

Phenomenology in Educational Qualitative Research: Philosophy as Science or Philosophical Science?

Mariwilda Padilla-Díaz^a

Received: 14 February 2015 • Accepted: 03 May 2015

Abstract: The objective of this monographic contribution is to inform the reader about the essential elements that constitute phenomenology as a educational qualitative research design. It aims to orient the reader concerning the basic concepts and scaffolding that distinguish the phenomenological design. Additionally, the author exposes the background of phenomenology as philosophy in a general manner, and the development and incorporation of phenomenology into a scientific research model. To facilitate the reading process, the text is broken down into the following sections: philosophical origin, types of phenomenology and general usage criteria, sample and data collection strategy in phenomenology and, lastly, data analysis in phenomenology.

Key-Words: Phenomenology, Research Design, Hermeneutic, Purposive Sampling, Textual and Structural Analysis, Meaning Units, Essence.

1. Introduction

Phenomenology is known as a educational qualitative research design (Ponce, 2014; Creswell, 2013, Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The philosophical basis of qualitative investigation stems from phenomenology (as a philosophy), from hermeneutics and from existentialism (Lucca Irizarry and Berríos Rivera, 2013). Therefore, qualitative research is contextualized in different philosophical paradigms which center on diverse conceptions of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). According to these authors, the main philosophical paradigms are: positivist, post-positivist, critical theory, constructivism and post-modernism.

^a Universidad Metropolitana (Puerto Rico, United States). Correspondence: Mariwilda Padilla-Díaz, College of Education, Universidad Metropolitana, PO Box 21150, San Juan, PR 00928 (Puerto Rico, United States). mpadilla19@suagm.edu.

2. Philosophical Origin

The philosopher Immanuel Kant used the term phenomenology in his classic work, *Critique of pure reason*, in which he differentiated between the mental representations of objects, understood as the thing in itself (*a priori* knowledge independent from experience), and objects understood on the basis of experience: *a posteriori* or empirical knowledge (Parodi, 2008). The word phenomenology derives from the Greek, and one of its meanings is the following: “apparition or manifestation”. It has also been defined as the *philosophy* or school that explains being and consciousness on the basis of the analysis of observable phenomena (Litchman, 2006).

The “father” or greatest figure of phenomenology was the mathematician Edmund Husserl. He was born in 1889 into a Jewish family in what is today known as the Czech Republic (previously Moravia) and died in 1976 (Parodi, 2008). According to this author, “with his phenomenological school, [Husserl] emphasized the study of meanings and ideal objects, of the psychological conscience of the world and of science” (p. 473). Husserl proposed phenomenology as an experimental method based on the conscience of phenomena in which the pure essences of the contents of consciousness stood out.

Starting with empirical observations, Husserl sought to reach conclusions framed within the scope of science. This is one of the most transcendental contributions of phenomenology to science. In fact, through this attempt Husserl aimed to attack psychology as a pure science, highlighting elements related to human perception and the intentionality of consciousness. The intentionality of consciousness refers to the search and identification of subjacent, subjective elements of consciousness which surpass the intention of understanding reality from a single point of view. Philosophical phenomenology stemmed as a counterattack to the reductionism derived from positivism. This philosophical current aimed to reduce information from experience to the empirical sciences. An example was the mainly behavioristic practice of psychology. Husserl reacted to behavioristic psychology proposing phenomenology as a rigorous science of experience and human consciousness (Parodi, 2008).

As a method of research, Husserl proposed *epokhé*; a word of Greek origin which means *doubt*. Giorgi (2009) held that the concept of *epokhé* refers to the suspension or suppression of judgments and the positioning of the researcher with regard to the experiences of the studied phenomenon. This suspension of judgment is a mechanism which ensures objectivity during the process of data analysis in a qualitative research. While it is true that the concept of *epokhé* stems from pure phenomenology, it is also true that the term has been adapted to qualitative investigation in general.

The researcher who places him or herself within the qualitative paradigm must set aside all preconceptions, judgments or prejudices towards a particular topic in order to make an objective analysis of the information participants bring to an investigation. Additionally, one of the precepts of all qualitative investigations lies on the perception held by the participants as protagonists of the studied phenomenon. It can therefore be argued that qualitative research is underlined by an element closely linked to perception (subjectivity to some) of the studied object.

