



EDUC 500: Research Methodology in Education

Activities

Phenomenological Interview and Writing

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This activity provides an introduction to phenomenological interviews and methods.

Phenomenology is “the study of the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences.

Phenomenology asks: “What is this or that kind of experience like?” It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9).

"Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience. For phenomenology the ultimate source of all meaning and value is the lived experience of human beings. All philosophical systems, scientific theories, or aesthetic judgments have the status of abstractions from the ebb and flow of the lived world. The task of the philosopher, according to phenomenology, is to describe the structures of experience, in particular consciousness, the imagination, relations with other persons, and the situatedness of the human subject in society and history. Phenomenological theories of literature regard works of art as mediators between the consciousnesses of the author and the reader or as attempts to disclose aspects of the being of humans and their worlds" (Armstrong, <http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/guide/entries/phenomenology.html>).

Features:

- “Study of lived experience (as we experience it and not as we conceptualize it)
- Study of essences (awakening of deeper meaning behind experience)
- Attentive practice of thoughtfulness (a minding, a heeding, a caring attunement)
- Search for what it means to be human (to become more fully what we are)
- Poetizing activity (a thinking on original experience, calling forth a speaking in a more primal sense)

Begin by reading Max van Manen’s (1989) brief summary of phenomenology and phenomenological methodology. Drawing from an extensive elaboration in *Researching Lived Experience*, van Manen summarizes the phenomenological method:

1. Turning to the nature of lived experience
 - a. Formulating the phenomenological question
 - b. Explicating assumptions and understandings
 - c. Orienting to the question
2. Investigating experience as we live it
 - a. Turning to personal experience as a starting point
 - b. Tracing etymological sources
 - c. Searching idiomatic phrases
 - d. Obtaining experiential descriptions from others
 - i. Protocol writing (Lived experience descriptions)
 - ii. Interviewing (personal life story)
 - iii. Observing (experiential anecdote)

- iv. Experiential descriptions in literature
- v. Biography as a resource for experiential material
- vi. Diaries and Journals as resources
- vii. Art and fiction as a resource
- 3. Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection
 - a. Lifeworld existentials as guides to reflection
 - b. Thematic analysis
 - i. Uncovering thematic aspects
 - ii. Isolating thematic statements
 - iii. Composing linguistic transformations
 - iv. Gleaning thematic descriptions from art and literature
 - v. Interpretation through conversation
 - vi. Determining incidental and essential themes
- 4. Hermeneutic phenomenological writing
 - a. Attending to the speaking of language
 - b. Silence— the limits of power and language
 - c. Anecdotes
 - d. Themes
 - e. To write is to show or reveal something

Phenomenology

- a. Phenomenology is primarily descriptive. Phenomenological questions tend to begin with: "how does it feel...[to be a graduate student, etc.]? or "what does it mean to be... [a naturalist, etc.]? Phenomenology deals with the nature or essence of experience.
- b. What is your phenomenological question? This should be clearly stated.
- c. Hence, phenomenology is ontological. The goal is to *describe* the nature or essence of things. There is power in phenomenological description.

Hermeneutics

- a. The goal is to interpret. Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to interpret experience. Interpretation is not to be confused with explanation and causal forces.
- b. For a good example of hermeneutics, see Perez-Gomez and Bronfman (1999), and pay attention to pp. 3-4 where they first argue that the issue or essence of architecture is neither aesthetic nor technological— rather, it is ethical. This is a classic Heideggerian move (e.g., the essence of technology is nothing technological...). Then they take a hermeneutic turn and proceed to interpret architecture by going back, etymologically, to the text— 'return to the text' is the hermeneutic mantra— the phenomenologist's mantra is turn to lived experience... or return to the immediate— or basically stay in/with the moment.
- c. Hermeneutics = interpretation = meaning making; hermeneutic techniques = etymology, exegesis, reflective analysis of (the) text (but not content analysis or discourse analysis).
- d. For those writing on & about nature, one place to start is the question of nature: what is (the nature of) nature? What is ecology? What is an environment? What is outdoors? And so on. For example, I was once writing on appropriate technology and ecology, and ended up turning to hermeneutics: "Economics, like ecology, is rooted in the Greek *oikonomos*, or knowledge of the household— not only individual houses but the household of Gaia. Perhaps appropriate technology will be a catalyst for us to get the house of design and technology education in order lest we continue to contribute unnecessarily and unwittingly to the disorder of our big house— the Earth..." Or you can ask what does birding entail? Or stewardship? The point is to interpret the text of what has been written on these types of questions through the hermeneutic circle— a sort of back and forth from text to new author of the wor(l)d (i.e., you). Hermeneutics has been criticized because it attends to the text but not necessarily to interests and

the author (i.e., author of the text). So, the new author (i.e., you) is in the hermeneutic circle but the old author is not. It's you and the text...and the text and you...in a circle.

- e. To begin the essay, you can start with a brief story or narrative, or a recent headline, etc. Enough to raise a question or problem— turn to the text for interpretation, and then back to the present.

Phenomenological Interview & Writing Activity (Academic Freedom & TPI)

For this activity, we will compress van Manen's method:

1. Formulating the phenomenological question
 2. Interviewing (personal life story)
 3. Thematic analysis
 - a. Uncovering thematic aspects
 - b. Isolating thematic statements
 - c. Determining incidental and essential themes
 4. Hermeneutic phenomenological writing
 - a. Turning to personal experience as a starting point
 - b. Tracing etymological sources
 - c. Anecdotes
 - d. Themes
 - e. To write is to show or reveal something
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1. Groups of 2
 2. Formulate the phenomenological question:
 - a. What does it mean to be...? What does it mean to be teacher?
 - b. How does it feel to be...? How does it feel to have academic freedom?
 - c. What is the experience of...? What are your experiences of freedom? Of academic freedom?
 - i. e.g., being a teacher
 - ii. e.g., being a graduate student
 - iii. e.g., being an environmentalist
 3. Create interview protocols
 - a. Ethics
 - b. 3-4 phenomenological interview questions
 - c. Recording protocols
 - d. Data protection and storage
 4. Conduct interviews (20-30 min each, exchanging roles)
 5. Attend to data via thematic and anecdotal analysis
 6. Limit the writing to 2-3 pages, double-spaced, plus references (APA).

References

- van Manen, M. (1989). *Notes for talk on human science in education*. University of Maryland, College Park, April 28, 1989.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.