



36.1 Brief History of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is rooted in the work of Husserl, who framed it as a study of the “transcendental, ideal structures of consciousness” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 2). Husserl (1998) viewed it as a paradigm that attempts to explain the nature of the things, the essence and the veracity of the phenomena with the aim of understanding the complex nature of the lived experience.

Since Husserl’s time, phenomenology has evolved through several distinct philosophical orientations and has moved from the transcendental to the more immanent world of everyday objects and concerns. This development has been marked through the contributions of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Sartre, all of whom have widened and deepened its philosophical features (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). Of these key philosophers, Heidegger, who was a student of Husserl, played an important role in connecting phenomenology with hermeneutics, and referred to the priority of studying ourselves as *being* or as we are in the world. For Ricoeur (1991), it is impossible to study experience without seeking to also understand its meaning, and it is impossible to study meaning without also examining its experiential grounding. Ricoeur emphasized that language was inseparably linked to the reciprocal reliance of meaning and experience, where language not only has a descriptive function, but is also “expressive and co-constitutive” (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 2).

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The increased interest in qualitative methods within educational research over the past few decades has acknowledged the value of inductive approaches to increasing understanding. As a result, hermeneutic phenomenology has manifested in varied methods and pathways that makes it somewhat challenging as a methodological approach. Gadamer (1975), Rorty (1979) perhaps sum it up best through maintaining that within the method of hermeneutic phenomenology there is no fixed method; the salvation for the researcher therefore lies with the research question.

36.2 Description of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

As Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) noted, hermeneutic phenomenology reflects the foundational philosophies of both hermeneutics and phenomenology. To understand hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method, we are required to first examine and define both *hermeneutic* and *phenomenology* as independent terms (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). *Phenomenology* is the study of experience, principally as it is lived and structured through consciousness (Henriksson & Friesen). In this context, experience is not something mastered and accumulated by individuals, it is something that happens *to* individuals. *Hermeneutics* is the art and science of interpretation and meaning, and is constantly open to interpretation (Friesen et al., 2012). According to Finlay (2012), interpretation is not merely an additional procedure within a hermeneutic phenomenological method. Instead, interpretation comprises of an inevitable configuration of “being in the world” (p. 22). Thus, a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology needs to record explicitly the researcher’s approach to how interpretations are managed (Finlay, 2012). In addition, the relationship between researcher and participant is a constant discourse, and therefore, must be attended to (Fuster, 2019; Gadamer, 1998). Subsequently, hermeneutic phenomenology aims for an openness to everyday, experienced meanings (van Manen, 2011) as opposed to theoretical ones (van Manen, 2007).

36.3 What Can Hermeneutic Phenomenology Be Used to Study

Hermeneutic phenomenology is “a research methodology aimed at producing rich textural descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (Smith, 1997, p. 80). From this perspective, it has been applied to examine where and how “everyday interpretation merges with re-interpretation” (Conroy, 2003, p. 3) in order that our knowledge of the world can be co-constructed with the lives and experiences of others. Hermeneutic phenomenology is receptive to the literary qualities of language, making it ideally suited to research in education, healthcare, and social work (Friesen et al., 2012).

36.4 Why Use Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology can be used by scholars concerned with the life-world and the human experience as lived (Patton, 2015). Critical in this regard is Heidegger's (1962) theory that focuses on understanding how persons create and shape meaning. By understanding how we are situated in the world, in the context of our being, we begin to understand and exist in the world. Heidegger argued that a person's background history and culture create ways of understanding the world. It is through this understanding that humans interpret differing forms of realities. Hermeneutic phenomenology method entails using the study of lived "texts" and the dialogic discourse along with personal reflection, through which meaning making evolves. It is an ongoing creative, intuitive, dialectical approach (van Manen, 2006).

36.5 Process of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Recognizing that the process for analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology is not bound by rigid structured stages that define other phenomenological methods (Patton, 2015), scholars have proposed some systematic approaches for using it as a method. One such approach is detailed by Fuster (2019) and includes four phases.

First Phase: Previous Stage or Clarification. At this stage, the researcher clarifies any perspectives or prejudices that may be tainted by the tradition, religion, ethical codes and culture that make up the preconceived world.

Second Phase: Collecting the Lived Experience. At this stage, the lived experience data are obtained from various sources, such as accounts of personal experience, protocols, interviews, autobiographical accounts, observations, or documentaries.

Third Phase: Reflecting on the Lived Experience. At this stage, the researcher tries to make sense of being a participant, and what it means to live through that participant's experience.

Fourth Phase: Writing About the Reflection on the Lived Experience. The purpose of this stage is to integrate into a single description all the individual physiognomies of all the subjects being studied.

The process allows both participants and the researcher to circle back into the data and attune question, rework, and reinterpret the data. Through critical dialogue and reflection, questions evolve and thinking transforms over time (van Manen, 2006). In hermeneutic phenomenology stories and text are key to giving life to experience. They are a rich, thick means of response (van Manen, 2006) and constructing

realities of relationships and actions. The constructed realities are not considered more, or less true; rather, they are more, or less, informed or sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this way the researcher and participants are linked in constructing realities through an interpretivist lens—through interpretation and interaction cycles.

Hermeneutic phenomenology must be attentive to ensuring that the researcher's approach and interpretations are fully documented, and the relationship between researcher and study participants is transparent and explicit. Interpretations are required to reveal the ways meanings are situated within their individual situational contexts (Finlay, 2012). In addition, interpretations are shaped by a researcher's own subjective understandings and life experience during data collection and analysis (Godden, 2016). Furthermore, interpretations are filtered through the specified historical and social-cultural lenses that relate to the co-created relationship between the researcher, and the researched (Finlay, 2012).

36.6 Strengths and Limitations of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

According to Gadamer (1998) “hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks” (p. 295). Within the hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm, one is able to add an interpretive element to explicate meanings, interpretations, and assumptions revealed through the participants meaning making of that which they may normally have difficulty in articulating (Crotty, 1998). In this respect, an “open” attitude, an attempt to see the world in a different way, and empathy towards what is being revealed is necessary (Finlay, 2012, p. 24). There is broad agreement amongst hermeneutic phenomenologists that they bring their own self-awareness to this process. However, some researchers emphasize the need for the *bracketing* of previous understandings, past knowledge, and assumptions, to allow the researcher to focus on the present. Researchers have argued that it is impossible or desirable to set aside experience and understandings and argue that instead, these should be re-examined in light of the new understandings (e.g., Finlay, 2008; Halling et al., 2006). Therefore, researcher's subjectivity should be placed at the foreground (van Manen, 2007). The critical danger is that of navel-gazing (Finlay, 2012), and preoccupation with one's own experiences must be avoided, with the researcher staying focused on the research participant and the phenomenon that is currently being revealed.

Engagement Activities

1. Identify a text of interest, read through a section, and make note of the literary techniques and devices that are used. Leave the text for a short while. Re-read the text. What do you notice that is different on this second reading? How do your feelings about the text shift or take on new meaning?

2. Hermeneutic phenomenology has been described as a “reality check.” What situations in your field of study might warrant such a research approach?

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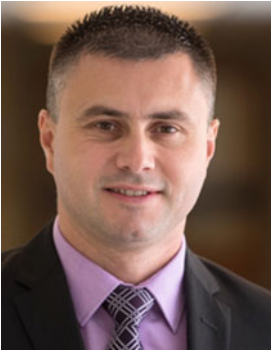
Additional Readings

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