# Understanding the Differences between Husserl's (Descriptive) and Heidegger's (Interpretive) Phenomenological Research

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## Abstract

Phenomenology is one of several qualitative research traditions. Undergraduate and graduate nursing students have sought to understand the differences between Husserl's descriptive and Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology. This article is a basic resource for nursing students that describes and interprets the differences between the two philosophical phenomenological schools of thought. The origin of phenomenology is presented. A descriptive and an interpretive article from two peer reviewed nursing journals are compared and contrasted based on their purpose, data collection and data analysis. The selected articles were chosen based on their topic of relevance related to nursing students in educational settings.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Research, Qualitative research

## Introduction

Nursing is concerned with delivering quality care and understanding people. In order for nurses to appreciate the depth of their patients, they engage in recognizing and validating the whole person and their unique experiences. Many nurses are interested in conducting phenomenological research, perhaps, because it takes into consideration the values of the individual's experience and their whole being. Consequently, when nurses consider conducting phenomenological research they need to choose the most appropriate approach, so that the value of their research is not compromised [1].

The aim of this article is to present an educational resource for nursing students, which illustrates the differences between Husserl (descriptive) and Heidegger (interpretive) phenomenological philosophy through the description of two peer reviewed nursing articles that employ either phenomenological approach in a nursing educational setting. The two selected articles were based on research topics that would be most relevant for nursing students, which could foster greater understanding of interpretive and descriptive phenomenology. Consequently, will nursing students who use a resource that examines the differences between Edmund Husserl (descriptive) and Martin Heidegger (interpretive) philosophies of phenomenology increase their understanding of the two phenomenological schools of thought? This article is not about original research and will not answer that question, because this article is a guide for nursing research students and any other researchers who want to better understand the two phenomenological approaches. The question for this article is: What are the differences between the philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger?

## The origins of phenomenology

The underlying philosophy of phenomenological research evolved through protest of the positivist paradigm. Reflected in 19th century thought, the principles of positivism postulated that researchers could study reality. The positivist paradigm asserted that reality was ordered, rational, and logical. Consequently, positivists assumed objectivity measured knowledge and was independent of human interaction. Furthermore, quantitative research negated human subjectivity through strictly controlled collection and data analysis methods. Logically, the findings of quantitative research were based on the tenets of empiricism and reductionism [2].

The naturalistic paradigm, the countermovement of the positivist paradigm, presumed that reality was not fixed but based on individual and subjective realities. As one would suspect, the philosophy of phenomenology allied closely with the naturalistic paradigm. Phenomenologists assumed that knowledge was achieved through interactions between researchers and participants. Therefore, phenomenological research was considered subjective, inductive, and dynamic. Consequently, participant and researcher engagement has offered researchers an understanding about phenomenon not typically studied [2].

## Husserl (descriptive) versus Heidegger (interpretive) phenomenology

Phenomenology is an inductive qualitative research tradition rooted in the 20th century philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl (descriptive) and Martin Heidegger (interpretive). Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German mathematician, founded the philosophical movement of phenomenology. Husserl believed that phenomenology suspended all suppositions, was related to consciousness, and was based on the meaning of the individual's experience [3]. The experience of perception, thought, memory, imagination, and emotion, involve what Husserl called "intentionality", which is one's directed awareness or consciousness of an object or event. Thus, the critical question for Husserl was: What do we know as persons? Consequently, Husserl developed descriptive phenomenology, where everyday conscious experiences were described while preconceived opinions were set aside or bracketed [4].

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Husserl's student, rejected the theory of knowledge known as epistemology, and adopted ontology, the science of being. Heidegger developed interpretive phenomenology by extending hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation [3]. He broadened hermeneutics by studying the concept of being in the world rather than knowing the world. Hermeneutics moves beyond the description or core concepts of the experience and seeks meanings that are embedded in everyday occurrences [5]. Thus, the critical question

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for Heidegger was: What is being? Heidegger, who was interested in interpreting and describing human experience, believed that bracketing was not warranted because hermeneutics presumed prior understanding [4].

Heidegger believed it was impossible to negate our experiences related to the phenomenon under study, for he believed personal awareness was intrinsic to phenomenological research. Heidegger rejected understanding how we know as humans, but accepted knowing as what it means to be [4]. According to Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom [4], "Heidegger asserted that human existence is a more fundamental notion than human consciousness and human knowledge. His philosophy makes it clear that the essence of human understanding is hermeneutic, that is, our understanding of the everyday world is derived from our interpretation of it".

