

# Phenomenology: A Philosophy and Method of Inquiry

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## Abstract

*Phenomenology as a philosophy and a method of inquiry is not limited to an approach to knowing, it is rather an intellectual engagement in interpretations and meaning making that is used to understand the lived world of human beings at a conscious level. Historically, Husserl' (1913/1962) perspective of phenomenology is a science of understanding human beings at a deeper level by gazing at the phenomenon. However, Heideggerian view of interpretive-hermeneutic phenomenology gives wider meaning to the lived experiences under study. Using this approach, a researcher uses bracketing as a taken for granted assumption in describing the natural way of appearance of phenomena to gain insights into lived experiences and interpret for meaning making. The data collection and analysis takes place side by side to illumine the specific experience to identify the phenomena that is perceived by the actors in a particular situation. The outcomes of a phenomenological study broadens the mind, improves the ways of thinking to see a phenomenon, and it enables to see ahead and define researchers' posture through intentional study of lived experiences. However, the subjectivity and personal knowledge in perceiving and interpreting it from the research participant's point of view has been central in phenomenological studies. To achieve such an objective, phenomenology could be used extensively in social sciences.*

**Keywords:** descriptive nature, interpretative nature, method of inquiry, phenomenology, philosophy

## Introduction

*Phenomenology as a philosophy provides a theoretical guideline to researchers to understand phenomena at the level of subjective reality. Probably, this philosophical framework or the theory of subjective reality plays a key role in understanding the actor or the subject regarding a particular event or a phenomena relating to*

*his/her life. The researcher can adopt interviews, observations and discussions as data collection strategies within a phenomenological method of inquiry; therefore, phenomenology has both philosophical and methodological stances. To this end, one needs to understand it from a historical and philosophical stand point.*

*The roots of phenomenology are found in the epoch of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle (Fochtman, 2008) as a philosophy of human being. Subsequently, during the first decade of twentieth century, Edmond Husserl, a German philosopher became successful in his attempt to establish phenomenology as an approach to study lived experiences of human beings at the conscious level of understanding (Fochtman, 2008; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Moreover, Heidegger, one of the students of Husserl, came with his creation of interpretive- hermeneutic phenomenology. In addition to its descriptive nature to give a wider meaning to the lived experiences under study as the core of phenomenological research is to know about the phenomena under study through consciousness (Creswell, 2007).*

*It implies that phenomenology is an approach to educate our own vision, to define our position, to broaden how we see the world around, and to study the lived experience at deeper level. It, therefore, holds both the characteristics of philosophy as well as a method of inquiry. The purpose of this paper is to seek phenomenological answers to some of the key questions about the phenomenology as a philosophy, a human science and a method of inquiry that it claims. The questions it may answer are: What is phenomenology? How philosophical underpinnings support the method of inquiry to understand the lived world at conscious level? How do we conduct phenomenological research? What are the methodological tools that help to understand this human science? Why is phenomenological approach important?*

### **Nature of phenomenology**

What is phenomenology? It is very difficult to stand along with one fixed, final and acceptable for all answer to this question. Spiegelberg (1969) argues that there is no one style of phenomenology. Probably, the reason behind this argument is that every phenomenologist appears to come up with diverse styles of phenomenology. Therefore, it is difficult to claim one single definition of phenomenology. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) observed that “a consensual, univocal interpretation of phenomenology is hard to find” (pp. 23–24).

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For instance, the Husserlian perspective of phenomenology is central to the concept of description of the invariant aspects of phenomena as they appear to consciousness. Similarly, following Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), one can say that “the scientific method is descriptive because its point of departure consists of concrete descriptions of experienced events from the perspective of everyday life by participants.” As a result of such a description, the researcher engages with describing the “structure of the phenomenon” (p. 251).

Thus the classical’ phenomenological research method with Husserlian framework of descriptive research focuses on ‘seeking realities not pursuing truth’ in the form of manifestation of phenomena as it is in the form of life world made of interconnected, lived experiences subjectively (Crotty, 1998). This method of inquiry is based on the philosophical framework embedded in Husserl’s (1913/1962) transcendental method with core emphasis on phenomenological description of the ‘invariant aspects of phenomena as they appear at consciousness’ (Mortari & Tarozzi, n.d.).

### **Theoretical basis on philosophical stand point**

The theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value and one which sees behavior as determined by the phenomena of experience, has been central in phenomenological studies. Even though phenomenologists seem to have different views on particular issues, there is fairly a general agreement on their core philosophical viewpoints as a belief that the consciousness is central and understanding the subjective consciousness is important. This view posits that consciousness has some specific structures which are gate ways to gain direct knowledge through reflections. Perhaps, these philosophical stand points guide the researchers in understanding the phenomena at conscious level of its appearance that how things appear directly to us rather than through the media of cultural and symbolic structures (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Therefore, description of events as they appear as a method of knowing in phenomenology is fundamental because it is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing.

Arriving at this point of argument from both the philosophical and methodological stance, phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon perceived by human beings at a deeper level of understanding in a specific situation with

a detailed description and interpretation of lived experiences through bracketing (Gearing, 2004); as taken-for-granted assumptions by the researchers. Perhaps, the use of bracketing strategy according to Husserl, is essential for the research to gain insights into lived experiences. Speziale and Carpenter (2007) add that bracketing is an effective way to ensure validity of data collection and analysis in phenomenological research.

