Research Article

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRAGMATICS OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW

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A B S T R A C T

Phenomenological interview as a method expects epistemological continuity. This paper is an attempt to understand the pragmatics of engaging in an interpretive phenomenological interview, deriving from the author's own experience as a researcher exploring the phenomenon of resilience among widowed Mapila women in a matrilineal community. The philosophical basis of interviewing is laid down as the foundation to the ideas of encountering subjectivities and co-generation of knowledge. The article tries to detail pragmatics of the interview as a method of research, using styles of questions in exploring lived world.

INTRODUCTION

The use of qualitative interview for better pragmatics in the methodology of phenomenology has evolved from the attempts at combining qualitative research with phenomenology (Varela & Shear, 1999; Gallagher, Taking stock of phenomenology futures, 2012; Høffding & Martiny, 2015; van Manen, 1997). Some examples of combining the resources of both phenomenology and qualitative interview are clinical work on schizophrenia (Parnas, 2005), in the area of neurophenomenology (Varela F. J., 1996; Lutz, 2002), on the expertise of dancers (Legrand & Ravn, 2009) etc. Interview is used as a generic method without really giving much thought as to how it should to be used in a particular methodology. Interview should originate from a methodological paradigm and must be discussed accordingly. Every interview is understood as situated in a meaning-making context since there exists the possibility of multiple interpretations of reality. The acknowledgement of the relationship between the philosophical tradition and the method is what distinguishes phenomenological interview from its other forms. For instance, one point of difference is seen in the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and moves from observational in quantitative research, to dialogical in qualitative research, and then to reflective in phenomenological research. This paper looks at how to conceive a framework that integrates a qualitative interview with phenomenological philosophy, and attempts to unpack the phenomenological interview by first laying down the

Subsequently, the researcher suggests merits and strives to qualify why it is worthwhile to engage in a phenomenological interview. In the concluding segment, some of the pragmatics of the interview process is delineated, with reference to the phenomenological exploration of psychological resilience among widowed Mappila women in Kerala conducted by the researcher.

Phenomenological methodology

Phenomenological research has originated and evolved from the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and psychology. Husserl advanced phenomenology as a guide for investigating the essence of a phenomenon as it creates to have meaning in an individual's consciousness (Husserl, 1970). The central focus of phenomenological research has been the presence of meaning in experience, and how it allows the researcher to examine human phenomenon in the lived experiences of participants. Creswell (1998) identified phenomenological research as one of the five significant research traditions in qualitative research – the other four being biography, grounded theory, ethnography and case study.

Qualitative research has been advocated as the method for inquiry involving groups that have been historically disenfranchised. The assumption of linear temporality has also placed limitations on scientific inquiry by centering the focus on cause-effect relationship and manipulation of variables. Phenomenological research in psychology has typically been descriptive in nature, with a focus on meaning-producing structures in consciousness. Phenomenological psychology relies on examining co-constitutionality of phenomena and the intersection of these interdependent relationships as lived by the person was referred to as life world by Husserl (1970). The

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generating knowledge together.

active role of the researcher, bracketing her presuppositions, biases and experience, is essential for the discovery of the ascribed meanings and subjective processes of another person's psychological reality.

Phenomenological methodology, an important one among major traditions of qualitative research, is supported by two conceptual propositions. The first is that the reality of a set of human experiences will be uncovered through the detailed yet subjective descriptions provided by the people being studied (Creswell, 1998) and second, that "establishing the truth of things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57) begins with the researcher's perception. The researcher can rely upon "intuition, imagination and universal structures to obtain a picture" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52) of the experiences under study. Phenomenology is concerned with identifying that which is inherent and unchanging in the meaning of an item or idea under scrutiny. Moustaskas (1994) contended that the term describes how true meaning within the social world of themes, ideas and happenings might be identified by a researcher and a respondent in a combined interpretive responses data. Such an interpretation would reflect some component of a researcher's own experience which Rieman (1986) argued should be known at the commencement of data collection. Of all the major traditions of qualitative research as defined by Creswell (1998) - biography, grounded theory, ethnography, case study and phenomenology- it is phenomenology therefore, which relies on the interpretive legitimacy of the researcher.

