Some Basic Existential-Phenomenological Research Methodology for Counsellors

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Abstract

This paper describes the major characteristics of existential-phenomenological research methodology for counsellors. The following topics are discussed: philosophical foundations, formulating the question, selection of participants, bracketing, data sources, data analysis, reliability and validity. The similarity of qualities needed for success as a counsellor and existential-phenomenological researcher are presented as a basis for advocating their integrative practice.

Résumé
Cet article décrit les points saillants de la méthodologie de la recherche existentielle-phénoménologique pour les conseillers. Les sujets suivants sont discutés: les fondements philosophiques, la formulation de questions, la sélection des participants, les regroupements, les sources des données, l'analyse des données, la véracité et la validité. La similarité des qualités nécessaires pour assurer le succès en tant que conseiller et comme chercheur existentiel-phénoménologique est présentée comme base pour défendre leur pratique intégrative.

As contemporary disenchantment with traditional natural science methodology, within the human sciences, has grown, there has been a parallel increase in the interest in qualitative research methodologies. The traditional antithesis between psychological practice and research has proved to be more apparent than real, while the attempt to develop a science of human behaviour has fallen short. Rigour has been achieved by restricting the focus of inquiry to that which has been amenable to natural science. A growing number of psychologists are unwilling to accept the decontextualization of experience and reduced meaning as a necessary price for the elusive goal of scientific objectivity. For some counsellors and psychotherapists there is a sense in which the current resurgence of descriptive/qualitative methodology is a kind of "coming home." Phenomenological research methodology is one qualitative research method which, I hope to show, has a close affinity with counselling practice, and is therefore worthy of careful consideration as a research methodology which stays closer to the meaning of human experience. This paper is an introductory overview and not a complete treatment of phenomenological research methodology. The reader will find more details in the articles referenced in this paper.

Philosophical Foundations

Before I discuss the "how" of phenomenological research I would like to briefly explain its philosophical foundations. Edmund Husserl, generally

considered to be the father of phenomenology, reasoned that if consciousness is our primordial window on the world, then an understanding of human knowledge would be best based upon an understanding of consciousness. Husserl used critical reflection and description to study the structures, rather than the contents, of consciousness. Husserl's famous dictum "unto the things themselves" characterized his attempt to plumb the depths of consciousness.

Husserl's most significant contribution to the understanding of consciousness is the notion of intentionality. His use of the term does not refer to purpose in the everyday sense, but to the fact that consciousness always has an object. Even when we think that we are not conscious of anything we are, in fact, conscious of not being conscious of anything. The concept of intentionality is synonymous with the existential-phenomenological view that we are *of* the world rather than in it. Such a view considers the person to be already existing coconstitutionally with his/her world. Reality is both construed by the subject and mirrored from the object out-there. The subject-object dualism is eliminated by the notion of coconstitutionality. Person and world constitute an interdependent unity.

There are a number of important implications of such a view for human science. We cannot compartmentalize each other. We cannot consider the environment independent of the ways in which people construe their environments (Bandura, 1978; Page, 1972) nor can we consider persons' experiences of their environments without considering the ways in which those environments have influenced persons' experiences of them.

If, as claimed by existential-phenomenology, all knowledge is human knowledge and apprehended through our phenomenal experience, then the study of phenomenal experience is a good starting place for developing an understanding of what it is to be human (ontology). The focus of such an approach is the understanding of persons' experiences of their world(s) and not the generation of explanatory laws (Giorgi, 1970). Generalizability, for such an approach to human experience, is based upon emphatic understanding rather than statistical explanatory procedures. Phenomenological research follows the tradition of descriptive science and not explanatory science (Giorgi, 1986). Exploration and description of human experience may well lead to later hypothesis testing but should not be thought of as an inferior preliminary step towards the ultimate goal of explanatory science. Descriptive science is a science in its own right.