When would a researcher choose to use either Husserl's descriptive or Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology? Researchers who choose to understand and conduct either descriptive or interpretive phenomenological research need to be interested in how an individual's consciousness perceives their description or interpretation of an object or an event. Hence, in the moment of perceiving, the individual implicitly describes or interprets the meaning of the experience through patterns that embody the gestalt of the phenomenon [6].

Interpretive phenomenology is used when the research question asks for the meaning of the phenomenon and the researcher does not bracket their biases and prior engagement with the question under study. Descriptive phenomenology is used when the researcher wants to describe the phenomenon under study and brackets their biases [7].

## Data analysis

There are several approaches to data analysis within the different schools of phenomenology. Colaizzi, Giorgi, and Van Kaam formulated three methods of data analysis, based on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology. All three methods describe the meaning of an experience through emergent themes. The researcher searches for common patterns elicited from specific experiences. Colaizzi's method instructs the researcher to validate the findings by returning to the study participants, while Giorgi's analysis negates the validation of the participants. Giorgi deems it inappropriate to ask participants or external judges for validation. Van Kaam's method requires that inter subjectivity be confirmed through expert judges [2].

Utrecht, the Dutch approach is the second school of phenomenological analysis. This approach combines description and interpretation in uncovering thematic aspects of the experience. Van Manen utilizes this method to identify and interpret the meaning of the phenomenon. There are three distinct options, which include the holistic approach, whereby the researcher reads the text as a whole, the selective approach, in which the researcher extracts essential statements, and the detailed approach, where the researcher analyzes every sentence. After the themes are identified the researcher engages in a reflective process by returning to the participants for validation [2].

Heidegger an interpretive hermeneutics utilizes the hermeneutic circle method of analysis, where there is continual review and analysis between the parts and the whole of the text. The basic tenet of the hermeneutic interpretive school of thought is that researchers cannot remove themselves from the meanings extracted from the text. The researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon. Consequently, preconceived ideas or opinions are not bracketed [2].

## Method

### Data collection

Two relevant educational peer reviewed nursing articles were selected based on either Husserl's descriptive phenomenological philosophy or Heidegger's interpretive phenomenological philosophy. Each article was reviewed and analyzed based on either the tenets of Husserl's or Heidegger's philosophy.

### Data analysis

A reading guide was constructed for the systematic review of the two articles.

1. Description or presentation of phenomenological approach.

2. Presentation of the design and analysis (aim/purpose, research questions, process of analysis and the researcher's role [bracketed or not bracketed]).

### A study based on Husserl's descriptive philosophy

Papp and Markkanen [6] conducted a qualitative study entitled, "Clinical Environment as a Learning Environment: Student Nurses' Perceptions concerning Clinical Learning Experiences". The design of the Papp and Markkanen [6] study was based on Husserl's descriptive phenomenological philosophy, where the directed awareness (intentionality) of the students' perceptions of their clinical experiences and the researchers' bracketed engagement guided their findings. The goal of the Papp and Markkanen [6] study was to describe the student nurses' perceptions of their clinical learning environments. The researchers were interested in describing how clinical and classroom learning complemented each other [6].

Two researchers selected 16 second, third and fourth year student nurses because their experiences were related to the area of interest that was studied. Data was collected through unstructured interviews, observations in clinical practice, and structured interviews immediately after patient care. The students reflected on the care of their patients through rich in-depth narratives, which were taped and transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Colaizzi's method of analysis. The researchers attempted to understand through the students' descriptions, the meanings embedded in the nursing students' statements in order to uncover common themes. Appreciation and support, quality of mentoring, and students' self-directness were the four themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews. The results of the study were shared with six of the participants, who confirmed the findings as their own original descriptions, because the Colaizzi method supported returning to the participants to ensure credibility [6].

According to Papp and Markkanen [6] Husserl's phenomenological philosophy supports impartiality, where preconceived notions, bias or judgments are set aside, or bracketed. Papp and Markkanen [6] asserted, "The researchers and research assistants carefully considered their own perceptions and preassumptions towards clinical practice in nurse education to enhance neutrality". Although the researchers had a great deal of experience in nursing education they set aside their prior experiences in the clinical environment [8], so they would not instill any bias during the research.