Philosophical basis of phenomenological method

As human beings we try to understand and make sense of our experiences. Each of us impose meanings on our perception of the world. It is from this seemingly simple assumption of the 'world' that one of the basic philosophical questions arise – What is real? Much of the things around me – a book, a chair, the trees, buildings as I walk down the street- seem to exist independent of my consciousness. They would continue to exist even if I was removed from the scenario. This theory, that sometimes is rather taken as a fact, has led to positing the existence of an 'objective reality'. The existence of a world independent of one's consciousness, and the notion that we have direct access to that world through our brain and senses, perceiving them as 'being out there'. Phenomenology as a philosophy attempts to question this conception of reality. It argues that what we term as reality is that "which is experienced by us as being real, is inextricably linked to our mental processes in general, and, in particular, to our in-built, innate human species capacity to construct meaning" (Spinelli, 2005). This view is the starting point of phenomenological inquiry. The objects exist the way they do through the meanings that each of us give them. In the everyday experience of reality, phenomenologists suggest that it is difficult to differentiate the interpretive process from the reality being perceived. So is there a 'correct' interpretation of reality? Following a phenomenological mode of inquiry, one can only say that our conclusions are relative - as they are dependent on many factors including socio-cultural diversity. Our judgments are influenced by consensus viewpoints agreed upon by a collective, or a whole culture. What we then have is only a 'phenomenal reality' that is open to a multiplicity of interpretations. It is possible that many of us, maybe partially, share similar interpretations of reality. From a phenomenological perspective , these invariant structures of experience shared by human beings form the foundational base

from which unique interpretations of reality are formed. But regardless of how singular or shared these interpretations may seem to be, they remain interpretations. Therefore, ontological realism is not a standpoint in phenomenological inquiry.

Why Interpretive Phenomenology

The primary difference between a descriptive and interpretive phenomenological analysis lies in how the findings are generated in the study. In Husserl's attempt to make phenomenology a rigorous science, he considered reality as objective and independent of history and context. This transcendental view does not consider the impact of culture, society and politics on the individual's freedom to choose. Heidegger built on and modified the work of Husserl, to expand the scope of phenomenology from mere description of core concepts of experience to look for meanings embedded in common life practices. The meanings are not necessarily apparent to the participants but can be gleamed from the narratives they produce. The inquiry is hence directed at what the participants experience, not at what they consciously know. The idea of being-in-the-world suggests that humans cannot abstract themselves from the world. Deriving from Heidegger's hermeneutic or interpretive tradition, a phenomenological inquiry would then "encourage the participant to describe interactions, workload, relations to others, experiences of the body, and experiences of time to place the lived experience in the context of daily work practices and socialization (Smith & Smith, 1995).

The concept of freedom is one tenet on which interpretive phenomenology differs from descriptive. The concept of situated freedom, as expounded in the works of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre etc is in opposition to Husserl's notion of radical autonomy. Situated freedom is an existential phenomenological concept that means that individuals are free to make choices, but their freedom is not absolute; it is circumscribed by the specific conditions of their daily lives. The subjective experiences are essentially embedded in a socio-cultural political context. The interpretation of the narratives against the backdrop of the context is therefore foundational in an interpretive phenomenological inquiry. Interpretive tradition also emphasizes on the concept of co-constitutionality (Koch, 1995) which indicates that the meanings that the researcher arrives at in interpretive research are a blend of the meanings articulated by both participant and researcher within the focus of the study. Gadamer (1976) used the metaphor "fusion of horizons" to explain this act of intersubjectivity and interpretation.

What is a phenomenological interview?

The object of study in social research are in fact subjects, in that 'they have consciousness and agency' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 67). The nature of interview is such that two subjects, capable of producing accounts of themselves and their world, interact in an ever-developing conversation. Generation of specific knowledge related to the objective of the study, however, is the aim of the interview. The interviewer is required to take a second-person perspective, an empathic stance, whereby the experience and understanding of the interviewer and interviewee resonate (Varela & Shear, 1999). Zahavi (2005, p. 10) says that "to adopt a second-person perspective is to engage in a subject-subject (you-me) relation where I am aware of the other and, at the same time, implicitly aware of myself in the accusative, as attended to or

addressed by the other." To this extent, there is not a single 'you'- the interviewee is encountered as an autonomous you and the interviewer is taken as their you. Thus, reciprocity becomes the prime point of a second-person perspective.

The encounter is structured in some ways, since there is an aim to the interview. Whether it be to confirm already held theories of the phenomenon under exploration, or it be a more open interview, one doesn't come to the interview as neutral. You already have some idea about what you want to know, what the interviewee is going to say etc. Interview is a knowledge generation process in which both the 'you's actively participate. Reciprocal interaction drives the subjects to contribute to the process of knowledge generation. For instance, the interviewer modifies her next question depending on the answer that they receive. Discursive knowledge as well as tacit knowledge is generated in this interaction. The way discursive knowledge is communicated refers to tacit knowledge, in this context. This kind of knowledge is usually found in one's body language, facial expression and tone of voice. When a statement is made with hesitation by the interviewee, it changes how the same would be interpreted by the interviewer. It is important for the interviewer to be aware of one's role in the co-generation of knowledge since the interaction doesn't happen in a theoretically neutral space, and be accountable for one's theoretical inclinations, methodology and pragmatics. In the case of a phenomenological interview these commitments derive from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.