The Question

The first step in doing phenomenological research is to frame the question the researcher seeks to answer. What is the phenomenon that the

researcher seeks to illuminate? At first this may seem a simple task, but usually the question is difficult to circumscribe. For example, a study of the phenomenon of childbirth would have to determine whether the phenomenon included the prenatal and postnatal periods, labour, or just the actual delivery. Such decisions are made on pragmatic grounds dictated by the researcher's interest. A similar situation arises in doing natural science-type research when it comes to defining the context of the research. (What are the independent and dependent variables?) These decisions express values and interpretations which are socially derived and are an inescapable part of research (Gergen, 1985). The researcher is well advised to engage in extended reflection on the determination of "the question." A prior understanding of the phenomenon of interest usually arises from the researcher's experience. However, the downside of such a prior underderstanding is a particular orientation to the phenomenon which may obscure what the data have to say. (This problem will be discussed later in relation to the procedure of bracketing.) Sometimes the researcher may discover that the initial question is not the final question. Interest in a question may also express personal concerns which have not been fully articulated.

Phenomenological research is not intended to test an hypothesis. The aim is to understand a phenomenon by allowing the data to speak for themselves, and by attempting to put aside one's preconceptions as best one can. The method provides us with descriptions of experience which are then interpreted by the researcher from a particular theoretical perspective. However, if there is a structure to the phenomenon it will transcend particular interpretations.

Bracketing

Existential-phenomenology recognizes the unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question, the determination of what are the data, the collection of the data, and their interpretation. Rather than attempt to eradicate or avoid such influences through experimental design, the phenomenological researcher attempts to articulate predispositions and biases through a process of rigorous self-reflection (bracketing); in this way those who read reports of the research will be able to take the researcher's perspective into account (e.g., Freudian or Rogerian interpretive frameworks will result in different renderings of the data). The knowledge coming from such research is not objective but perspectival. Given the researcher's orientation, the reader is then able to judge whether the phenomenon of interest has been illuminated from a particular perspective (Valle & King, 1978).

Interpretation is so pervasive that Gergen (1985) has suggested that science is ultimately an exercise in rhetoric. The scientist has to persuade others that his/her research practices, and the words used to describe

and interpret them, are defensible. The profound difficulty inherent in such a task is that there is no complete correspondence between language and experience (Wittgenstein, 1963). Whether the researcher uses numerical or verbal abstractions the gap between lived-experience and language remains. This is why we need to be careful about accepting verbal utterances at face value whether they be those of the subject or the researcher.

Selection of Co-researchers

Terms such as "participant" or "co-researcher" are preferred to the term "subject" in order to emphasize the co-operative and voluntary nature of the research. Participants are usually fully informed of the nature of the research. An atmosphere of respectful concern for participants, a shared interest in illuminating the phenomenon, and good rapport, are essential for the dialogal relationship between researcher and co-researchers. The researcher aims for accounts of co-researchers' pre-reflective experience rather than cognitive constructions of experience based upon co-researchers' assumptions of what was intended. The aim is to remove as many demand characteristics from the research situation as possible and replace them with a relationship of empathic understanding and trust so that genuine experience will be conveyed.

The number of participants needed is variable. The researcher needs as many participants as it takes to illuminate the phenomenon (Wertz, 1984). Sometimes one person may be sufficient, but usually more than one person is advisable for reasons such as attrition or because some participants may not illuminate the phenomenon. The aim of the research is to achieve perspectival understanding of a phenomenon and identify its structure. The interpreted structure obtained from one person should be found in the experience of other persons, if it has empathic generalizability. Generalizability is established *a posteriori* rather than by *a priori* procedures based upon sampling theory.

Participants should be people who have experienced and can illuminate the phenomenon. Such a prerequisite does not necessarily mean a "verbal" person. Extremely verbal people may express ideas about their experiences rather than the actuality of those experiences. The researcher needs to locate those who can illuminate the phenomenon of interest. For example, in researching the phenomenon of the experience of classical music there would be no point in selecting a person who had no interest in such music. Preliminary interviews with potential participants are a useful way of determining who to use in the research.

