come into question, with some modern phenomenologists suggesting the term bridling over bracketing to indicate less separation from the phenomenon and more accounting for the impact of such prior interaction with the phenomenon (Vagle, 2016).

Most importantly, we retain the use of a phenomenological question and purpose in this methodology. In addition, we also advocate the use of a philosophical discussion, experientially descriptive accounts, a group of participants who have all experienced the phenomenon, and a phenomenological approach to trustworthiness.

Van Manen (2016) framed a phenomenological question as one which poses, "What is this human experience like?" (p. 350). Phenomenological polyethnography also exists to explore such a question. Phenomenology requires a researcher to bracket out, bridle, or reduce prior experiences and conceptions in order to approach the phenomenon anew through the prereflective experiences of others. However, it is possible for the researchers use their own voice and experiences if they write prereflectively as they experience the phenomenon for the first time. Phenomenological polyethnography then allows a phenomenological question to be explored from an insider, emic perspective provided by researcher-participants with differences.

This may perhaps even more effectively answer a phenomenological question than traditionally etic phenomenology, as it allows the original voices to not only describe the experience but to also provide their own hermeneutic. A phenomenological question, however, does not live in the realm of empiricism; rather, it is entirely phenomenological (philosophical) in nature. This does not, of course, preclude our studying of individuals or social groups to better comprehend or understand the experienced phenomenon. We merely suggest that researchers using this new methodology must first view the research issue phenomenologically rather than as an empirical exercise. It might help to juxtapose phenomenology with social constructionism. By and large in phenomenology, we endeavor to locate essences and illuminate those essence in our writing; however, social constructionists would argue that there are no essences of things or phenomena, because realities are constructed and not "out there" waiting for their essences to be uncovered. So, when we talk about phenomenological questions, we are speaking in regard to things which precede constructionist thought. In our empirical endeavors, however, we believe social constructionism and phenomenology will be inexorably intertwined—it will be the participants' understanding of the essences, which are almost certainly shaped by social forces. Thus, the essence resides in the experience—inherent to the participants and vicariously experienced by the readers—not in the phenomenon.

In phenomenological polyethnography, transcripts of dialogue and other descriptive accounts, such as reflections, conversations, and journals may be analyzed. Contrary to van Manen's (2016) approach, we adopt the stance that such empirical materials not only *include* "perceptions, opinions, beliefs, views, and so on" (p. 350) but expressly emphasize the centrality of such for this methodology in the spirit of duoethnography.

Traditionally, when conducting phenomenological research, the researcher seeks to find

participants who have all experienced the same phenomenon and reflect upon their past experiences, such as Creswell's (2013) example of living with AIDS. In phenomenological polyethnography, the twist is that the researchers are the participants should begin to collect the data as they experience the phenomenon or immediately thereafter, rather than attempting to recall events in detail potentially years later. This immediacy allows researcher-participants to collect prereflective data in a way not possible if written much later.

Beyond general approaches to analyzing the trustworthiness and overall quality of qualitative research, such as those set forth by Williams and Morrow (2009), Creswell (2013) proposed the following criteria for evaluating a phenomenological study—

Does the author convey an understand of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology?

Does the author have a clear "phenomenon" to study that is articulated in a concise way?

Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology?... Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants? Does this essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred? Is the author reflexive throughout the study? (p. 260)

As our new methodology has a phenomenological purpose, this approach to trustworthiness is in greater alignment with phenomenological polyethnography than that employed by Norris and Sawyer (2012) in duoethnography.

Though retaining many elements of phenomenology, we suggest that researchers using this methodology not adhere to the tenets of bracketing, search for invariant structures or meanings, or attempt to be non-comparative.

Instead of suspending our preexisting knowledge of the phenomenon to understand emergent meaning in a phenomenological investigation (van Manen, 2016), Norris (2012)

suggests "bracketing in" for duoethnography rather than bracketing, bridling, or epoché. One's biases, preconceptions, sense of self, etc., should not be "controlled for" in phenomenological polyethnography. Instead, we strongly advocate researchers actively reflect and reflex on their biases and include a statement of researcher and co-researchers stance (e.g., positionality statements) in the final representation of research, which will further delineate author difference. While we align with this view in phenomenological polyethnography, we propose simply moving on from the concepts of bracketing, epoché, and bridling entirely.

