

The language of research (part 8): phenomenological research

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Emic
- ▶ Essence
- ▶ First-person view
- ▶ Interviews
- ▶ Lived experience
- ▶ Phenomenon

Previous articles in this series have explored research paradigms, quantitative and qualitative methodologies and some of the terminology associated with research. In this article, we will explore the second of the qualitative methodologies that this series will decode, namely phenomenology.

It must be remembered that a methodology is the general research approach (the blueprint for the way in which the research is done) and reflects the academic and philosophical underpinnings of the research.

WHAT IS PHENOMENOLOGY?

Phenomenology is an interesting approach to studying people and people's understanding, beliefs and interpretations of the world. Phenomenology has been used to study people, ethics, law, aesthetics and architecture among other subjects (Moran, 2000). While there is a diversity of philosophical understanding influencing the various approaches to phenomenological study, what they all have in common is: 'The study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view' (Smith, 2004).

It is the requirement to be able to access and understand the 'first person' experience that shapes phenomenology as a research approach and which, in turn, creates its strong emic (explanation of a belief, attitude or experience from the first-person point of view) credentials.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is credited as being the founding father of phenomenology. The phenomenological approach he pioneered was that of descriptive phenomenology, which is a simple form of phenomenology that seeks only to describe the world from the point of view of the person experiencing a given phenomenon.

The drive behind of descriptive phenomenology is, therefore, to access the essence (in the sense of this being the distilled down most important aspects of the thing being studied) of an object, an action or an experience. In this sense, essence is like the essences used in cake making where a small drop or two of, for example, vanilla essence is enough to give flavouring to the whole cake. Simultaneous to this, in accessing someone else's understanding of a phenomenon, researchers have to put to one side their own

prior understanding of the topic being studied (this is sometime called 'epoching' or 'bracketing' [Zahavi, 2003]).

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, modified the approach to undertaking phenomenological study in order to make it more of a study of 'being'. His existential phenomenology is a refinement of Husserl's in that it pays attention to the analysis/interpretation (hermeneutics), of the experience, recognising human experience as being interpretative (Heidegger, 1988). That is, Heidegger recognised that experience is really a function of what is happening and the interpretation the individual puts on that experience.

A more recent development on this theme is the emergence of a third form of phenomenology; phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA attempts to work with, rather than trying to work around, the solipsistic (knowledge only of one's existence) elements of phenomenological enquiry. That is to say, unlike the other two forms, it does not ask the researcher to try to put to one side their existing understandings of a phenomenon.

In IPA, the emphasis remains on accessing the emic perspective, but unlike the other phenomenological approaches, it recognises that the emic perspective is itself an interpretation of the lived world, and that the researcher will themselves apply an interpretation to the subject's interpretation (Smith and Osborn, 2004). That is, the IPA researcher is attempting to understand subjects' attempts to make sense of their world.

All of this suggests that there are a large number of issues with attempting to conduct phenomenology in that it is an interpretation of an interpretation that is restricted by the use of language, which, one might argue, is also open to interpretation. That said, no research approach is perfect and all we can claim to gain by the use of any research process is an attempt to understand the world given the constraints we have to work within.

DOING PHENOMENOLOGY

Any phenomenological study is usually easily identified because it includes in its aims the desire to understand the essence of an experience or something broadly similar. Most phenomenological studies have to address the exact philosophical stance

they are working from at the start of the paper. This allows the reader to make judgements both about the validity of the processes employed in the study and ultimately the findings.

A purposive sample is used in phenomenology; a purposive sample being one which selects people who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. So if one were to study the lived experience of having a venous ulcer, it is pointless asking anyone who has not had a leg ulcer. Therefore, one samples for the purpose of the study; that is people who have currently, or have had, experience of living with a leg ulcer.

In seeking to gain an in depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest, the study has to have a degree of credibility this requires the study interviews enough people to get a good insight into the topic, but not so many as to lose sight of the essence of the topic.

Different text books suggest different sized samples for phenomenological research, but in reality, a sample of between 6 and 20 individuals is sufficient (Ellis, 2016). Practical issues, such as funding, time and access to participants, do, however, often limit the sample size in many qualitative research studies.

Again in common with many qualitative studies, the sample used in this type of research is often a convenience sample; that is people who are easily accessed. Because qualitative research does not seek to be generalizable, it is not necessary for the sample to be representative of all type of people who have experienced the phenomenon of interest.

There are only two main approaches to collecting the data for any qualitative study; they are interviews and observation. There are many forms of interview which may be used in qualitative research (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014), but the type most commonly used in phenomenological studies are in-depth, unstructured (or sometimes semi-structured) interviews.

In depth, unstructured interviews allow the researcher to explore an issue in depth with an individual respondent by tailoring their questioning according to how the interview is progressing (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). Unstructured interviews allow the researcher to probe the responses given and gain a richer, fuller (often called thicker) understanding of how the respondent sees the world.

This looser exploratory interview style matches

the aims of phenomenological research, exploring the meaning or essence of an experience from the point of view of the person who has had the experience. Open questions are used as these invite the respondent to take the interview in a direction that they find important as opposed to the direction of travel within a structured interview, which follows a path predetermined by the interviewer.

ANALYSING PHENOMENOLOGY

In common with all qualitative research, the result of phenomenological research are derived by reading and reading the verbatim transcripts of the interviews to ascertain the important messages that emerge.

Analysis of the interviews involves the researcher in moving from broad observations to a general theory by grouping emerging themes together in a meaningful way. The process of analysing qualitative research is more of a process of judgement than science and all good studies will explain the choices made in the process of analysis. There are four key steps required to analyse qualitative data:

- ▶▶ Reducing the raw data to something more manageable
- ▶▶ Filtering the important ideas out from the less significant
- ▶▶ Identifying important themes
- ▶▶ Vonstructing a theory/hypothesis or narrative account of the analysis (Ellis, 2016).

Good studies will demonstrate how they derived their themes and how they check these by using more than one person to independently analyse the data and/or check the derived meaning with the study participants. In all forms of phenomenology, the emphasis is on identify the important messages — the essence or kernel of the topic — so that the important aspects of the phenomenon are described.

CONCLUSIONS

Phenomenology is a useful study approach in nursing and health and social care as it allows the researcher to gain a window into the world as seen through the eyes of the people being cared for. Good quality phenomenological research will explain the philosophical stance it has chosen, the sampling methods and interview techniques employed, as well as how the research was analysed

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