However, the concept of bracketing (Gearing, 2004) seems similar to what Husserl (1939/1954) discusses about two negative procedures: (a) the *epoché of the natural sciences* –return (from theories) to the things themselves (*avoiding explanations*) and; (b) the *epoché of the natural attitude* – the phenomenological reduction – becoming unaware of the presumptions and presupposition that researchers keep in their mind and concentrating on original phenomena the way it manifest rather involving in it. Probably, these procedures allow researchers to focus on lived experience as it is itself given rather explained or analyzed. Similarly, the two main positive procedures Husserl (1913/1962) developed are called *intentional analysis* - how experiential processes proceed and what is experienced, and *eidetic analysis* - *Intuition of essences*. This helps researchers to understand the lived experiences not only how experience is experienced, but also how the role of intuition of essences adds meaning to that experience.

In so doing, the researchers must be well aware of being fundamentally descriptive, while using the procedures of intentional analysis, eidetic analysis on one hand and using the epoché of the natural sciences and the epoché of the natural attitude on the other in order to gain a wider meaning attached to the phenomena under study. Moreover, Spiegelberg (1969) claims that the aspect of “emancipation and preconception as a method of phenomenology is a great contribution to philosophy... to use in understanding the phenomena under study with its fullest breadth and depth” (p. 680). However, to gain meaningful underrating of the phenomena under study, interpretive element adds more meaning to the descriptive nature of the phenomenology.

Phenomenology is part of constructivist/interpretivist paradigm that is both philology and methodology. From both philosophical and methodological stand point, phenomenology (Spiegelberg, 1969) is greatly influenced by the Vancouver school of thought, which is basically rooted in descriptive phenomenology of

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Husserl, interpretive / hermeneutic phenomenology, constructivism (Schwandt, 1994) and Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology. The Vancouver School of doing phenomenology from methodological dimension involves seven step cyclic process: silence, reflection, identification, selection, interpretation, construction and verification to seek meaning from different parts of a phenomena to its whole (Halldorsdottir, 2000).

On the other hand, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) identifies four characteristics to make a clear distinction of the methodological nature: description – openly reading, reduction – sorting of meaningful units, search for essences –reflecting on each meaningful units, and intentionality – based on research question essential structures of phenomena. Starting from these, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) establish a phenomenological research method by suggesting a four-step procedure for meaning making.

### **Methodological Approaches**

The data collection and meaning making in phenomenological research takes place simultaneously. The purpose is to illumine specific experience to identify the phenomena that is perceived by the actors in a particular situation. The emphasis is on subjectivity and personal knowledge in perceiving and interpreting the phenomena from the research participant point of view (Lester, 1999). However, the notion behind all these philosophical and methodological views of phenomenology and procedures are directly linking to the core concept of understanding the phenomena related to human being with a deeper level of consciousness.

Phenomenological approaches are more effective in describing rather than explaining subjective realities, the insights, beliefs, motivation and actions and folk wisdom (Husserl, 1977) by clearly showing the research participants rather than hiding (Plummer 1983, Stanley & Wise 1993). The element of interpretation makes the research more interesting and meaningful for understudying social structures, policies and practices from the vantage point of personal perspectives of the actors visible clearly in the research study.

Phenomenological approach to research may be based on single cases as well as multiple cases, with a clear principle emphasis of minimum structure and maximum depth to keep a balance of research focus within limitations of time

and other resources (Lester, 1999). This type of research, like other qualitative researches, uses many methods including interviews, observations, action research, discussions, focus group meetings and analysis of the text. The focus is on more in-depth understanding of phenomena embedded within research participant's views and perspectives. The analysis is messy, as data do not tend to fall into neat categories and there can be many ways of linking between different parts of discussions or observations.

In phenomenological studies, reporting of the findings need to be focused on detail description of the phenomena, before reaching at interpretations of the description or the interpretation of the research participants. In so doing, a summary of the findings, discussion on findings and recommendation or future implications seem fundamental in phenomenological research to make things vivid to readers about the research report. For example, providing a summary of the findings of major themes and issues need to be described fairly without any biasness. These findings can be vigorously reported through the use of direct quotations of the research participants and interpreting through descriptions rather explanation.

The purpose of doing phenomenology is basically looking very closely at the phenomena under study to explore the complex world of lived experiences from the actors (those who live it) point of view. In doing so, it not only helps us to understand a phenomena or an event at a deeper level of conscious, but at the same time it helps us to explore our own nature, bringing a transformation at personal level. In this way a researcher can reflect critically and become more thoughtful and attentive in understanding social practices as well.

### **Conclusion**

Phenomenology is a “way of thinking about knowledge – a philosophical and theoretical viewpoint – how do we know what we know” (Bozzi, 1990; Mortari & Tarozzi, n.d., p.5). It is a methodological space within the social science research to study human phenomena at a deeper level of conscious to understand lived experiences. Within this space the research data collection tools like interviews, discussions, participant observations and action research are commonly used. However, it is the researcher whose expertise matters to a great extent in gaining a deeper level of insight about the personal knowledge of the research participant. Phenomenological studies thus focus more on Husserlian framework of descriptive

research to understand the lived experience of persons related to phenomena under study. For the phenomenological question ‘how to capture the phenomenon in its original existence’, Husserl suggests applying a heuristic principle of being faithful to the phenomena as it appears to be, at the experiential level, describing whatever it manifests itself to consciousness.

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