As the phenomena appropriate to this study are emergent and, in this emergent form, specific to local variations, invariant structures and meanings will not yet be identifiable. Rather, phenomenological polyethnography seeks to document an event as it happens from an insider perspective and reflect how it impacted those researcher-participants.

Vagle (2016) suggested that phenomenology is so focused on the phenomenon under consideration that the study must stand alone, without comparison to other phenomena. However from our previous duoethnography, synchronous online education was a new experience for both of us (Olt and Teman, 2018), and we found it extremely helpful to connect this new knowledge to our previous knowledge of traditional face-to-face classes and standard asynchronous online classes. Doing so provided us with context for understanding. As phenomenology is meant to give meaning and provide understanding of a phenomenon (Heidegger, 1927; van Manen, 2016), comparison became an effective way to give a baseline of understanding to inform our dialogue to interpret the central phenomenon under consideration— synchronous online education. When the experience under consideration is emergent and not commonly considered, we propose that engaging in comparative analysis with more common phenomena better accomplishes the purpose of illumination than not doing so.

A Married Purpose

It is in the purpose that the two methods must be most significantly married. Phenomenology is a "meaning-giving method of inquiry" (van Manen, 2016, p. 28). When the researchers are among the most qualified participants to illuminate a phenomenon and phenomenology requires some form of bracketing, phenomenology, in its full and proper sense, does not provide a methodological solution for such needed research. Sawyer and Norris (2015) noted that "the purpose of duoethnography became for us not the finding of essence but the exploration of how life histories of different individuals impact the meanings they give to those experiences by employing multiple voices in dialogue" (p. 2). Thus similarly, duoethnography provided us with no solution to our purpose, as its focus diverges from the phenomenon.

The purpose of phenomenological polyethnography then brings these together as two or more researchers share their experiences from different points of view and interrogate their multiple understandings of a phenomenon through dialogue to expose the manifestation and meaning of a phenomenon as they jointly experience it.

Phenomenological polyethnography then exists upon a theoretical framework of poststructuralism. Both duoethnography and phenomenology have poststructuralist ties. Only recently a recent trend in phenomenology, it is brought closer to duoethnography than had previously been the case. Poststructuralism and postmodernism are terms often used interchangeably (Crotty, 1998), because it is difficult to clearly distinguish between the two theories (Sarup, 1993). However, we want to make an effort to align our stance with that of Fink-Eitel (1992), who suggested that postmodernism is a broader term under which poststructuralism fits. More specifically, we adopt Wolin's (1992) viewpoint that postmodernism is a "non-sentimental adieu—a farewell without tears—to the traditional metaphysical longing for totality,

holism, and presence" which places poststructuralism as the "epistemological—or better: anti-epistemological—corollary of this epochal cultural transvaluation" (p. 9). If the postmodern world "is at once, and paradoxically, a world of massification and a world of fragmentation" (Crotty, 1998, p. 12), then poststructuralism might be the way in which we interact with the blurred and fragmented mess (or plurality of meaning) in academic texts. We see poststructuralism as fitting broadly within critical theory, as it allows for knowledge construction within the power-knowledge critique (Crotty, 1998).

Hodgson and Standish (2009) explained how the narrative approach—that taken in duoethnography— cuts to the heart of understanding an experience:

> The use of narrative in educational research is often seen as a form of deconstruction that empowers the individual by allowing them to tell their own story, and it is frequently accompanied by explicit discussion by the researcher of their own story and positionality in relation to their research participants. (p. 317)

From these poststructuralist desires to allow for individuals to tell and interpret their own stories, Sawyer and Norris (2015) gave birth to duoethnography as a qualitative methodology. They described reaching the tipping point of frustration with using other qualitative methods as a "crisis of representation" (p. 1). They felt they could no longer try to represent or explain the views of others, and thus they created the duoethnographic methodology to interrogate their own experiences.

Phenomenology has historically been aloof from such researcher involvement, emphasizing a bracketing out of the researcher and the researcher's ways of thinking. Phenomenology demands that, from a philosophical perspective, a topic be explored through prereflective experiences, thus requiring the researcher to be external to the phenomenological

research and set aside personal knowledge through bracketing—also called reduction, epoché, and bridling (van Manen, 2016, p. 215). We contest, however, that this philosophical goal for prereflective experience need not exclude the researcher as a participant; rather, the researchers can write prereflectively if intentionally journaling and dialoguing as they encounter the phenomenon for the first time. While the researchers would then have to come into a new experience with the intention of phenomenologically researching it, this approach would allow for prereflective engagement by researcher-participants. Though we believe van Manen's hermeneutic approach to phenomenology best aligns with our proposed hybrid methodology, Vagle (2016) has represented a turn in phenomenological thinking with his post-intentional phenomenology. He asserted that this new approach to phenomenology, based on poststructuralist ways of thinking, would allow for "multiplicity, difference, and partiality" (p. 114), rather than a quest for invariant structures through objectivity. Thus, a poststructuralist approach to phenomenology joins with the duoethnographic ideal of researcher difference.