What are the Data?

The data are descriptions of experience. Data sources can be spoken or written accounts of phenomenal experience in the form of conversation,

interview, group dialogue, diary, autobiography, and personal narrative. Becker (1986) and Kvale (1983) have thoroughly discussed the use of the interview as a major means of gathering data for phenomenological research. Data may also be non-verbal forms of personal expression such as movement, dance, mime, gesture, etc. However, this form of expressing experience remains to be explored as a source of phenomenological data. If a researcher uses non-verbal expressions of lived-experience as a data base, those expressions still have to be translated into language by an observer (who may or may not be the researcher) who has a particular orientation to the data. The researcher then interprets such descriptions so that non-verbal expressions inevitably become second-hand verbal expressions of experience. What may be helpful in such a situation is to have the experiencer and the researcher describe the experience from introspective and extraspective points of view respectively, then discuss the outcome. Expressions of aesthetic experience such as painting and music avoid the use of language. Nonetheless, interpretations of the meaning of such works of art are expressed verbally in order to be communicated within a community.

Records of *in situ* data such as group processes (dialogue) can provide data which can later be supplemented with additional descriptions from the participants before and after they have listened to or viewed the record of their original experience. For example, a group therapy session may be videotaped and the experiences of individuals and the group analyzed. However, the group's discussion of the videotape of their preceding meeting may also provide data. This process of data collection and discussion functions in the manner of an interpretive circle. The discussion and interpretation of the data generates new data for further interpretation and discussion.

The researcher can also be his/her own data source such as when one writes an autobiography then analyzes it. Data can also be generated by means of imaginative variation (e.g., what would it be like to be the opposite sex?).

Phenomenological methodology accepts the difficulty of representing human experience through language. Although there are non-verbal ways of communicating, most data are in the form of language which, as already mentioned, does not necessarily convey lived-experience unambiguously. The meaning of verbal descriptions has to be interpreted by the researcher. A similar problem confronts natural science's use of numerical representations of human experience.

METHOD

There is no such thing as *the* phenomenological method. Phenomenological methodology is more of an orientation than a specific method. The particular procedure used in any study depends upon the question

being posed. Good rapport between researcher and co-researcher is crucial. Unless rapport and trust are established the researcher is unlikely to get authentic descriptions of a co-researcher's experience. Ethical considerations also enter the situation, for when the researcher has collected her/his data the co-researcher may require continued attention in order to resolve any personal difficulties which may have become more conscious as a result of data collection.

The interview is the most common procedure for data gathering. Becker (1986) discusses a number of interview formats, but the one I believe to be most useful suggests three phases of interviewing. The first-phase interview is used to establish rapport and inform the co-researcher of the nature of the research. The second-phase interview is used for data gathering, usually in the form of open-ended dialogue or interview. The researcher must take care not to "lead the witness." The interview should not be an interrogation aimed at substantiating the hunches of the researcher. Open-ended, minimally structured interviews are more likely to produce data which might otherwise be missed. Reminding oneself that the aim is to allow the data to speak for themselves is advisable. Having a list of aspects of the phenomenon the researcher would like to cover is a good idea, but the co-researcher should not be prompted until s/he has apparently "run out of steam." Active listening (Gordon, 1974) is a valuable skill for the researcher. Co-researchers can also be asked to reflect further upon the phenomenon after they leave the interview and report any additional descriptions to the researcher. More than one data-gathering interview may be needed, especially if co-researchers reflect upon the phonomenon after each interview. Successive data-gathering interviews create a re-spiralling effect and enable a more complete illumination of the phenomenon. The process is similar to a series of therapy sessions. Sometimes the researcher may find that asking the co-researcher to write out a description of his/her experience of the phenomenon prior to the second-phase interview is useful in priming the co-researcher for the interview. A major advantage of asking co-researchers to write out their experiences is that the researcher is spared the task of transcribing video or audio tapes. The price for this convenience may be a loss of some data.