This approach gives way to the following statement:

All qualitative research has a phenomenological aspect to it, but the phenomenological approach cannot be applied to all qualitative researchers.

In the first place, it is completely appropriate to say that all qualitative research has a phenomenological aspect to it, because one of its main characteristics lies on the study of qualities and the interpretations addressed by the object of study. Here, the philosophical basis of phenomenology that originates and permeates all qualitative research is openly manifested. All qualitative investigation describes the richness of content in human complexities (Lichtman, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In the second place, the previous statement suggests that even when qualitative investigation is centered on the systematic study of a problem through the interpretation of its informants, this does not imply that the phenomenological focus must be used as a strategy of data collection in all qualitative researches. Rather, it is used in particular cases depending on the research problem studied. The characteristic scaffolding of phenomenology as research focus is discussed in the following section.

3. Types of Phenomenology and General Usage Criteria

In order to accurately describe the scaffolding or staging of phenomenology, it is appropriate to begin with its different types and classes, hereby briefly described:

- Descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenology – It refers to the study of personal experience and requires a description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation.
- Eidetic (essence) or transcendental phenomenology – It analyzes the essences perceived by consciousness with regard to individual experiences.
- “Egological”, genetic or constitutional phenomenology – It refers to the analysis of the self as a conscious entity. This type of phenomenology appeals to universal consciousness.

Creswell (1998) posits that the best criteria to determine the use of phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of *human experiences* common to a group of people. The author suggests that the studied group should consist of 3 to 15 members. The members of the group need to be able to articulate their lived experiences. The more diverse the experiences of participants, the harder it will be for the researcher to find the underlying essences and common meanings attributed to the studied phenomenon. The role of the phenomenological investigator or researcher is to “construct” the studied object according to its own manifestations, structures and components (Ponce, 2014).

4. Sample and Data Collection Strategy in Phenomenology

The samples or participants in phenomenological research are generally chosen according to what is known as “purposive sampling”. Purposive sampling is characterized by the incorporation of specific criteria met by the participants at the moment of selection. For example, in a study concerning the practices, experiences and meanings of equity in couples, Padilla Díaz (2006) selected the sample based on the following criteria: self-denomination as couples that practice equitable ideas (validated by a qualitative instrument), 5 years or more of living together (given that this was the period shown by existing literature as a reasonable span for the configuration of experiences as a couple) and solid belief in some feminine aspects or theories. These criteria aimed to ensure that the selected couples had common experiences regarding the studied phenomenon.

The most appropriate data collection strategy for a phenomenological research is the profound interview. Existing literature (Kyale & Brinkman, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2010) coincides in that the phenomenological interview should be open or semi-structured. These two types of interviews allow the researcher to address the phenomenon profoundly, providing a space of aperture for the informants to express their experiences in detail, approaching reality as faithfully as possible. The detailed descriptions or interpretations brought by the participant in the profound-phenomenological interview should be as representative of experienced reality as possible.

The main focus of the phenomenological interview is the description of the meanings of phenomena (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). These authors point out that is recommendable to carry out some additional interviews in order to: verify the information obtained, allow the participant the opportunity to provide further detail or expand on the information offered and, lastly, for the participant’s final approval. As exposed, phenomenological interview is complex and requires a great deal of time to scrutinize the studied phenomenon with the necessary depth. It is therefore vital for the researcher to have excellent skills and/or competency in interviewing.

Some of the skills to be considered during the interview are the following: paraphrasing, clarification, summarizing, reflection of feelings, self-revelation, empathetic listening (Rivero Vergne, 2009). Additionally, the researcher must have dominion or skills in the following areas: paralanguage, kinesics, oculosics, proxemics, vocalizations, identification and recognition of types of silences and sensibility to cultural diversity. A general knowledge of the styles or types of questions is another necessary skill for the researcher using phenomenology. Some types of relevant questions are: those without a specific focus, anecdotal questions, bipolar, intentional, reflexive, of instantiation, etcetera.

5. Data Analysis in Phenomenology

Data analysis in phenomenology is characterized by the following procedures: *epokhé*, identifying common meanings and essences, “horizontalization” of data, textual and structural analysis (Moustakas, 1994). These procedures are discussed in this section, with the exception of *epokhé*, which was previously discussed in this essay.