Key Tenets of Phenomenological Polyethnography

Conveying a clear understanding of what exists regarding a phenomenon need not exclude the researchers and their experiences, in contrast to the tenets of phenomenological methodology. Van Manen (2016) noted on phenomenological intentionality that the phenomenon is experienced by each individual "partially, perspectivally, seen from this side or with that aspect" (p. 62). Major strengths of autoethnography (Ellis and Adams, 2014) and duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer, 2012) are that they draw from insider experience while being written by experts in research methods and the subject area. Allowing such insider experts into the exposition of a phenomenon need not inherently taint the research; rather, when those experts are qualified participants to explain the nature and meaning of the phenomenon, we

believe that it can be preferable for them to communicate that through phenomenological polyethnography.

Incorporating the retained aspects of duoethnography and phenomenology, the key tenets of this approach are 1) the consideration of a phenomenon, 2) the use of authors with relevant difference who have both special insight into that phenomenon as participants and skill as qualitative researchers, 3) the intentional collection of prereflective data while all researcher-participants are experiencing the phenomenon or immediately after, 4) the subsequent reflection upon and interpretation of the phenomenon as it was similarly and differently experienced by the researcher-participants, and 5) the description of both the essence and meaning of the phenomenon.

Discussion

Phenomenological polyethnography is a powerful methodology for those with insider knowledge to use their own voices to communicate their experiences of a phenomenon. Applying this framework to our previous duoethnography (Olt and Teman, 2018) would have altered both the content and application of the study. The new methodology has numerous applications inside of higher education and other sectors to illuminate emergent phenomena by using diverse, insider insight.

Applying Phenomenological Polyethnography to Our Previous Duoethnography

In our previous study (Olt and Teman, 2018), we adhered tightly to Norris and Sawyer's (2012) framework for duoethnography, though at times we found it limiting and frustrating. If phenomenological polyethnography were applied retroactively, several significant shifts would take place. First, we would have framed and organized our entire study around a phenomenological question of describing what the experience is like (van Manen, 2016). This

would have produced numerous minor adjustments throughout the study. With this change in focus, we would have then given far more attention to the phenomenon and less to how the experiences of synchronous online education and writing the duoethnography changed our thinking. Second, while we focused on the effects that synchronous online education had on us, we would have instead focused on the essence and meaning of the phenomenon. This would have yielded more practical insight for those synchronous online education by providing more detail and analysis of the phenomenon. Third, we would have provided more comparative data and analysis with traditional face-to-face classes and standard asynchronous online classes, which would have made the content more relatable to the vast majority of those interested in learning about synchronous online education. Finally, we would have provided a deep philosophical reflection on ontology, otherness, and digital versus physical presence.

Applications of Phenomenological Polyethnography

This method is an ideal way to investigate phenomena in higher education and other settings with researcher-participants who are skilled in qualitative research. Key events could be discussed as they emerge by those with different insider perspectives. Issues such as controversial speakers, changing a learning management system, social justice issues, or the appointment of a non-traditional president would all benefit from such reflection, as those later experiencing or studying such phenomena in other settings could draw on the insights of a phenomenological polyethnographic studies. Pulling from duoethnography, difference among the authors is essential to the impact of this approach by precluding devolution into a heavily biased research product. Emergent issues could be explored with difference by gender, political affiliation, race or ethnicity, religious beliefs, relationship to power, approach to the phenomenon, or really any other axis of difference relevant to the topic.

Conclusion

Phenomenological polyethnography is a hybrid qualitative methodology that incorporates aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology into duoethnography. Coming from a poststructural perspective, we believe that this new methodology best respects individual voices while describing the essence and meaning of a phenomenon. Best used where skilled researchers are the participants, the products of this methodology may produce insights of an emergent phenomenon far more clearly and quickly than other methodologies by eliminating intermediary interpretation and translation.

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