



Journal Homepage: -[www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com)

## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/13435  
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/13435>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF PHENOMENOLOGY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

Ian Mc Coog, Ed.D.

#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 25 July 2021

Final Accepted: 29 August 2021

Published: September 2021

#### Abstract

In the philosophical tradition, phenomenology is a means by which random, raw phenomena are categorized into what can be called human experience. Phenomenology is a school of thought within ontology which focuses on the nature of existence. Edmund Husserl's view of phenomenology proposed that to understand the world, one should examine the lens through which he/she experiences the world as opposed to attempting to examine the world itself. The application of this idea first expanded to the discipline of psychology by researchers such as Amedeo Giorgi and Clark Moustakas and more recently has been more widely applied to the social sciences as a whole. Possessing an understanding of the philosophy and psychology traditions behind phenomenology greatly increases a researcher's ability to implement it as a qualitative research method.

Copy Right, IJAR, 2021,. All rights reserved.

#### Introduction:-

When psychologist Amedeo Giorgi started research on what became the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology, he wanted to know if anyone was applying Husserl's phenomenological principles to a practical research method. After a sabbatical spent traveling through Europe and following every lead provided, he realized the answer was no. He also realized that implementing a literal interpretation of Husserl's view meant that he was "doing philosophy" when he set out to "do psychology" (Giorgi, 2019). Today's phenomenology researchers in fields such as nursing/health sciences, social work, and education are tasked with a similar quandary, namely how to apply what has become a versatile qualitative research method to their own field.

Husserl drew a distinction between what he called the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude is the means by which most people go through their day. We form our own beliefs and experiences based upon the stimuli that we encounter from minute to minute. To move to the phenomenological attitude, Husserl believed we must check our beliefs and recognize bias and assumptions. Using the phenomenological attitude is not to say that we don't believe the random and raw phenomena which we experience in the natural attitude; we simply check, acknowledge, and, in phenomenological research, mark those beliefs (Husserl, 2012).

The researcher assumes the phenomenological attitude through the process of bracketing. By considering the study and any implicit bias or assumptions the researcher can possibly make in conducting the study, the researcher is laying his/her cards on the table for the reader (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Research topics are not random. Researchers become interested in devoting large amounts of time and effort to topics that interest them and that they feel can really make a difference in the academic record both theoretically and in practice. For this reason,

researchers often choose topics that have a special meaning to them or explore phenomena they have personally experienced. This is why bracketing is so important to an accurate representation of the essence of the phenomenon.

A qualitative researcher must become an expert in finding themes. Conducting a qualitative study such as a phenomenology gives practice in identifying themes long before the researcher collects any subject data because bracketing your own experience allows the researcher to consider themes within the context of conducting the study. Think of this exercise as color coding bias and assumptions before beginning research. At some point a pattern emerges. Recognizing and reporting that pattern is effectively how a researcher brackets his/her experience and one of the first steps to finding the epoche (Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994) where the researcher considers the topic against his/her beliefs about the topic, reintegrates the two, and formally interprets how this bracketing will affect the research project moving forward.

### **Husserl and Eidetic Reduction**

Husserl, and subsequent phenomenologists, categorized experiences through a process known as Eidetic reduction (Husserl, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 2013; Giorgi, 1970). For example, when considering an object, one should consider which characteristics are necessary and invariable. It is necessary and invariable that a ball be round or at least non-angular (I supposed an American football isn't technically round). If it were square, it would be a cube. If it were stretched, it would be a cylinder. But a ball doesn't necessarily or invariably have to be blue or red, hard or soft, large or small. It would still be a ball. The phenomenological researcher should take the same approach when considering what are the necessary and invariable characteristics of the population of the study. A bounded system sets parameters such as teachers in a rural private school setting or registered nurses who received their training after a career change. In these cases, the researcher would use a variation of Eidetic reduction to determine which study participants fit the characteristics in establishing a bounded system.

### **Heidegger and Dasein**

Martin Heidegger was a student of Husserl. He questioned many of his teacher's theories. One in particular that is germane to this discussion is the Heidegger's idea of dasein- German for "being there." Heidegger considered what it is to be a human being, whereas Husserl inadvertently focused on how to interpret what is the experience of being a human being. Both are useful thought exercises, but Heidegger found a distinct advantage for those who are able to deeply consider what it means to exist. Understanding existence is beneficial to... well... existence. One can best broker power when one understands the rules of the game (Heidegger, 2011).

Husserl and Heidegger presented very intriguing philosophical views and here is an example of where phenomenology as a philosophy and phenomenology as a research method divide. Phenomenologists take a page from Husserl and Heidegger in that they attempt to explain a shared experience as it exists. Experiences, however, exist within a specific time and space. An important consideration for researchers when implementing phenomenology as a research method is the changing world in which the experience exists. Will the experience be the same in 50 years? 5 years? Was the experience the same 50 years ago? 5 years ago?

