

Phenomenological Research Methods – Description and Comparison

Introduction

Phenomenology is a science that aims to study, analyse, and evaluate the lived experiences of people at a deeper level. It helps researchers educate their vision, define their position, and broaden the lens with which they perceive the world around them. It is not just a philosophy, but a method of inquiry which gives scientists a qualitative research framework for investigating their hypotheses. Using this approach, researchers can directly study people's experiences and the consequential behaviours and/or actions that arise from these experiences. As with the nature of people's experiences, there are numerous phenomenological research methods available and they are often adapted based on the type of study and questions being asked (Qutoshi, 2018). This paper aims to throw light on the phenomenological research methods of two outstanding philosophers – Husserl and Heidegger – and draw comparisons between the research methods of both.

Phenomenological Research Methods from the Philosophy of Husserl

Edmond Husserl is a German philosopher who sought to use the science of phenomenology to analyse the lived experiences of people at their conscious levels of understanding (Fochtman, 2008). He took a transcendental approach to phenomenology where he established scientific and philosophical knowledge and focused on accurate descriptions of different levels of consciousness (Giorgi, 2007). Two research methods that originated from his philosophy are described below.

Moustakas' Approach to Phenomenology

Clark Moustakas is considered to be the founder of phenomenological research. He used Husserl's transcendental phenomenology theories to develop a research method that can be used to analyze the wholeness of experience as well as acquire an understanding of the essence of the experience. According to Moustakas, experience and its consequential behaviour are inseparable with the person who has had the experience. Moustakas' theory follows a

constructivist paradigm where he considers a person's personal views to understand how s/he perceives the experience (Chiari and Nuzzo, 1996).

The following are the essential steps of a research method that follows his theory of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994):

- i. *Immersion* – The investigator becomes one with the experience
- ii. *Incubation* – The investigator takes some time for reflection and insights, and develops awareness and understanding of the experience
- iii. *Illumination* – The investigator attempts to expand his/her understanding of the experience
- iv. *Explication* – The investigator dwells on reflective actions
- v. *Creative Synthesis* – The investigator synthesizes available information to reveal underlying patterns and relationships

Giorgi's Approach to Phenomenology

Amedeo Giorgi, a professor at Duquense University, follows a descriptive phenomenological approach based on Husserl's philosophy, where he aims to study lived experiences to the extent that they can be recalled by the person. Every single element of an experience only makes sense in the context of the whole experience, and therefore, the interpretation of lived experiences depends on the content that is recalled by the person and the meaning s/he chooses to attach to the experience. In Giorgi's approach, the data collection process aims to provide an extensive description of the lived experience of the participant including their feelings, responses, attitudes, and behaviours towards the experience. Data analysis involves reduction by means of bracketing wherein the investigators' preconceived opinions and prejudices are identified and removed. This will ensure that the description of the lived experience is solely based on the meaning that occurs in the participant's consciousness. Following this, the investigators search for the essences, which are the stable characteristics of the experience, and intentionality, which is the investigators' experiences as present in their consciousness (Isabirye and Makoe, 2018).

Phenomenological Research Methods from the Philosophy of Heidegger

Heidegger's approach to phenomenology was interpretive or hermeneutic, rather than transcendental, and he was one of the few philosophers to challenge Husserl's theories and propose new research methods. His focus was on ontology as opposed to epistemology, and he studied temporality and the nature of being in lived experiences (Newbauer et al., 2019). Two research methods that originated from his philosophy are described below.

Gadamer's Approach to Phenomenology

Hans George Gadamar was a pioneer of hermeneutical phenomenology, and he studied both Husserl's as well as Heidegger's approaches before he devised his own research method. His research approach to phenomenology comprises of three essential practices which are reflexivity, dialogue, and interpretation. Reflexivity refers to the circle of understanding focusing on the relationship between the dynamics of the experience and the basic structures of our understanding. This relationship has an interpretive effect on the study where raw interpretation of the experience may be made without considering personal feelings, attitudes, and behaviours. The second element which is dialogue involves engagement with the participant such that there is a shift in understanding following the process of sharing of information. The third and the most critical aspect of any research method is interpretation wherein the acquired information is aligned to the investigators' own views and prejudices such that the deeper meaning of the lived experiences is revealed (McCaffrey et al., 2012).

Ricoeur's Approach to Phenomenology

Paul Ricoeur, another scholar of hermeneutic phenomenological methods, focused on the events and experiences that shape a person's reality. He promoted the concept of action which begins as thoughts and is then converted to behaviours following any lived experience. His interpretation theory stands on the pillars of understanding and explanation, followed by reflection that allows investigators to connect with the lived experience. Therefore, by using a reflective approach and open dialogue, Ricoeur aims to understand the lived experiences of participants through dialogue and use reflective methods to interpret the meaning of these

experiences. Not only does dialogue involve the content of the text, but it also includes facial expressions, gestures, and body language (Terra et al., 2009).

Comparison between the Transcendental and Hermeneutic Philosophies of Phenomenology

The transcendental approach was developed by Husserl and the hermeneutic approach was developed by Heidegger, who was Husserl's student, after he identified several limitations of Husserl's theories. Husserl primarily focused on the lived experiences of people as a basis for qualitative research wherein he claimed that knowledge is deeply interconnected with conscious awareness and to truly understand the essence of lived experiences, all preconceived notions must be ignored. In contrast, the hermeneutic approach focused on interpretation followed by understanding, which can be achieved by placing oneself in the world of the participant. Where Husserl focused on consciousness and intentionality, Heidegger focused on human existence (Mohamed, 2017).

Considering both the approaches to phenomenology, the Heidegger's approach is more relevant to our current qualitative research requirements. In qualitative research, the investigator is the prime introducer of bias in the research methodology because his/her previous worldly experiences can cloud interpretation of information obtained from the participant. Heidegger acknowledges this and encourages the investigator to be a part of the participant's experiences in order to obtain the most accurate description of the participant's lived experiences (Mohamed, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper threw light on the two major approaches to phenomenological research that are currently in use today and the various research methodologies that have arisen from these two philosophies. Several research scholars have described in detail the use of these philosophies for qualitative research focusing on the positive and negative aspects of both. Heidegger's philosophy was formulated due to limitations recognized in Husserl's philosophy, which considered researchers to be non-contributory in the participant's lived experience. Heidegger, on the other hand, included the researcher's role in the qualitative study and

proposed a methodological framework for interpretation and reflection on the information obtained from the participant. As every individual sees the world through a different lens, it is imperative to consider the impact of personal opinions and prejudices of the researchers in documenting and analyzing participant responses in a qualitative study. Therefore, Heidegger's philosophy makes more sense in the current context where researchers are called upon to perform qualitative research in different settings.

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