

Phenomenological analysis and interpretation

Phenomenological perspectives on knowledge, science and the role of the researcher can, broadly speaking, be associated with the work of two philosophers – Husserl or Heidegger. Other schools have developed, of course, but the two Hs remain highly influential and are therefore the focus of attention here.

The Husserlian perspective

When analysing qualitative data from the Husserlian perspective it is important to acknowledge that researchers influenced by Husserlian philosophy still believe that there is a life-world beyond individual experience that might be knowable through the testimony of research participants. A specific phenomenon might comprise more than the individual human experiences that make it up. For example, although military personnel may have a highly individualised experience of being in a combat situation, there may be something essential about the experience which is common to the majority and intrinsic to what it means to deal with armed conflict. This commonality might be associated with uncertainty (for instance, in relation to the origins of the threat/risk of being killed or injured). Husserl used the term ‘essence’ to refer to the most fundamental elements of any such experience; researchers who are guided by his philosophy search for the essences in their research data.

Remember, an essence is that aspect of a phenomenon which is central to its very definition and which, were you to remove it, would render the phenomenon almost meaningless as human experience. Although any phenomenon is surrounded by experiences, episodes and examples of it in action, these are merely the ‘outer clothing’ for what is the quintessential core of the phenomenon that is being studied.

Intuiting to identify essences

The process by which a phenomenological researcher identifies essences within and through the everyday testimony of research participants is referred to as ‘intuiting’ by Husserl. Once data have been gathered and collated (these are usually transcripts of interviews because interviewing is the dominant method of data gathering), the researcher examines the data carefully, searching for recurring themes which may suggest something deeper and more essential about the phenomenon being described.

A simple analogy may be helpful here. In many ways the researcher is rather like a prospector who is searching for precious metals. The goal is to find the load-bearing seam beneath the surface of the ground. So the search begins by looking for signs of what might be hidden below the surface. The prospector may perhaps pan for gold in a stream that emerges from the rock. This is not because the

gold dust found in that particular location is sufficient in and of itself, but rather because it might indicate where the seam of precious metal might be located. What research participants provide is, therefore, the terrain. The transcripts are like streams that must be panned for nuggets of information, ideas and experiences that point to the essential nature of the phenomenon being investigated. If military personnel in combat zones report that they wake every morning feeling glad yet surprised to be alive, this does not in itself tell us about the essence of the phenomenon of being a person in a combat situation (i.e. waking up and being surprised). However, if combined with similar accounts about dealing with uncertainty, then the researcher may begin to understand that managing uncertainty is an essential element of the phenomenon. This then can be labelled as a *theme* that underlies the experience of being military personnel in a combat situation.

Interpreting data from the Husserlian perspective

What the researcher has done thus far is analyse the data, which have yet to be interpreted and woven into an account of the phenomenon that will be disseminated more widely as part of the research report. In a sense, the theme that has been identified (uncertainty) is still rather ‘rough and ready’ and as such marks the start of the interpretation process. The researcher knows where the theme came from and can trace it back to specific interviews. But at this stage it has not been expanded or examined in such a way that will enable the researcher to say something more significant about the phenomenon being studied.

Eidetic reduction

Husserl refers to the next (interpretive) stage as eidetic reduction: the researcher re-examines their notes on a particular theme in order to question whether the data are being interpreted in a way that is too closely related to common sense. It would be very easy, for example, to see a specific experience through the lens of the researcher’s professional training. Under those circumstances ‘revelation’ can easily be regarded as ‘information needs’, precisely because in our professional lives we have been socialised to see a lot of human experience in terms of specific needs. For this reason a researcher using Husserlian philosophy typically invites someone to challenge his or her understanding of what has been discovered (In the context of T847 this is something that could be done via your tutor group and the wiki activity for this block.) Whoever agrees to do this should be asked to be sceptical and question whether the themes tentatively identified by the researcher are reflected in the data and appear to represent common experience, based on the individual’s own close examination of the data. Challenge in this context is not concerned with participant verification: the participants are not asked to verify what they said because they have merely reported something rather than analysed it. Instead, someone other than the researcher needs to enable the researcher to examine critically the interpretation of the qualitative data that have been gathered.

Contrary to what some people believe, this technique is not intended to counter bias. Rather it is designed to help researchers go beyond the familiar ways of describing the phenomenon that is being studied (i.e. the researcher brackets out straightforward or politically correct explanations). If this is not achieved, subsequent interviews may be less purposeful and inquisitive – the researcher may miss opportunities to follow up new leads that might help them appreciate the complexity or richness of the phenomenon. As Husserl would argue, eidetic reduction enables the researcher to move beyond the commonplace in order to identify what is absolutely core and necessary about the phenomenon, as opposed to what surrounds it by way of example or illustration.

Finally, before a theme can be presented to others as part of a description of the phenomenon, the researcher must consider the key insights associated with each theme and be able to trace it back to the interview data, demonstrating an appropriately scholarly attitude throughout the process.

Analysis from the Heideggerian perspective

One way to think of the key differences between the two phenomenological perspectives is to ask: ‘Is the research viewed as a documentary or a drama?’ Husserlian phenomenology creates an in-depth documentary while a phenomenologist guided by the work of Heidegger is writing a drama.

Arguably, the latter may represent human experience far more vividly and authentically than by simply presenting factual accounts.