Encountering subjectivities in an interview

Interview is a process where one directly encounters another subjectivity (Varela & Shear, 1999). The methods used to understand subjectivity are fundamentally different from those employed to understand objects (Zahavi D. , 2010). The third phenomenological commitment is understanding subjectivity as irreducible to objectivity. But first we need to understand the relation between the interviewee's experience and her description of it. When one poses the doubt of whether the description of an experience corresponds to an actual experience, one falls prey to the confusion between objectivity and subjectivity. The presupposition that an experience is like any object is implicit in that doubt. This further implies that descriptions of an experience can be 'final or complete', where they can be treated as 'data', static and subject to 'reproducibility'. From a phenomenological perspective, experience is not a thing one can retroactively turn to. There is no fixed diachronic stability that is hidden inside one's head (Krueger, 2014) which can be dug up from memory. It is embodied and enacted in the world together with other experiencing subjects. The embodied, enactive and embedded foundations of subjectivity is the fourth phenomenological commitment. Memory does not affect the foundations of phenomenological analysis due to this commitment. In the first tier, we are not testing how the descriptions of experiences are accurate representations of the experiences as it happened at a particular time. They are rather a different manifestation of the same experience. Experience can take different shapes – reflecting and describing are no falsification of experience, but an opening up of it. Rich and nuanced descriptions of the experience are gathered through explorative interaction. The hermeneutical dimension of the methodological approach to experience is inescapable. As Varela and Shear (1999) says, "..every examination is an interpretation, and all interpretation

reveals and hides at the same time." But this does not in any way mean that any description of an experience is a 'deformed' version of what it 'really' is.

Choosing to engage in a phenomenological interview

Classical phenomenology has not engaged with interviews. Generating knowledge through interview takes a great deal of time. So, why is it justified and worthwhile to engage in phenomenological interview?

A methodological tool in phenomenology, a genre of the classical thought experiment, was 'eidetic variation'. It is "using our imagination to strip away the unessential properties of things" (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). However, Zahavi suggests that imagination can successfully be supplemented by real-life deviations. Interviews can be used for factual variation but it is always preferable to engage in the process oneself rather than interpreting the results of other researchers. The pitfalls of relying on other researchers' results can be seen in the "Schneider problem" in Merleau-Ponty's reading of a case by researchers Gelb and Goldstein. Another researcher's data can be treated in the third person only, which is then used philosophically for factual variation. There is an epistemological discontinuity between others' data and own interpretation. In contrast, in a phenomenological interview, designed in two tiers, knowledge remains open to being revisited and reinterpreted. In case of ambiguities at the level of description, one can return to the interviewee and ask for clarification.

The embodied and embedded nature of experience makes the co-generated knowledge in phenomenological interview unique. Body, socio environmental context etc., partly constitute experience, and hence it follows that in order to understand experience thoroughly one should include a consideration of enaction, embodiment and embeddedness in the general method. Lately, as means of collecting data, researchers have begun to use journals, literature, songs, visual media etc. Most of these methods fall short in capturing the experiences in one or the other seven fractions of lifeworld that Ashworth (2006) proposes to use in the analysis and explicitation of data.

Phenomenological interview is a dominant method for data collection in phenomenological research as it provides a situation where the participants' descriptions can be explored, illuminated and gently probed (Kvale, 1996). "What one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through." Giorgi (2009, p. 122). The aim of phenomenological interviewing is to identify the invariant structure of experience. This is how it differs from mere introspection (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008).

Even though interview is mostly floated as a qualitative method for data collection, it is imperative that the design of the interview derives from its philosophical, methodological paradigm- which in this study is the phenomenological paradigm. Interview is used as a generic method without really giving much thought as to how it should be used in a particular methodology. Interview should originate from a methodological paradigm and must be discussed accordingly. Every interview is understood as situated in a meaning-making context since there exists the possibility of multiple interpretations of reality. The acknowledgement of the

relationship between the philosophical tradition and the method is what distinguishes this interview from its other forms. For instance, one point of difference is seen in the relationship between the researcher and the participant. It moves from observational in quantitative research, to dialogical in qualitative research, and then to reflective in phenomenological research (Munhall & Oiler Boyd, 1993). The interview enables the investigator to explore, gather data, and develop a rich and deep understanding of the participant's experience while engaging in a dialogue (van Manen, 1997). Concrete examples and stories from the participants form the foundation for abstraction of meaning and illustration of resilience, rather than direct/defining statements from them about resilience. The use of dialogue is essential in assessing knowledge claims, and storytelling promotes the kind of dialogue that is rooted in the culture of the women who are part of this research. It also provides contextual grounding in the means of locating one's self and helps clarify the lens one uses to view the world. Stories are not mere embellishments, they reaffirm the ways of knowing of these women. Written descriptions can also be additionally used. The responsibility to establish rapport and trust, encouraging the participant to provide concrete and specific responses and keeping the focus of the interview on the experience of resilience, all fall within the role of the researcher.