Textual analysis refers to the description of *what* is expressed by the participants. Structural analysis refers to the interpretation of *how* it is expressed by the participants. These are some questions proposed by Smith and Osborne (2003) to guide the researcher using phenomenological analysis:

- What elements do people unintentionally filter?
- What are some events evidenced through the stories without the person being aware of it?
- How does the person construct meaning within his or her social and personal world?

If we analyze the questions posited by Smith and Osborne (2003), we will notice that they highlight the transference of explicit information (what the participants say) to implicit information (how it is told; what is behind the narration, what are the meanings behind what is told and what is omitted). In other words, phenomenological analysis requires: describing and analyzing the “text” to interpret the “context”. The description, analysis and interpretation of the information obtained through interviews make up the three main steps suggested by Wolcott (2010) for the general analysis of qualitative research. As part of the scaffolding characteristic of phenomenology, analysis and interpretation must be headed towards particular search activities: descriptions, contexts, hidden discourses, meanings and essences.

While it is true that both types of analysis (textual and structural) are fundamental in the interpretation of the findings, structural analysis plays a

vital role as a fundamental part of the scaffolding of phenomenology because it is the one that directs us towards common essences and meanings. Structural analysis reflects the intentionality of conscience as a fundamental aspect of phenomenology.

Creswell (2013) describes the following steps to elaborate phenomenological analysis:

1. The researcher describes his or her own experience with the object of study in order to identify personal judgments and prejudices so that they don't affect the process of analysis.
2. The researcher proceeds with the "horizontalization" of data. This refers to the process wherein the researchers lists each of the relevant quotes of the studied topic and gives them equal value with regard to the expressions of the group. This is where the textual description begins: what are the participants saying? What are the relevant topics expressed by the research participants?
3. The researcher groups the relevant topics into units of meaning.
4. The researcher writes the textual description and includes "ad verbatim" quotations.
5. The researcher writes the structural description.
6. Finally, according to the textual and structural analysis, the researcher proceeds to identify the essence of the phenomenon. What are the common elements repeated in each of the researched participants?

To give an example of this last step, the research by Padilla Díaz (2006) explored practices of gender equity in a group of heterosexual, Puerto Rican couples. From the expressions of the couples with regard to the meaning of the practice of equity, an assessment and recognition in equal parts of individuality (the individual self) and mutuality (the self as belonging to a bond) emerged. This meant that in order for equity to be practiced, it was necessary to establish a balance between individual needs and goals, and the needs and goals of the significant other. The couples never expressed these exact words. The analysis done by the author was structural in nature, and allowed her to establish essence and meaning beyond direct textual transcriptions. In fact, the author inferred that achieving a balance between individuality and mutuality required a proper management of interpersonal relationships. To illustrate the procedure of the research, here are some of the textual expressions from which emerged the structural analysis and essences of this particular group.

Equity is:

"It's about having a vision of relationship, and even when you take care of personal needs, it's a relationship to achieve a compromise between both parties"

“Contributing to achieve each other’s goal and having that goal become the partner’s goal”

“Your own, individual wellbeing becomes common wellbeing”

It is important to highlight to the reader that these *ad verbatim* quotes were interpreted according to emerging categories, which themselves emerged after a process of scrutinizing abundant amounts of information. Therefore, the transcriptions or audio that contain the information from the interviews require carrying out the prolonged chore of visiting and revisiting the text. Abstracting the information along with constructing the relevant categories or themes constitute the main basis to obtain an interpretation that is faithful to the essence and meanings of the studied phenomenon. Phenomenology as a research design contains some validation strategies.

Some of the most commonly used strategies during the process of validation under phenomenology include corroboration by participants and agreement between coders (Creswell, 2013). Corroboration with participants consists of presenting and discussing the data analysis between the researcher and the research participants to verify that the essences and meanings are in fact those expressed directly or indirectly by the participants. Agreement between coders is a more complex process. Various people or external researchers participate willingly in the process of encoding data. These people concern themselves mainly with seeking correspondence between the relevant themes (and subthemes) and the categories that emerge from the data analysis. At the end, all coders compare their respective analysis and, if necessary, according to mutual agreement, the categories can be reorganized to validate the information obtained.

