

Phenomenological Study: An Inquiry into Lived Experience

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Phenomenological methodology is one of major approaches in qualitative research and evaluation. Based on the long-well-established philosophical studies since Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the approach focuses on human experience and the meaning ascribed to it. In this paper, I would like to briefly present the conceptual understanding of phenomenological approach and share with you some of my own studies. I begin the discussion with the epistemology in which phenomenological research is anchored and then proceed to its theoretical perspective. The last half portion of the paper describes the notion of phenomenological research.

Epistemological & Theoretical Underpinnings

The epistemological stance for phenomenological study is grounded in constructionism. The very nature of knowledge according to constructionism is that the meanings of reality are not discovered, but are constructed by human beings (Crotty, 1998). The construction of meaning requires active engagement in the world. For constructionists, the process of meaning construction always involves intentionality and human consciousness (Crotty). In other words, the process refers to meaning construction intended toward a certain object and operated consciously. The justification of meaning/truth is an umbrella concept. As a sport sociologist, the specific epistemological concept underpinning my studies include social constructionism. Social constructionism focuses on social and historical interaction in which people negotiate meaning (Creswell, 2007). Epistemologically, social constructionists believe that the truth is reproduced through human interaction with realities. Within the understanding of knowledge as socially constructed, it is clear that "different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Particularly, the epistemology of social constructionism considers human beings as actors who define their situation, and therefore focuses on "how social actors recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions and how they come to share an intersubjective understanding of specific life circumstances" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 39). In my phenomenological studies, I have been viewing research participants as social agents which historically and socially interacted to reproduce the meanings of physical activity/physical education.

Using social constructionism as the bedrock, the theoretical perspective of phenomenological approach is interpretivism. Interpretivism assumes that human actions embody meaning and that the investigators' responsibility is to uncover such meaning (Schwandt, 2007). Unlike post-positivists arguing that the role of theory is to explain human action, the central focus of interpretivists is to understand it by looking for "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Furthermore, within interpretivism,

Crotty identified three prominent philosophical traditions including symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. The later is what frames the phenomenological research and evaluation.

Phenomenological Approach to Qualitative Studies

Phenomenological, assuming that phenomena become objective realities because of the conscious nature of human beings (Crotty, 1998). In other words, phenomena emerge as meaningful experiences since human understandings actively make sense of them. In qualitative inquiry, phenomenology seeks to understand these conscious, everyday experiences and depict the essence of them (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2007). A phenomenological study focuses on the meaning of a phenomenon as it is socially constructed by individuals (Creswell, 2007). What kind of specific experience the phenomenological researchers look for? It is called the lived experience which we experience pre-reflectively. Van Manen (1990: 35) argued that the basic tenet of lived experience contains one's immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life: "a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself." What does it look like? As a lecturer in the first day of a class, we might figure out the moment when it is hard to disregard the students who are "looking at me." This feeling creates awkwardness resulting in the difficulty to behave naturally and speak freely. The students force us to be aware of our experience while we are experiencing it. But as we engage in the teaching, we disregard the presence of our students and then "become involve again immediately and naturally in the activity" (van Manen, p. 36). Another example of pre-reflective experience is our experience of getting through the door. We normally do not measure the dimension of the door to make sure that we fit in proceeding into the room. Without much thinking, we just walk through it. This is the kind of experience the phenomenological reseachers would be interested in.

This pre-reflective, lived experience will be our attention in the process of study ranging from research conceptualization, data collection, and analysis. For example, my study with Indonesian youth living in New Zealand provided data with strong phenomenological characteristics. For example, Giovani described her experience of participating in competitive swimming. More specifically, her underlined sentence represents her embodied experience through which the event of competition was experienced by using her body.

I think it was freestyle and it was a 25 meter race and it was something called a cash swim so if you get a placing if you come first second or third you get money for it so yeah it was a cash swim so I think I got I was up into 25 m cause I wasn't very good at long distance so but Im good at short distance so but Im good at short distance so I was put into all the short distance races and it was very.. the atmosphere was so different like when you get up on the block, everyone is silent and like it was so crazy and then - oh my gosh I was so nervous and honestly like and when you're diving and your swimming you could hear all the people all like shouting and encouraging you and its actually pretty good, yeah. (Giovani)

In addition to data informing lived experience, phenomenological research investigates the ascribed meaning or the essence of the experience. Within strong Husserlian tradition, transcendental phenomenology (more rigorous, post-positivist, scientific approach) this can be accomplished by describing textural and structural description of the experience. Merriam (2009) detailed that a phenomenological study demands a careful depiction

of textural description in order to accomplish a structural description. Textural description refers to what appears to be the phenomenon just as it is, while structural description is concerned with the meaning of that phenomenon. In more loosely grip from Husserl's philosophical thoughts, hermeneutic phenomenology takes place focusing on what van Manen called the "free act of seeing meaning" (p. 79). While transcendental phenomenology tends to detach researchers role, hermeneutic phenomenology relies on the researchers themselves to make sense of the researched. Another strategy to discover the meaning includes carefully crafted interviews involving, for example, photo elicitation interview. In my study with physical education teachers, I asked them what it means to teach students with disability. One teacher picked a photo of painting and described his meaning:



Teaching these kids are like painting on the white canvas. So I would say that kids are like a plain canvas. They know nothing. Then I paint is slowly; very slowly so it won't make bad scratches in order to make a good painting. So, we have to be into those kids. We have to know their characters. What are the characters of the paper, the brushes, and the acrylics? We have to know about those things in order to make our painting or like our teaching would meet the goals. (Pak Barja)

Methodologically speaking, bracketing is pivotal in order to move toward discovering meaning. Bracketing is a way to put researchers' experiences and perspectives aside from the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). For Crotty, researchers' knowledge and assumptions need to be bracketed so that they do not contaminate the data and prejudice the experiences. An example of bracketing strategies is to surface "preconception prior to undertaking the research project" through the writing of researcher's personal experiences (researcher's reflexivity and journal) with regard to the phenomena (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 85).

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