### **Phenomenology as a Qualitative Research Method**

As a research method, phenomenology "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, 76). The focus is to as best possible define "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, 163). Both of these are examples of what is Heidegger might define as dasein. The researcher collects data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and best describes what they experienced and how they experienced the object of the study. Qualitative research theorists share some common ideas but diverge on other points.

### **Giorgi**

Amedeo Giorgi (1970) developed the descriptive phenomenological method with the publication of *Psychology as a Human Science*. Much of Giorgi's work focused on empirical psychology and transcendental subjectivity. Both of these terms refer to the researcher's focus on finding meaning and wisdom within the human experience backed by evidence, but not limited by definitive evidence. The descriptive phenomenological method does not discount evidence but does take into account the countless number of factors that might affect the researcher's ability to tell the whole story. In order to account for these, the researcher identifies themes and evidence within his/her findings to make logical sense of the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 2009).

Another unique characteristic of Giorgi's approach is in the reduction of ideas or objects. He stated, "only the objects of the experience are reduced, not the acts" (Giorgi, 2009, 65). In this case, the term object refers to the phenomenon itself. The acts are a projection of existence and are therefore subjective. When taking this approach, not only is the researcher's experience with the phenomenon bracketed but also the collected data concerning the participants' experiences. This creates a holistic picture that doesn't treat the researcher's experience as a separate entity but a part of the research project and findings as a whole (Giorgi, 2009).

### Moustakas

Clark Moustakas was an established psychologist in the areas of heurism, humanism, and play therapy long before he became a leading voice of phenomenology as a research method. He established himself in phenomenology through a number of articles during the 1980s (Moustakas, 1987, 1988) and ultimately with the publication of *Phenomenological Research Methods* in 1994. Like Giorgi (2009) the research method outlined by Moustakas became more of an ideological means of conducting research backed by Husserl's ideas as opposed to a literal interpretation. An example of this is the epoche. Moustakas defined the epoche as recognizing and setting aside personal prejudice (Moustakas, 1994) whereas Husserl defined epoche as "assuming the natural attitude" in one of his many phenomenological reductions (Husserl, 2012). While the two interpretations are similar, there is a clear difference between conducting a study free of preconceived notions and considering a topic in a natural state free of all factors that could sway the individual's understanding of the topic. The researcher chooses to conduct a phenomenological study because (1) he/she has considered the problem at hand, (2) determined that a shared experience has occurred, and (3) that further research can be insightful to the academic record. Completing this prerequisite most likely eliminates any possibility of studying the research problem from a "natural state."

Another logical transition from philosophy/psychology to research can be found in both researcher's interpretation of transcendental phenomenology. Whereas, Husserl defines this psychological reduction as a means of recognizing consciousness (Husserl, 2012), Moustakas applies this term to a psychological reduction used in identifying research structures (Moustakas, 1994). As stated earlier, Giorgi (2009) viewed reduction as a means for both the researcher's and the participants' experiences to become part of the findings. What Giorgi and Moustakas did was find a gap in qualitative research that needed to be better defined and took the work of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher to develop and refine a qualitative research method that has application far beyond the disciplines of philosophy and psychology where the method was first theorized.

### Conclusion:-

The goal of all phenomenologists, past and present, is to explain a shared human experience through descriptions with overt analysis of the essence of the experience, not provide an explanation. The researcher achieves this by identifying themes but not necessarily drawing conclusions. What began as a school of philosophy with minds such as Husserl, Heidegger, and MerleauPonty was adapted by contemporary psychologists such as Giorgi and Moustakas. As qualitative research moves forward into the second quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, phenomenology remains and continues to develop as a tried and true method for researchers attempting to explain what it is to be human and what it is to experience life.

### References:-

1. Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
2. Giorgi, A. P. (1970). *Psychology as a Human Science*. Harper & Row.
3. Giorgi, A. P. (2009). **The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach**. Duquesne University Press.
4. Giorgi, A.P., "Amedeo Giorgi on the Descriptive Phenomenological Method," interviewed by Justin Karter, *Society for Humanistic Psychology*, March 17, 2019.
5. Heidegger, M. (2011). *Being and Time* (Macquarrie, J., Robinson, E., Trans.). Harper & Row (Original work published 1927).
6. Husserl, E. (2012). *Ideas* (Boyce Gibson, W.R., Trans.). Routledge (Original work published 1931)
7. Maxwell, J.A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Sage Publications.
8. MerleauPonty, M. (2013). *Phenomenology of perception* (Landes, D., Trans.) Routledge (Original work published 1945).

9. Moustakas, C.E. (1987). Phenomenology, discovery, and meaning. *Michigan Journal of Counseling and Development*, 18(1), 21-24.
10. Moustakas, C.E. (1988). *Phenomenology, science and psychotherapy*. Family Life Institute, University College of Cape Breton, Sydney, N.S., Canada.
11. Moustakas, C.E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications.
12. van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Routledge.