Phenomenological Research: Inquiry to Understand the Meanings of People’s Experiences

Linda A. Bliss, School of Education and Human Development, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to introduce readers to phenomenological inquiry, an inductive qualitative research approach that is rooted in the philosophical proposition that researchers can gain valuable insight into the structure of how people understand their experiences. It is assumed that there is a structure or essence to the meaning people make of their experiences that can be described and that human experiences are spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, temporal, spatial, etc. Perceptive descriptions of these experiences can inform more humane workplace policy and helpful new theories. To develop such descriptions, researchers must challenge their own and a priori theoretical understandings of the experience. The article presents information about lifeworld, epoche, and essence; major tenets of the approach. Various ways of understanding and conducting phenomenological inquiry are also presented, including examples of how proponents of various viewpoints discuss methodological concerns. Further, the article provides guidelines for conducting phenomenological research, illustrated with examples of online accessible phenomenological studies in a variety of fields that were conducted from different viewpoints. The article stresses the importance of researchers being knowledgeable about the various viewpoints in order to be articulate about their own phenomenological methods decisions.

KEYWORDS

Epoche, Essence, Lifeworld, Methodology, Phenomenological, Qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenological research is a deep investigation of what experiences mean to people. At its core, it concerns the investigation of everyday human experiences in order to learn people’s common sense understanding and the meaning they make of their experiences and the experiences of others. Phenomenological research requires a researcher to focus on people’s experiences of a phenomenon to obtain comprehensive details that provide a basis for reflective structural analysis that ultimately reveals the essence of the experience.

Phenomenological research provides an opportunity for researchers to help people gain a new understanding of the meaning of these phenomena – these aspects of lived experiences. This qualitative research approach is designed to offer people insight into phenomena such as spiritual organization leaders’ quest for wholeness (Thakadipuram, 2010); the lived experiences of outstanding teachers (Amparo, 2013); gay male law enforcement officers’ experiences learning to cope in a masculinized industry (Collins & Rocco, 2015); entrepreneurial learning experiences (Cope, 2005); the embodied
experience of taking part in extreme sports (Willig, 2007), experiences with technology (Cilesiz, 2011), and the experience of being mentored (Gibson, 2006; Gibson & Hanes, 2003). Because there is a wide range of things that people can consciously experience (e.g., phenomena such as emotions, decisions, plans, and activities), this research approach has been used in many disciplines and academic fields. Insights gained from this research supports development of more humane workplace practices and policies as well as providing opportunities for inductively developing experience-based theories about phenomena.

Because phenomenological inquiry has its roots in philosophy, it is not surprising that there are multiple branches of phenomenological thought and therefore to ways of thinking about and conducting inquiry about the meaning of human experiences in the lifeworld. It should be noted, however, that researchers conducting phenomenological inquiries typically address the importance of their reflecting on their preconceived notions of and theories about the phenomenon of interest. Further, it should be noted that whatever the branch, these inquiries are typically undertaken to clarify the nuanced essence of people’s lived experiences of the phenomenon. This clarification is based on studying, describing, and interpreting people’s perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and memories about their experiences.

It is beyond the scope of this article to present more information about the branches. More extensive discussions of the definitions, histories, and tenets of various branches (e.g., existential, hermeneutic, transcendental, historical, ethical, and linguistic phenomenology) may be found on van Manen’s open access website (PhenomenologyOnline, 2011) under the tab Orientations. For a view that includes related Eastern philosophy, see Kafle (2010). Because researchers of phenomenological studies typically include discussions of the philosophical and historical grounding of their studies (e.g., Amparo, 2013; Cope, 2005; Gibson & Hanes, 2003; Groenwald, 2004; Willig, 2007), I encourage readers who are interested in conducting phenomenological research to get a sense of how researchers position their work among the branches of phenomenology and use that observation to better understand the research or the guide. Readers can then also reflect on their own philosophical understandings, so that their ensuing research related decisions are aligned with those understandings as well as with what they have learned about the varied practices and philosophical tenets of phenomenological research.

ORIENTING CONCEPTS

The Lifeworld

There are four elements to the lifeworld. One is how we react to the spaces we find ourselves in. Lived space may be the huge open spaces of a sports arena or a cathedral, familiar or foreign spaces, and places we feel safe or where we seek particular experiences. For example, I experienced university graduations differently when one was in a chapel and the other was in a field house. The latter felt more open to casual behavior like walking around and cheering for particular graduates, as if attending an athletic event; in the former, the experience was quieter and more restrained - more akin to attending a solemn religious service. Lived space may concern our workplace cubicles, offices, or modular meeting places. The location where the researcher interacts with study participants becomes part of the research experience for both.

A second element is how we experience time, which may be different from clock time. We may feel that time slows down during a boring meeting and speeds up during our time away from our workplace. Our lived time may include how we experience our chronological age including how we understand our past, our present, and our future. Phenomenological researchers should be sensitive
The Human Student: The Essentiality of the Teacher-Student Connection in Higher Education
www.igi-global.com/article/the-human-student/202371?camid=4v1a