Data Analysis

The method of data analysis also depends upon the purpose of the researcher. There is no orthodoxy here either. The procedures I shall discuss are those which have been discussed in the literature and are relatively common (Alapack, 1986; Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1975). I recommend these analytic procedures especially for those who may be unfamiliar with phenomenological methodology.

Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1975) describe a fairly structured tabular presentation of thematic analyses of the data. The researcher begins by reading over the descriptions to get a feel for the data. Each co-researcher's protocol is reduced to simple paraphrases. This is done on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The theme(s) of each sentence is interpreted. The themes are then clustered in a way similar to a rational factor analysis. Clusters of themes are clustered into higher-order clusters. This hierarchical procedure may produce a higher-order cluster of themes which defines the structure of the phenomenon. The final structure can be presented in schematic form or as a figure (e.g., Osborne & Kennedy, 1985) and as a written synthesis (e.g., Alapack, 1986; Stevick, 1971). Performing this kind of analysis for each co-researcher constitutes a within persons analysis.

The final shared thematic structure can be presented in tabular form, as a schematic, or as a written synthesis. Whether the researcher chooses to present data in tabular and/or written form is a pragmatic decision which depends on the writing ability and preferences of the researcher and the audience for which the text is intended (e.g., most mainstream psychologists are comfortable with tabular presentations of data). Phenomenological researchers who have highly developed interpretive and writing skills may decide to immerse themselves in the data and present the phenomena as a descriptive narrative (Alapack, 1986). This approach is not recommended for the novice researcher.

Interpreting the data rather than doing a content analysis is a major difficulty for most beginning phenomenological researchers. The researcher's interpretation of the co-researcher's experience is not simply based upon the literal meaning of the words used in the description. The child who asks "what time is it?" might really be communicating hunger, boredom or other possibilities which can be interpreted.

The researcher's focus is upon the deep structure of meaning rather than surface linguistic structure. A skilled phenomenological researcher "reads between the lines" as s/he looks for deep structures which characterize the phenomenon in much the same way that a Jungian or Freudian analyst seeks to unearth archetypal or oedipal structures. The notable exception is that the phenomenological researcher is looking for structures to present themselves rather than looking for a structure based upon a preconceived theory.

The interpretive process depends upon the researcher's sensitivity and perceptiveness in relating to the data. The orientation which the researcher brings to the data shapes its interpretation. Data analysis is the interaction of the intentionalities of both researcher and co-researcher; a good reason for dialogue between the two as interpretation proceeds. Interpretations are perspectival and need to be presented much as a lawyer presents an argument to a judge. The ultimate acceptance of the

researcher's interpretations depends, in part, upon her/his rhetorical skill. Potential researchers who do not possess the types of interpersonal, clinical, analytic and rhetorical skills described in this paper are probably best advised to use alternative research methods which are more compatible with their personalities and talents.

The final shared structure must be shared by all participants. However, all aspects of the structure may not appear in each co-researcher's description. If most co-researchers exhibit aspects of a shared structure, the researcher can ask those co-researchers who did not allude to apparently common aspects, whether or not this omission is a valid representation of their experience. Based upon the presumption that missing aspects of what would otherwise be a common structure have simply been overlooked, the researcher can assemble a synthesis of what appears to be a shared structure for most participants and then check the accuracy of this presumption with each participant. Participants will often accept a structural description of the phenomenon which they claim fits their experience even though they may have overlooked particular aspects of the phenomenon during data collection. The practice of re-spiralling interviews and interpretations described earlier is one way of minimizing such apparent gaps in the data. Nonetheless, sometimes participants will share common, but not all, aspects of a phenomenologically derived structure. It is the shared structure which is most important to the phenomenological researcher.

