

## SHIFTING CONSCIOUSNESS INTO DOING PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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When utilizing a phenomenological approach in teaching the class is immediately thrown into confusion. This confusion frequently arises from the ambiguity that this approach allows. This work is an attempt to present the meaning of doing phenomenological research and to address its difficulties and advantages. Questions posed regarding not only the nature of research but also the meaning of doing research helps to ground one's thought. It is a way to begin at the very beginning. To discover the meaning of research is in itself a phenomenological approach. In phenomenology one is in search of meaning rather than quantity or measurement sought in experimental research.

When investigating human experience a qualitative approach seems appropriate. Openness and flexibility are the way of a phenomenological approach to understand a given phenomenon. *The primary emphasis is on the phenomenon itself as it reveals itself.* This open approach allows meaning to emerge from the phenomenon itself. It is investigating a phenomenon in its contextualization.

All of this sounds quite sensible but actually doing it presents the problem of being able to tolerate the ambiguity that is bound to emerge. Without the structure provided by a predetermined method an unsettling experience arises and one may find a situation too difficult with which to cope. Too many researchers make closure by bringing about hasty conclusions. Many think that solid research conclusions are not only desirable but also mandatory. Yet not knowing what to do or even doing it incorrectly often says a lot. Just formulating the research question can be a problem in itself. It takes patience to work with the ambiguity without getting frustrated or out of touch with what is going on. By letting the ambiguity emerge one begins to understand a phenomenon in its contextualization. In so doing one is then investigating the whole phenomenon.

A phenomenological approach allows one to follow the movement of a showing. It is opposed to an experimental method that merely looks through selected variables via their manipulation. The intertwining of ambiguity and openness is recognized in doing phenomenological research. Experience is understood to be perspectival and is viewed from a certain intentional stance. If a perspective guides the interpretation of the meaning of a phenomenon, this recognition beckons one to wonder about the necessity of knowing one's own preconceptions about a particular phenomenon in the research approach. With this approach the researcher

writes a description of the phenomenon before investigating it. This reveals one's own self-understanding of the phenomenon.

Through dialogue in a teaching situation or research group one comes to realize the perspectival nature of experience, its interpretations and how many biases one may hold about a given phenomenon. It displays the specific meaning while commonalities emerge. The idiosyncratic and common themes of meaning are both maintained, nothing is lost or eliminated. In this way a phenomenological approach allows for the possibility to understand the quality and richness of an experience in its contextualization rather than obliterating it by use of quantitative statistical analyses that cut off differences via the stat curve. Here the unique would be lost.

Statistical methods can be likened to what Martin Heidegger calls "levelling down" experience and meaning into the "they,"<sup>1</sup> into the inauthentic, average repetitive and taken-for-granted. With a phenomenological approach themes and variations of themes display the height and depth of each and every experience. Each phenomenon occurs within which and runs throughout a variety of experience in different situations. A consistent, although possibly ambiguous, meaning is there for the one who is experiencing that particular situation. By being aware and attuned to this the phenomenological approach allows for an appreciation of the multitude of richness of experience and possibilities in human living. We understand as we live. This way of investigating opens out to the contextualization including variations of meaning in a given situation. Interpretation is within the contextualization. It is a revelation of what is as it brings one into focus.

Doing phenomenological research can be contrasted to the almost ghostly human presence found with an experimental method. A phenomenological approach opens one's deeper self-understanding of experience and meaning in other situations. Through dialogue in a teaching situation or research group, for example, preconceptions about not only "this" experience and its meaning emerge but numerous other experiences present and open the phenomenon further. Deeper and deeper meanings emerge as complexities arise and ambiguity enriches one's own way of experiencing those meanings and further encounters in life. Phenomenology opens one to see different ways of understanding the same world. This way of seeing our own experience becomes embodied existentially. One learns to ask questions in different ways. Openness and flexibility reveal a consistency that cannot be found with statistical analysis.

A deeper self-understanding emerges out of this as well as a deeper regard and respect for the quality and meaning of the other's experience. In this regard emerges a greater personal freedom. It encourages discovery of

self and others. For example, dialogue in a teaching situation or a research group encourages one to express what one is experiencing while being open to what others have to say. In dialogue the possibility to understand the other's experience arises while the meaning of one's own experience becomes more clearly in focus. For as we are asked to clarify, to explicate our understanding, as we do so, we learn not only what the other understands but also what we ourselves understand. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty would say, our words teach us our thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

Reading a description of an experience one finds how it guides one through what the other went through while doing research. Not only is the writer's view revealed and identified but also one's development of an experience is displayed as the movement of a showing. In this way one can follow the meaning and understand how signification is embedded into meaning and self-understanding. The ability to communicate the stance from which a particular phenomenon is viewed is intertwined with one's understanding. Others must be able to see *as you saw* and in spite of their *own* vision, see *what you saw*.<sup>3</sup>

In this respect the phenomenological approach is at least, if not more, thorough than any other research. For research to allow the inclusion of special incidents or particular idiosyncrasies requires contextualization. When a situation is precisely controlled and a research method selects as significant that which is prominent as the only aspect accounted for and analyzed all else becomes statistically insignificant and is lost. Negation of an experience or its meaning is a dangerous method for understanding human beings. Doing research should not cut us off from our possibilities. In a phenomenological approach both the universal and the particular meaning of experience are included. Not only are they included but also they actually guide the researcher in understanding and interpreting the findings. The researcher remains in dialogue with the experience.

Doing phenomenological research is being aware and attuned to the meaning of our experience as we live through it. Experience gives rise to theory itself. A phenomenological approach is a movement toward bridging the current gap between theory and praxis. First the researcher begins with experience then goes to theory rather than starting with theory and hypothesis testing. With the phenomenological approach one begins with experience, describes its meaning then enters into dialogue with existing theory. In this way it is not difficult to return to the praxis or experiential aspects of living to implement and apply the findings. The ground of doing phenomenology is experience and in the end, it returns to its beginnings.

In the phenomenological approach, one attempts to hold in abeyance one's own preconceptions about the phenomenon so that the phenomenon shows itself from itself as it is.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to imagine a researcher with an

experimental method holding in abeyance their rigid scientific proofs and without being caught up in their value orientation. The most apparent disadvantage of the experimental method is that it frequently seeks only functional relationships which are to be utilized in future application of findings as ways of a prediction and control. Experimental research does not seek any understanding of self-actualization and fulfilling ways of existence for human beings but its result frequently imposes control from without and produces conformity.

The unique is regarded as insignificant or bothersome and not worthy of consideration. It is possible to find any number of functional relationships and yet not touch upon a phenomenon's meaning for human existence. For example, knowing how a clock works is fine but what does it mean for human existence? The difference between clock time and lived time resides in experience. One begins to grasp the significance of what it means in research to not forget the obvious. The world is intelligible only in and for the human being. With the phenomenological approach one begins by moving-with the showing, what is there, as it is. One ends by returning to the beginning.

#### Notes

- 1) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 164-165.
- 2) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New Jersey: The Humanities Press, 1976), p. 177.
- 3) "Approach is how you get there. Method is what you do after you get there." Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities using Metaphysics and Phenomenology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990), p. 53.
- 4) With a strict phenomenological approach presuppositions are held in abeyance. With this approach presuppositions are acknowledged and utilized in dialogue as one's self-understanding of the phenomenon in question.