Unlike Husserl, Heidegger’s thinking is much more existentialist. That is, he accepted that individuals create their own world around them – a world of personal meanings that not only help them make sense of what they encounter, but that increasingly help shape the definition of the world for that person. Heidegger described this as ‘thrownness’ – like clay pots, we are thrown on the wheel of experience and moulded by that experience. This means that we cannot stand aside from the world and study it dispassionately as recommended by Husserl. At best, we can investigate and catalogue the experiences of others and construct with them a vivid account of what this has meant for them. This has important implications for how the researcher gathers, organises, analyses and interprets the data and it distinguishes a research study inspired by Heidegger from one guided by Husserlian thinking. The key characteristics of Heideggerian phenomenology define research activity.

First, and crucially, the researcher thinks of the research participant as a co-researcher rather than as a correspondent of experience. Therefore, interviews inspired by Heideggerian phenomenology are more like discussions, allowing the researcher to divulge his or her experiences and reflections.

Gadamer (1976), a philosopher who was influenced by the work of Heidegger, referred to this process as the ‘fusion of horizons’. We aim to bring the research participants and our own lived experience sufficiently close together in order to trigger new shared insights. This process is rather similar to two people confiding about a difficult process and discovering something that was important and new to

both of them. Imagine, for instance, two friends talking about divorce and through their discussion they discover something new about ‘hurt’ or, perhaps, ‘trust’.

Such intimate interviews produce very different sorts of data from those that would be generated if the research were to be guided by the Husserlian perspective. Both interviewee and interviewer are not simply reviewing the experience, they are mutually redefining it as they proceed. You will have experience of engaging in this sort of process as part of social conversations; for example, ‘Don’t talk to me about our weather – it hasn’t stopped raining this summer!’. Of course, it’s highly unlikely that it did rain every day, but what we have done is to create a shared account of a British summer; it becomes our mutual construct. Irrespective of whether this account is a completely accurate representation of rainfall, we use it when thinking about the British climate.

The researcher then collates shared accounts of the phenomenon under consideration and must analyse not only what the research participant was conveying about his or her experience, but also what the researcher contributed to the conversation.

This means that data analysis is deeply introspective, not only with regard to what others have told us, but also how we then interpret what we have been told. Although the latitude to construct accounts of the phenomenon might seem to offer a wonderful freedom (it sounds easier to do than it actually is), it still requires scholarship. In some regards, what we decide to include in the final report may indicate more about ourselves and about our ways of thinking than we may realise or find comfortable.

Integrity of interpretation becomes even more crucially important. We are interpreting other people’s experiences, which we cannot completely know, using our own experience to guide the process. In this sense the interpretation is hermeneutic. Although we are not analysing and interpreting ancient biblical text, the ‘otherness’ of each individual’s experience can make it seem distant and therefore difficult to convey.

It is for this reason that the researcher takes their account of the phenomenon back to the research participants and asks, ‘Does this reflect what we were talking about?’. Returning to the participants is not therefore simply a matter of etiquette, to check whether what they said has been captured accurately. Rather, having interpreted the raw data of the transcript and turned these data into the themes of their own account, it is important that the researcher checks that these themes are real and relevant to all those who contributed to the research.

Students new to phenomenology may find the research literature on data analysis lacks clarity. You may encounter a number of other theorists (e.g. Colaizzi and Van Manen) who have developed their own accounts of how phenomenological data should be gathered and analysed. In practice, whichever technique you select, it is not possible to ignore the data analysis equation described in Block 3: ‘These data ... mean that ...’. It is this focus on the data and what you do with the data as part of

analysis that distinguishes one type of phenomenological study from another, and enables you to defend your work with reference to your chosen research approach and school of thought.

The table below summarises the main distinctions between the work of Husserl and Heidegger in relation to data analysis.

A comparison of data analysis guided by two schools of phenomenological thought

Activity	Husserlian approach	Heideggerian approach
Preparing data	Transcripts are treated as accounts provided by correspondents and are gathered together. Passages of the narratives are highlighted that seem to suggest deeper, more essential, themes that capture the phenomenon being studied.	Transcripts are treated as joint records of the researcher and participant enquiry into a chosen experience. Passages of the narratives (from both interviewees and interviewer) are highlighted in order to identify themes, from which an account of the phenomenon can be constructed.
Analysing data	The themes identified are not literally what the participants have said, but are what their correspondence points to. Themes are fundamental and are uncovered by examining the transcripts in detail and going beyond the description of chronological events. The number of themes identified may be quite small, but they should capture the essential aspects of the phenomenon being studied.	The themes are the product of deep introspection about what joint discussions have suggested is relevant and important in the experience being investigated. There may be many themes because at first the researcher may be unsure what they capture about the experience. Identified themes are likely to come from both interviewee and interviewer contributions to the research interviews.
Interpreting data	The researcher aims to go beyond commonplace explanations of what has been heard, and check that it is not simply a common-sense way of seeing the phenomenon being studied. The question is asked whether each theme is essential to the phenomenon? The key test of this is that if a theme were taken away would our understanding of the phenomenon still be as meaningful? The researcher is interpreting the phenomenon.	The researcher searches for those themes that occur again and again and which suggest that they capture the collective experience of all those involved. The researcher constructs an account of the phenomenon being studied.
Verifying the authenticity of an account	Another person is invited to challenge the researcher's interpretation of the	The transcripts of the interviews and proposed themes are taken back to the research participants

	phenomenon by examining carefully the proposed themes against the transcribed interview data.	to enquire whether they capture and reflect their own experience of the phenomenon.
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References

Gadamer, H.G. (1976) *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (trans. and ed. by D.R. Linge), Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.

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