The phenomenological interview, in Seidman's (2006) terms, is a structured, three-stage process, which begins by establishing the context of the interviewees experience, through to a construction of the experience and finally a reflection on the meaning it holds. The progression of the interview will be influenced by the nature of the relationship/interaction that occurs. Structuring the interview might seem contradictory to the phenomenological method, especially the unstructured interviews described by Koch (1995). But even the most unstructured interview will have some underlying structure, no matter how vague, in order to maintain the focus on the phenomenon under investigation. It is also apparent that many research questions must arise from the researcher and therefore a conceptual map of the phenomenon already exists. Here the understanding of structure need not necessarily be in what to ask but rather on how to manage the process of questioning. The term semi-structured interviewing is interpreted by many in the sense that they should be overly prepared and consequently work out a dozen or so questions before a phenomenological interview. Such attempts end up in leading the participant instead of directing them. The idea of a semi-structured interview is, for instance, two large questions that will get the information necessary for the phenomenon under inquiry. There is the process of asking for clarifications, questions and prompts that are interspersed in the interview process. However, these are following and dependent on the responses of the interviewees. By integrating the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, Seidman, Kvale and Brinkmann (Ricoeur, 1976; Seidman, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), Bevan (2014) developed a structure for phenomenological interviewing consisting of three main domains

- contextualization (natural attitude and life- world),
- apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing, natural attitude), and
- clarifying the phenomenon (imaginative variation and meaning)

Interviewing is an embodied skill to be acquired and hence an exhaustive manual of its practicality cannot be provided. The focus of the interview is not just to understand the experience of the subject, but importantly to understand the invariant phenomenological structures of these experiences. Depending on this premise, the interview questions are differently oriented from that of anthropologists, sociologists etc. The subject's focus of attention is directed from general descriptions of experience to particular singular lived experience, "by repeatedly reenacting and evoking selected time slices of the targeted singular experience situated in time and space" (Høffding & Martiny, 2015).

There exists epistemological continuity between generation of data and the subsequent interpretation. The questions asked during a phenomenological interview must originate from the research questions. The empirical questions are framed differently than the research questions, though. The statements from tier one data are transcribed and then relevant categories are generated in the second tier. The second tier is interpretive in nature. This is important due to the reciprocal nature of the encounter during interviews and the co-generation of descriptions by the interviewer and the interviewee. Continuity is seen at the initial levels of interviewing but throughout and at the stage of analysis as well.

Questions would be asked in the vocabulary and language of the individual being interviewed. This would help reduce theoretical terms and implies a form of phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 1970). Contextualized questions help the participant to reconstruct and describe their experiences as a narrative (Wertz, 2005). Description of accounts of places, events, actions and activities would highlight areas for further questioning apart from giving the contextual idea. The context informs the meaning and since there is no view from nowhere, it is essential to situate the context of the experience for the participant (Van Kaan, 1966). The mode of appearance of the phenomenon or experience for the participant is elicited in detail through the descriptive contextual questions.

Continuing from the discussion above, tier one would entail asking contextual questions to reconstruct the horizon of experiences of the participants. This would give pointers as to the nature of questions to be asked in tier two, which would make detailed enquiry into the meaning of the experiences.

Pragmatics of the interview

Interviewing is an embodied skill, that is one can only learn to conduct an interview by doing it. One cannot provide an exhaustive manual of its pragmatics. Nevertheless, one can read up on good rules of thumb and examples of best practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In a phenomenological interview the interviewer must focus on leading the interviewee from describing experiences in general to descriptions of a particular lived experience. Sometimes you see that what you get are beliefs about a past experience rather than actual descriptions of it. The interviewer then has to repeatedly bring the interviewee to evoke the selected time slices of the targeted singular experience situated in time and space. This can only be achieved when one brings the interviewee to suspend other concerns and turn her attention from the 'why' and 'what' of the experience to the 'how' of its givenness. This is essentially the idea of performing phenomenological reduction. The use of 'open' questions,

taking inspiration from Ericksonian language, without introducing biases in their formulation or suggesting possible answers/concepts useful for verbalizing them, is the only way to encourage the interviewee to move into a pre-reflective dimension of consciousness.

