

# An introduction to phenomenological research

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. In the human sphere this normally translates into gathering 'deep' information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s). Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, 'bracketing' taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasise the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.

Phenomenological research has overlaps with other essentially qualitative approaches including ethnography, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. Pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl 1970). More recent humanist and feminist researchers refute the possibility of starting without preconceptions or bias, and emphasise the importance of making clear how interpretations and meanings have been placed on findings, as well as making the researcher visible in the 'frame' of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer (e.g. see Plummer 1983, Stanley & Wise 1993).

Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allows it to inform, support or challenge policy and action.

## **Methods**

Phenomenological and associated approaches can be applied to single cases or to serendipitous or deliberately selected samples. While single-case studies are able to identify issues which illustrate discrepancies and system failures - and to illuminate or draw attention to 'different' situations - positive inferences are less easy to make without a small sample of participants. In multiple-participant research, the strength of inference which can be made increases rapidly once factors start to recur with more than one participant. In this respect it is important to distinguish between statistical and qualitative validity: phenomenological research can be robust in indicating the presence of factors and their effects in individual cases, but must be tentative in suggesting their extent in relation to the population from which the participants or cases were drawn.

A variety of methods can be used in phenomenologically-based research, including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings and analysis of personal texts. If there is a general principle involved it is that of minimum structure and maximum depth, in practice constrained by time and opportunities to strike a balance between keeping a focus on the research issues and avoiding undue influence by the researcher. The establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy is critical to gaining depth of information, particularly where investigating issues where the participant has a strong personal stake. Interview methods and issues are discussed in Gorden (1969), Measor (1985), Oakley (1981), Plummer (1983) and Spradley (1979) among others.

## **Analysis**

The 'problem' for many researchers with phenomenological research is that it generates a large quantity of interview notes, tape recordings, jottings or other records all of which have to be analysed. Analysis is also necessarily messy, as data doesn't tend to fall into neat categories and there can be many ways of linking between different parts of discussions or observations. Two methods I use are described below.

Where the data is fairly disorganised - interview transcripts, unstructured notes or personal texts - the first stage is to read through and get a feel for what is being said, identifying key themes and issues in each text. These points - from all the texts for a small-scale project, or a sample of different ones where there are more than 15-20 - can then be aggregated and organised with the aid of a mind-map or set of 'post-it' notes. The resulting list is used as a set of points to interrogate the texts and structure and summarise them ("what is this participant saying about..."). Points which aren't brought out through this process need to be added. A more detailed description of this process is provided by Hycner (1985).

In a small-scale project looking across themes between participants is likely to be easy to do with physical documents, but an alternative useful where there are larger numbers of participants is to enter the data into a database according to the analysis headings, and use a mailmerge facility to extract and compare entries. This also enables data entered under different headings to be juxtaposed and compared, particularly useful to identify relationships between different themes and factors.

## **Reporting**

Phenomenological studies make detailed comments about individual situations which do not lend themselves to direct generalisation in the same way which is sometimes claimed for survey research. The development of general theories (i.e. which apply to situations beyond the participants or cases which have been studied) from phenomenological findings needs to be done transparently if it is to have validity; in particular, the reader should be able to work through from the findings to the theories and see how the researcher has arrived at his or her interpretations. This may or may not involve the researcher appearing 'in person' in the research (while this is beginning to happen in theses, academic papers and sometimes in organisational research, it is still rare in public-domain reports).

Different factors are important at different points of the report. My preference is to use three sections or chapters to report and discuss the findings:

A **summary** of the findings. This will arrange findings according to themes and topics and draw out key issues being discussed by participants. The aim here should be to be faithful to the participants, and to be aware (insofar as is possible) of biases being brought to the inevitable editing which is needed; there is an ethical issue about misrepresenting, distorting or deleting findings which have been provided in good faith by participants ('treachery,' according to Plummer). This part of the report does involve some interpretation and conjecture in deciding what to select and how to express and order it, but its main role is to describe rather than explain. The findings can be reported robustly, and my usual preference is to include direct quotes - both 'soundbites' and more extensive quotes - from participants to illustrate points. Some types of study benefit from vignettes of individual cases or participants, provided this does not compromise confidentiality (see Connell 1985 for an interesting if debatably valid solution to this).

A **discussion** section. This enables the researcher to 'intrude' more into the study by making interpretations and linkages, relating the findings to previous research or commentary, to personal experience or even to common-sense opinions, and developing tentative theories. Informed speculation and theorising can be included here, provided it is clear what findings are being discussed and what assertions and assumptions are being made. Facts have been left behind in the previous section: it is important not to pass off interpretations and theories developed here as more concrete than they are.

A final section on **issues and implications** (or recommendations, in a commissioned report). I have a dislike of 'conclusions' particularly in this kind of research, because it suggests a finality and surety which is not defensible. However, this section provides an opportunity to be creative with the ideas developed through the discussion, provided it is made clear what is being done. A suppositional structure to arguments can be useful to indicate that the study is not coming to a firm conclusion, but pointing to implications or ways forward which make sense if the interpretation referred to is an accurate or useful one.

### **Some issues**

The main issue I have come across in taking a phenomenological (or any qualitative) approach in a commercial or organisational setting is people not understanding what it is, and expecting similar parameters to apply as for quantitative research. A fairly common comment concerns sample size - it can be hard to get over to people that a single-figure sample is valid - and there can be confusion between methods such as theoretical sampling (see Glaser & Strauss 1967), used to ensure that participants are drawn from a spread of contexts, and statistical sampling which is concerned with quantitative reliability and often with differences between contexts. If the sample size is increased a common misunderstanding is that the results should be statistically reliable.

A second issue is that commissioning clients are rarely willing to pay realistic rates for in-depth studies using a small number of participants: they usually want a larger sample size based on the reasons above. Although a skilful interviewer can get into reasonable depth quite quickly, this does mean that depth of information gathered is often less than it could be. Equally, depending on the

study it can be difficult to gain access to participants for more than a single session of an hour or less, particularly if they are not strongly engaged with the topic of the study. The result tends to be a compromise where a phenomenological approach is used, but the methods used are more structured and contrived than is ideal.

Finally, phenomenological approaches are good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard. This is not always comfortable for clients or funders, particularly when the research exposes taken-for-granted assumptions or challenges a comfortable status quo. On the other hand, many organisations value the insights which a phenomenological approach can bring in terms of cutting through taken-for-granted assumptions, prompting action or challenging complacency.

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