Introduction to Phenomenology as philosophy and research method

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Overview

• Philosophical foundation of phenomenology
• Phenomenology schools
• Conditions of possibility of phenomenological analysis
• Phenomenological questions
• Pre-reflective Experiential Material: lived experience
• Phenomenological analysis
• Assumptions
Historical background

• Phenomenology as research method is a qualitative methodology that arose out of and remains close to phenomenological philosophy
• Philosophical movement started with Husserl, and was developed by Heidegger and other philosophers (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Lévinas)
• In the mid-1950s, however, the phenomenological “method” was also taken up by a group of non-philosophers in the Netherlands: the Utrecht School
• The Duquesne School, A.Giorgi (Descriptive Psychiological Phenomenology)
• Phenomenology of Practice (Pedagogy) M. van Manen
What is phenomenology?

- Phainomenon + logos = study of human experience, the way things appear to our consciousness
- To describe or to interpret human experience as lived by the experiencer
- Focus on understanding aspects of our human experience of the world
- Focus on the perceptions of the “things in their appearing”
- Return “back to the things themselves” to recognize that the world is a *lived experience* rather than an *object to be studied*
Main concepts

• Intentionality – our consciousness is always of something. There is always an object of our awareness.

• Noema (experienced) – noesis (Experience)

  Experiencing- Husserl wants to transform this relationship subject-object into a correlation of what is experienced (noema) and the way it is experienced (noesis).

• Epoché- we try to abstain from our presuppositions (bracketing).
Phenomenological approaches

Descriptive phenomenology
- Traditional approach (Husserl)
- 1970s at Duquesne University (A. Giorgi)
- Essence of the phenomenon through epoché and reduction
- Sheffield school (P. Ashworth) incorporated ideas of the existential philosophy into the analysis process

Hermeneutic phenomenology
- Greater concern with hermeneutics and interpretation
- Focus on the meaning of the expressions of lived experience
- Hermeneutic phenomenology (M. van Manen)
Phenomenological research

- Our most fundamental and basic experience of the world is already full of meaning.
- The purpose of phenomenological research is to bring to light and reflect upon the lived meaning of this basic experience.
- Researchers attempt to describe phenomena as they appear in everyday life before they have been theorized, interpreted, explained, and otherwise abstracted.
- Any attempt to do this is always tentative, contingent, and never complete.
Phenomenological studies

Open to nearly any human experience, such as:

• The experience of learning online with MOOCs (Adams, et al. 2014)
• The experience of social anxiety (Fischer, 1974)
• The experience of being victim of a crime (Wertz, 1985)
• Living with multiple sclerosis (Finlay, 2003)
• Meanings of plagiarism (Ashworth et al. 2003)
• Approaches to studying (Greasley & Ashworth, 2014)
• Pedagogy of Technologies: Facebook and Online intimacy (van Manen, 2015)
Phenomenology as method

- Method of questioning not a method of answering
- Begins with wonder
- Phenomenological question explores what is given in moments of pre-reflective experience, experiences as we live through them
- Aims to grasp the singular aspects (essence/otherness) of a phenomenon or event
- Phenomenology is a meaning-giving method of enquiry, but not a method in the sense of tools, rules and procedures
- Phenomenological questioning: possibilities for experiencing “opening, understandings, insights” of the meaning of a particular phenomenon
Conditions for the possibility of doing phenomenological analysis

• A proper phenomenological question

• Pre-reflective experiential material = lived experience
Phenomenological questions

- Not: Questions that are abstract, theoretical, conceptual or that ask for explanations, perceptions, views, or interpretations

- Phenomenological questions - an element of wonder, discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary, the strange in the taken for granted

- Phenomenological questions ask what a possible human experience is like
Phenomenological questions

- What is your opinion or view on failing the first TMA?
- Why do you think that students fail their first TMA?
- Do male students fail more than female students their first TMA?
- Do students who work full time fail more their first TMA?
- Do you think that failing a first TMA is something to be ashamed of?

- What is the experience of failing your first TMA like?
Phenomenological questions

When doing interviews:

• Ask when and how this experience occurred:
• What was it like the first time? The most recent time? The most memorable moment?

• Try to recall and describe me the first time you….
• Think back to this time and try to remember a particular incident or moment
• How did this experience of … make you feel? How did your body feel?
• What did you do? What did you say? What did you think? What happened?
Lived experience descriptions (LED)

- Phenomenological analysis can only be conducted on pre-reflective material
- Not on views, opinions, beliefs, perceptions, interpretation and explanations of experiences
- Best material: direct descriptions of the experience, rather than accounts about experience
It was a wonderful Saturday morning. I just had breakfast and was enjoying the sun in the kitchen and the idea of not having anything to do that day. I was just checking my mails when I saw one from the OU: the results of the TMA01 were available on my website. Oh! Great! I clicked on the link and at first I did not understand… a figure: “30”, a word: “fail”. My stomach started aching and I felt a cold stream on my back: “It cannot be”, “it must be a mistake”, I read it again and again, I opened the PT3 form, the words didn’t mean anything to me: bla, bla, “assessment criterion 1”, bla, bla, I don’t understand. I don’t like the explanation of my tutor, how could she? The time has stopped. My hands are trembling a bit while I prepare a cup of tea, I feel small, vulnerable, the space around me is dark and claustrophobic.
Activity

Developing a “phenomenological eye”

1. Take a research question and turn it into a phenomenological question
2. Use the question to briefly interview your partner, try to elicit lived experience descriptions
3. Develop a phenomenological attitude (epoché)
Phenomenological analysis

• What do we do with the accounts once we have them? Unlike some other qualitative methodologies, hermeneutic phenomenology has not set method (van Manen, 1990/1997, 2014).

• While there are a range of activities that may be used: line-by-line reading thematic analysis existential analysis

• none of these are guaranteed to result in a phenomenological reflection

• The “how” must be found anew with each study (van Manen 2014), making phenomenological researchers “perpetual beginners” (Merleau-Ponty, 2006).
Phenomenological analysis

- Transcripts: containing rich and subtle experiential detail
- From an analysis of experiential examples, or LED we can learn how the phenomenon may actually be experienced
- Challenge is to work out the phenomenological descriptions in a narrative text.
- Developing a “phenomenological pen”
- Use of existential methods
Phenomenological analysis

- Guided Existential Inquiry

Use of the existentials of lived relation:
- Lived self-other (Relationality)
- Lived body (corporeality)
- Lived space (spatiality)
- Lived time (temporality)
- Lived things and technology (Materiality)

We all experiment the world through these existentials
Assumptions

Two concepts of truth:

**Veritas** – (Latin) based on the idea of justice, true – false
In the Western world *veritas* = truth is pragmatic, technical, associated to instrumental procedures, controlled methods

**Aletheia** – (Greek) means disclosure, unconcealment, openness. The truth in *aletheia* derived from the study of meaning
Involves attunement to the things that present themselves to us.
Truth is not all-or-nothing, but a complex interplay between showing and hiding.
Phenomenological truth operates as *aletheia*
Conclusions

• No conclusions

• Questions, further reading:
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