### A study based on Heidegger's interpretive philosophy

Idczak [7] conducted a qualitative study entitled, "I am a Nurse: Nursing Students Learn the Art and Science of Nursing". The study explored how nursing students interpreted their experiences of "being in" nurse/patient interactions. The design was based on Heidegger's

interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology. The purpose of the study was to understand how nurses make meaning of their experience of "being in" nurse patient interactions. The researcher who was a nurse for twenty-nine years reported that she understood how nursing students learned through classroom and clinical placements, but did not know how they learned the "being of nursing" [7].

Twenty-eight sophomores enrolled in entry-level fundamentals of nursing course were selected to participate in the study. The students were instructed to electronically record their thoughts, feelings, and emotions related to their interactions with their assigned patients. The student nurses completed thirty-seven journal entries, where the circular hermeneutic interpretive process of analysis was utilized. A priori categories were identified through an extensive literature review, which included the science of nursing, the art of nursing, caring, presence, and being. Initially, the researcher interpreted the journal entries in their entirety, and then each entry was coded in appropriate a priori categories. The entries were reread in order to discover similar themes within an individual experience. Fear of interacting with patients, developing confidence, becoming self-aware, connecting with knowledge, and connecting with the patient were the five emergent themes that described how nursing students experienced nurse/patient interactions [7].

In contrast to Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology eliminated bracketing, asserting that impartiality was impossible because researchers became enmeshed with the experience. Heidegger endorsed the hermeneutic circle, where understanding and interpretation of phenomenon was gained through shared knowledge and shared experiences [8]. Welch [9] stated, "As we understand something we are involved and as we are involved we understand". The analytic process of starting with a priori categories and ending with emerging themes was indicative of the interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological method, which facilitated the process of understanding how the students made meaning of their nurse/patient interactions [7].

The researcher believed the depth of the journal entries ensured the credibility of the data, so she did not confirm with the participants if the findings were consistent with their entries. The researcher's decision not to confirm was based on her belief that her personal engagement and reflection during the study and the interpretive nature of the data analysis method did not necessitate confirmation. The researcher described in detail the circular process of interpretive data analysis [7].

## Discussion

As illustrated by the two distinct articles that utilized either the descriptive or interpretive phenomenological research methods, there is a unique difference between the two philosophical schools of thought. In the descriptive article, authored by Papp and Markkanen [6] the research question implied Husserl's descriptive approach, since the authors were interested in the student nurses' descriptions not their interpretations about their perceptions of their clinical learning environments. Additionally, the authors asserted that they bracketed their biases, which is a distinguishing feature of Husserl's descriptive method, which is not part of Heidegger's interpretive methodology. Papp and Markkanen [6] reported that the researchers and their assistants reflected on their personal perceptions, so that they would ensure

neutrality. The themes that emerged from the students' descriptions were discovered through Colaizzi's method of data analysis, which is a descriptive method that also encourages researchers to check credibility of their findings with the participants.

In the interpretive article, authored by Idczak [7], which was based on Heidegger's interpretive philosophy, the research question posed was based on the students' interpretations not their descriptions of experiences of "being in" nurse/patient interactions. The author made it very clear that bias was considered advantageous to the research process, since Heidegger's interpretive philosophy purports that humans are embedded in their world and the researcher cannot and should not negate their prior understanding and engagement in the subject under study. Idczak [7] explicitly defined the data analysis method, which was indicative of the hermeneutic circle, which believes that shared experience, for example through a priori categories would validate the students' interpretations of their nurse/patient interactions. Since the researcher did not bracket their biases, there was no need to return to the participants to ask if they confirmed the findings of the research, because Heidegger's philosophy asserted that the depth of involvement of researchers would confirm credibility.

## Conclusion

Choice of an appropriate phenomenological research method that is congruent with the underlying philosophical tenets of either Husserl's descriptive or Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology is vital to the credibility of the proposed research. Are you, the researcher, asking for description or interpretation? Do you believe that your preconceived notions should be kept at abeyance or allowed to embrace the depth and breadth of the analysis of the subject under study? Does your choice of an analysis methodology represent the underlying philosophy of Husserl or Heidegger? Nurse researchers need to be careful when choosing and naming their research approach, since their approach may have consequences for the quality of future research.

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