An Orientation to Reliability and Validity

Any consideration of reliability and validity must begin by acknowledging that phenomenological research methodology is based upon different metatheoretical assumptions to those used in natural science (Wertz, 1986). Natural science research aims at objectivity through explanation, control and prediction, while phenomenological research aims at the elucidation of meaning and understanding of human existence from an individual's point of view. Natural science methodology looks for statistical generalizability while phenomenological research strives for empathic generalizability. Natural science looks to a reality in itself while phenomenology looks to the actuality of human lived-experience as the primordial reality. Natural science is an explanatory science while existential-phenomenological research is descriptive science (Giorgi, 1986).

Reliability

Although reliability in natural science psychology generally refers to consistency, replicability and stability of measurement, considerations of validity inevitably enter into procedures which aim to assess reliability. When samples are drawn from the sampling domain, this procedure

depends upon the researcher's conception of the universe to be sampled. The researcher must also employ conceptions of what constitutes true and error variance. Reliability is always context bound. One never assesses reliability in the abstract. Measurement is always measurement of something which has to be conceptualized in order to be measured (validity). The nature of the construct being measured will have an effect upon how it is to be measured (reliability). The intrinsic interrelationship of reliability and validity results in conceptual ambiguity (Wertz, 1986).

The phenomenological researcher's approach to reliability is based upon the observation that human perception is perspectival and contextual. Although there may be several interpretive perspectives on the same phenomenon, sameness (reliability) can arise out of the inconsistency, variability and relativity of human perception. The basis of social reality (common sense) is intersubjective agreement. Interpersonal differences in experience of a phenomenon are analogous to binocular disparity (Wertz, 1986). For example, different interviewers of different co-researchers produce situations which are never repeatable but which provide multiple perspectives which can lead to a unified description of a shared phenomenon. Phenomenological research focuses upon meaning rather than facts. Stable meaning can transcend variable facts. Such reflected subjectivity may be superior to technical objectivity (Kvale, 1983).

The major risk of unreliability and invalidity resides in the interpretive process for, as Kvale (1983) notes, the researcher can "read the data as the devil reads the bible." We must remember that there is no absolute interpretation of the data and that interpretations can produce contradictory as well as coherent meanings. The best the researcher can do is to argue a particular interpretation as persuasively as possible, supported by references to the data, and leave the final judgement to the reader.

Validity

There are four major ways in which the validity of a phenomenological researcher's interpretations can be assessed. First, by bracketing his/her orientation to the phenomenon and carefully describing the procedure and data analysis, the researcher provides the reader with the opportunity to understand his/her interpretations of the data. Even though the reader may disagree with the researcher's interpretation of the data s/he is able to understand how the researcher arrived at that interpretation (Giorgi, 1975).

Second, during collection and interpretation of the data the researcher can check interpretations for goodness of fit with the co-researchers. Dialogue between the co-researchers and researcher is a good way of checking the congruence of the researcher's interpretations

with participants' accounts of their experiences. Sometimes participants may reject a researcher's interpretations even though they may be valid. Such situations can result from participants' defensiveness (e.g., denial, transference, rationalization, etc.). For this reason this second method of assessing validity is suggestive rather than definitive.

Third, the most crucial means of validating interpretations of phenomenological data is the juridical process of presenting coherent and convincing arguments. As Gergen (1985) has noted, the interpretive process is dependent upon rhetoric which convinces members of the research community.

Fourth, the final check on the validity of the interpreted structure of the phenomena depends upon the extent to which that structure resonates with the experiences of other people, not in the study, who have experienced the phenomenon (Shapiro, 1986). For example, the structure of the phenomenon of childbirth should resonate with the experience of others, not in the study, who have experienced childbirth.