One can't control how people choose to express their experiences. They might resort to a narrative account, use of analogy, chronology or significant events. The interviewee might assume understanding of the expressions of experience on the part of researcher. It is up to the researcher to clarify the interpretations of these expressions and to not take them as already understood. It is for this purpose that the descriptive questions in an interview are supplemented with structural questions. These two kinds of questions complement each other and add depth and quality to the information obtained. When a participant offers an interpretative statement, the researcher can ask a structural question to unpick what is meant by it. This action also demonstrates the commitment to phenomenological attitude, withholding oneself from premature interpretations as well.

For instance, to understand the phenomenon of resilience among widowed women one may guide the interaction with the following questions:

"- it was worse than when I lost my father.

- Why do you say that?
- (…) I seemed to fall from where I was standing. I wouldn't hit the ground. I just kept falling.
- What did you do then?
- (…) I recited Qur'an. For hours. My sister took care of my crying son, I wasn't in a state to do that.
- How did that help you?
- I don't know

When an interviewer is confronted with an "I don't know" is mostly when the interviewee needs further prodding to emerge into the pre reflective dimension. Sometimes the simplest of questions seem to be the complex ones for the interviewee. This can be termed a kind of 'guided bracketing' and aims to avoid getting caught up in the natural attitude that focuses on the contents, and not the structures of experiences. Natural attitude is the normal unreflective mode of being engaged in an already known world. A phenomenon or thing is experienced in many ways from different perspectives (or modes of appearance) and this is an element of natural attitude. It comes effortlessly to the subject. Pre-reflective is that which is "not yet conscious" (Petitmengin, 2007). Prior to the interview, the experiences were not available for reflection and verbalization. Every experience has different layers of descriptions, with degrees of granularity (Vermersch, 2009). The aim of guided bracketing is to arrive at the degree of granularity where the pre reflective layer of lived experience is discursively apparent. The interviewer utilizes devices like bracketing, and open questions to elicit 'reduction' in an interview context. The interviewee stabilizes attention on unusual levels of details, to become aware of pre reflective operations. Bringing in the fourth phenomenological commitment to the pragmatics of an interview, the interviewee must be in a 'speech position' or 'embodied utterance position' indicative of whether she comes in contact with the pre reflective experience (Petitmengin, 2006; Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013). The objective indicators to identify this position can, for example, be the vocabulary used to give the descriptions, the direction of the eyes when giving the descriptions, the flow of the descriptions and the bodily gestures.

In understanding the pre reflective dimension it is easy to confuse it with the psychoanalytic concept of unconscious, and further with introspection. An experience is not something purely internal to dig out. When asked to recount an experience, it is enacted, a different manifestation in a different temporal and/or spatial setting. It does not have object-like properties that helps one 'get closer to' it. The spectrum of noticed/unnoticed is a better comparison to explain pre reflective. That is, pre reflective is what becomes accessible in the interview, explained by the interviewee when realizing the richness of the experiences she lived through. It is not always necessary that the interviewees are able to see the structural dimensions of their experiences and give verbal descriptions of it. The second tier of phenomenological analysis of co-generated descriptions are intended to perform this task. For instance, when asked to talk about themselves in the study by this researcher, most of the women had nothing to go by. They were not used to being asked about themselves. One can be reminded of how the simplest questions turn out to be the complex ones in this instance. "I" was mostly talked of in relation to another person as far as these women were concerned. The researcher was in a dilemma of whether to modify the question or to let it be the probe that helps the women move out of their natural attitude and be forced to look at themselves. But since the content of descriptions were not the ultimate focus of a phenomenological interview it was decided to keep the question. The analysis in tier two benefitted immensely from this question.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I think that this process, which is built over two methodologically distinct, but overlapping processes, can guarantee the phenomenological value of an interview. A phenomenological interview must be used to acquire detailed first-person descriptions of an experience in question. The understanding that subjectivity cannot be reduced to objectivity becomes implicit in the process of the interview. The first-person perspective needs to be understood on its own terms. Phenomenology construes subjectivity as embodied, enactive and embedded. The interview directly confronts us with these aspects of experience.

One must be empathetically present with the interviewee and at the same time consult one's phenomenological background knowledge to generate descriptions that are as detailed and clear as possible. Interview is an embodied skill, the pragmatics of which cannot fit into any one manual. Nevertheless, asking open questions, using structural questions to encourage emergence of consciousness into pre reflective dimension, looking for objective indicators of speech position etc., prove useful during interview process.

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