Up to this point, some tenets that characterize phenomenology as a qualitative research design have been presented. Phenomenology is inserted into the field of research as a design with a particular scaffolding. Some people frame it as a philosophical current and others as a methodological research design. The origin of phenomenology is of a philosophical character, and its greater contribution has been to provide a new vision of philosophy that allows us to view things in themselves. This new vision or understanding of “reality” is precisely what gives way to phenomenology as a pertinent qualitative research design. The qualitative paradigm is known as a “decolonizer of method” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), with a clear reference to an investigative endeavor that distances itself from the traditional quantitative method. The qualitative paradigm seeks to study the experiences of human beings in their most natural, purest scenarios. In this context, phenomenology occupies a transcendental area in the new paradigms of science: to systematically inquire into the mind and human experiences to reflect the essences of phenomena as well as the intentionality of conscience. After the statements exposed, the reader is left to answer on his or her own account: is phenomenology philosophy as science, or is it a philosophical science?

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Phenomenology has become an useful and meaningful design among educational and social sciences researches. Most of them, have understood that phenomenology is a genuine manner of representing the realities that participants experience in their lives. Although this premise is true, one of the biggest misconceptions about phenomenology (as a research design) is that it can be applied to all qualitative approaches. Indeed, perception is an element in all qualitative research designs, however, it is very important to consider the intention of the research and the problem to be resolved, before selecting phenomenology as a design. Usually, the type of problem best suited for this design is the study of lived/common experiences. The researcher has to understand the philosophical assumptions that are implied in the use of phenomenology.

Bracketing is another aspect that the researcher might employed while conducting a phenomenological research. The main aspect of phenomenology is to understand the essence of the experience that participants share within a common ground. It is important to understand that participants will bring out subjective and objective experiences. The emphasis while analyzing the data is on the essence (or common experiences) and on the significance of the experience. In other words, it is important to read the “text” and the “context” . This requires to analyze not only what is told by the participants but what it really means: textual and structural analysis). The categorization of the significant statements and meaning units which were verbalized by the participants are key within the data analysis process. Thus, interpretation and analysis skills from the researcher have to be adequately developed. Although deep interviews are the most common data collection method, observations and documents can be used to conduct the research. Phenomenology research can be considered directive as its sampling method is purposive. However, it is important to comprehend that all qualitative research has a phenomenological aspect to it, but the phenomenological approach cannot be applied to all qualitative researchers.

References

- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. (2009). *Research Design. Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds). (2008). *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2011). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *A Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A modified Husserlian Approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Hernández Sampieri R., Fernández Collado, C. Baptista Lucio P. (2010). *Metodología de la Investigación*. México: McGraw Hill.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkman, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. (2nd. ed). Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lincoln Y. S. & Guba E. G. (2000). Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions and Emerging Confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed., pp. 97-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Litchman, M. (2006). *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lucca Irizarry, N. & Berríos Rivera, R. (2013). *Investigación Cualitativa: Una Perspectiva Transdisciplinaria*. Cataño, PR: Ediciones SM.
- Lucca Irizarry, N. & Berríos Rivera, R. (2009). *Investigación Cualitativa: Fundamentos, Diseños y Estrategias*. Cataño, PR: Ediciones SM.
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2010). *Designing Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Miles M.B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, California Sage Publications.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Padilla-Díaz, M. (2006). *Experiencias, Prácticas y Significados Atribuidos a la Convivencia en un Contexto de Equidad por Género entre un Grupo de Parejas Heterosexuales Puertorriqueñas: Consideraciones Feministas para la Consejería de Parejas*. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). San Juan, PR: Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, Recinto Metropolitano.
- Parodi, L.M. (2008). *La filosofía: Fundamentos de la Educación, Visión Histórica, Sistemática y Educativa de la Filosofía Occidental*. Hato Rey: Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas.
- Ponce, O. (2014). *Investigación Cualitativa en Educación: Teorías, Prácticas y Debates*. Hato Rey: Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas.
- Rubin, H.J., & Rubin, I.S. (2012). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (3rd. ed). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Smith, J.A. & Osborne, M. (2003). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (pp 51-80). London: Sage.

- Stake R.S. (2010). *Qualitative Research: Studying How it Works*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Vanderstoep S.W. & Johnston D.D. (2009). *Research Methods for Everyday Life*. San Francisco:CA: Jossey-Bass
- Wolcott, H.F. (2009). *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (3rd.ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage



© 2015 Padilla-Díaz; licensee International Journal of Educational Excellence, Universidad Metropolitana (SUAGM). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly credited.