Counsellors and Phenomenological Research

Counsellors I know who have done phenomenological research have almost invariably told me that they have learned as much about understanding human existence from their research as they have from their practice. The reason for this is probably that phenomenological research methodology remains close to the actuality of experience. In the past, counselling researchers felt constrained to use quantitative research methods in order to strengthen the credibility of their theories of counselling (e.g., Carkhuff, 1967; Rogers & Dymond, 1954). Nowadays, counselling researchers need no longer feel compelled to use quantitative methods. In fact, descriptive methodologies, such as phenomenology, allow the counselling researcher to investigate aspects of human experience which were previously neglected because they were not amenable to quantification (e.g., the "inner life").

Doing phenomenological research requires that the researcher have personality characteristics and skills used by counsellors. The capacity for empathic understanding and interpersonal communication skills is crucial. The relationship between researcher and co-researcher parallels the relationship between counsellor and client. The two parties co-constitute a relationship. The researcher is part of the co-researcher's experience just as the counsellor is part of the client's experience; there is a truth for the co-researcher and a truth for the client. There is considerable positive transfer between the context of counselling practice and counselling research.

Inevitably, as Brammer (1979) argues, helpers engage in informal research as they collect and interpret data from their clients. Some of the data which clients present to counsellors is undeniably phenomenologi-

cal. Whether realized or not, counsellors use procedures which are similar to those used in phenomenological research. Clinical diagnosis and the interpretation of phenomenological research data demand a hermeneutically oriented approach which requires not only a perceptive intelligence but a kind of pathic knowing which enables the counsellor or researcher to read between the lines or pursue clinical hunches. Both practices rely upon building an argument for a particular interpretation of the data. There are, of course, several interpretations for most data sets.

A counsellor needs to be aware of his/her own value orientation (Brammer, 1979) and feelings and this awareness parallels the phenomenological researcher's procedure of bracketing. Personal qualities such as warmth, caring, openness, positive regard for others, ethical integrity and responsibility are important requisites for both counsellors and phenomenological researchers. Both are primarily interested in understanding the life-world of another, unless the counsellor uses an arms-length technique which avoids an intimate relationship with the client. Even behaviour therapists, thanks in part to the work of Bandura (1978) and others (Kaufman, Baron & Kopp, 1966; Page, 1972), have recognized that how the client construes the therapy has a powerful influence upon its efficacy.

The reasons why phenomenological research methodology complements counselling practice seems obvious. Many of the same personality characteristics and interpersonal skills are required in both fields. No doubt there are counsellors who are more comfortable with a natural science orientation to research. There are also practicing counsellors whose approach is based upon a metatheory which is different to the existential-phenomenological metatheory expressed here. However, if we consider that counselling practice has been heavily influenced by existential-phenomenological thought (e.g., May, Maslow, Perls, Rogers, Shostrom, etc.) then the interface of counselling and phenomenological research methodology seems appropriate.

Until recently the hegemony of natural science-type research methodology has tended to exert a strong influence upon counselling research in the form of statistically oriented studies. Some counsellors have experienced a dissonance between their practice and research. Aspects of lived-experience, commonly observed during practice, were either inaccessible to prevailing quantitative methods or distorted by the need to operationalize the quality to be measured. There was often a tension between "soft" practice and "hard" research. There is no longer any need for counselling research to remain tied to statistically oriented research methodology. Phenomenology is one of several qualitative research methodologies which researchers are using more often these days. Descriptive interpretive research methodologies are more compat-

ible with the so-called "soft" approaches to counselling and psychotherapy. Counsellors need no longer have reservations about the respectability of such research methods. Decriptive research methodologies are neither more nor less rigorous or interpretive than statistically based research methods. Phenomenological research is no less empirical than traditional "empirical" research methodologies unless the term "empirical" is to be defined as meaning experimental⸱rather than experiential. The integration of counselling practice with phenomenological research methodology, for those whose approach to counselling is more influenced by human science than natural science, can strengthen both by removing any antithesis between practice and research and replacing it with a metatheoretical unity.

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