# Developing Phenomenological Method for Researching Lesbian Existence

Rowena J. Hunnisett
*University of Victoria*

Résumé

Cet article affirme une relation complémentaire entre la méthode phénoménologique et la théorie féministe pour ensuite développer un outil de recherche propre à l'étude des lesbiennes dans leurs communautés. La comparaison de trois méthodes phénoménologiques produit une nouvelle approche comportant des innovationsméthodologiques dans les techniques d'entrevue et dans l'analyse des données.Les résultats de l'étude en question sont résumés. On donne un aperçu des dangers et des défis que pose la recherche phénoménologique, et on relève les implications de cette méthode pour les scientifiques et les intervenant(e)s.

Abstract

This paper argues a complementary relationship between phenomenological method and feminist theory; then develops a research method suited to the study of lesbians in their communities. A comparison of three phenomenological methods produces one new method with methodological innovations in interviewing, mapping and data analysis. Findings of the study under discussion are summarized. Pitfalls and challenges of phenomenological research, and implications for counsellors and researchers are outlined.

## CHOOSING THE METHOD

Phenomenology offers researchers a broad theoretical framework within which to develop a single clearcut method suited to the needs of a specific research project. Those whose philosophical sympathies lie with phenomenology, but who are new to the practice of it may find it challengng to carve their own path through the maze of methodological possibilities. The following is offered as an example of one such path.

The study under review in this article was entitled "A Phenomenological Study of Crisis Experience in a Lesbian Community: Implications for Counsellors" (Hunnisett, 1983). The researcher investigated self-identified lesbians' experience of being in crisis, in the context of living in a lesbian community. A principal underlying assumption of this study was that many helping professionals who work with lesbian clients may be unaware of how being a lesbian affects being in crisis, of what a woman's life as a lesbian is like, or of the nature of the lesbian community. The study sought to educate counsellors about lesbian lifestyle, the lesbian community, and the subjective experience of being a lesbian in crisis.

Phenomenology was chosen as the appropriate method for this study for a number of reasons.

1. In phenomenology the participants' subjective reality is valued.

2. Since phenomenology is the science/art of meaning-creation (Valle & King, 1978), the meaning of certain aspects of lesbian existence could be made clearer for counsellors.

3. Phenomenology concerns itself as much with the structure of experience as with the content: the intent of this study was to focus on the structure of crisis experience for lesbians, as well as the specific content of the experience.

4. The phenomenological perspective requires that we try to understand events and experience in a relational context: this was consistent with the idea that lesbian crisis experience should be viewed in the context of the lesbian community.

5. The phenomenological concept of *dialogue* assumes that the researcher is in a spontaneous, receptive relationship with the participant: this kind of relationship encourages the researcher to elicit the participant's co-operation in developing an accurate reflection of the person's experience.

## DEFINITIONS

Having decided that phenomenology was the appropriate method for the study, the next step was to define those concepts central to phenomenology which would guide this study. A brief summary of those definitions follows:

- *objectivity*: "fidelity to phenomena" (Colaizzi, 1978), which means describing in a way that is consistent with the participants, rather than imposing one's world on them.

- *the dialogal relationship*: the researcher and the participant are always in communication and that communication influences the recollection of experience.

- *co-constituancy*: the researcher and the participant constitute together the world created by the piece of research being done, therefore, one person cannot be the "object" under study.

- *reflective experience*: the formulation of meaning out of experience in the framework of culture and language.

- *the structure of experience*: the essence or form of experience; that which makes certain experiences recognizably similar, and therefore, identifiable; the common threads running through the diverse appearances of a phenomenon (Prescott & Valle, 1978).

- *situatedness*: experience is always situated in a context; all experience takes place in-the-world, and therefore cannot be separated from the world.

- *explication*: the step-by-step process of analysis and description of experience. In explicating one attempts to reveal the meaning to the reader on the basis of the material gathered.


## PHENOMENOLOGY AND FEMINISM

The second step taken before working out the practical details of the method was to address the theoretical biases of the resercher. Two major influences were identified: the work of the phenomenologist Van Eckartsberg and the philosophy and politics of feminism.

Von Eckartsberg (1979) has written about what he called "culture-building." He pointed out that

we can no longer study the individual either in isolation as a segmentally responsive organism or as an undifferentiated member of a general species. . . . We have to take the given and developing cultural differences, endowments, traditions, vested interests and social groupings into account. (p. 229)

Since lesbians had for the most part not been studied in the context of their communities (Krieger, 1982), and this study sought to rectify that, Von Eckartsberg's perspective seemed appropriate to a study such as this one. This concept of community as a "spiritual tribe" and as a "fellowship in consciousness" fit with lesbians' and researchers' descriptions of living in a lesbian community (Lewis, 1979; Wolf, 1979).

One of the ways that a shared consciousness is developed is through the telling of stories. Stories are "the most simple form of meaning-creation and meaning-communication" (Von Eckartsberg, 1979, p. 233). The personal stories of women in this study were the foundation of the study. The exposition of the meaning of these stories is the task of the phenomenologist. The phenomenologist and the participant collaborate in an act that Von Eckartsberg calls culture-building. Culture-building is the communication and preservation of knowledge about our fellowship in consciousness.

The feminist movement has regarded the telling of stories by individual women who spoke out of their personal experience as a basic building-block for feminist consciousness. Experience is the matrix out of which meaning evolves, from which we analyse our social condition and develop feminist theory to describe and explain the condition of being a woman (Daly, 1978).

Phenomenology is a research tool for understanding the nature of our relationship to the world. By harnessing the phenomenological method to a feminist perspective we can broaden the scope of research to encompass the social and political world that we all inhabit. The domain of feminism is the relationship between individual lives and political-social realities. This methodology involved the synthesis of feminist culture-building and phenomenological research.

## THE METHOD

The third step involved working out the practical details of the method. I compared three different presentations of the phenomenological method, each of which described the process of research in a clear, step-by-step manner. My own method was created using this comparison as a starting point. I chose Colaizzi (1978), de Monteflores (1978), and de Koning (1979). Colaizzi communicated a strong sense of the underlying rationale of phenomenology and a feeling for the spirit of the method. De Koning's presentation of the method was chosen as a concrete example of how this method can be applied to a specific piece of research. De Monteflores' method was used because it was the one example found to date of phenomenology being used in a study on lesbians.

The fourth column below included those steps that were common to all three writers, some that may have been peculiar to only one writer but still seemed to be useful (such as Colaizzi's decision to "interrogate presuppositions" (see p. 7), and additional steps to meet my own research needs for investigating this topic.

TABLE 1

*Comparison of Phenomenological Research Steps*

| Colaizzi (1978) | de Monteflores (1978) | de Koning (1979) | Hunnisett (1983) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | generate general questions |
| | select participants | | select participants |
| interrogate pre-suppositioms e.g., why am I involved with phenomenon especially personal biases and possible gains | | | examine personal involvement in this study, e.g., why am I involved in this study, especially personal biases and possible gains |
| state presupposition about focus of research e.g., what would I experience? | state own assumptions about focus of research | | answer same questions as participants |
| generate research questions from own description of of experience | | | generate further questions from own description and from professional literature |
| | state how assumptions affect interviews; ongoing analysis of assumptions through interviews | | state expectations that emerge from personal experience and professional literature |

| Colaizzi (1978) | de Monteflores (1978) | de Koning (1979) | Hunnisett (1983) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | prepare participants for interviews; plan interviews | | prepare participants for interviews; plan interviews |
| interview using "imaginative listening" | interview; adopt attitude of receptivity, tape | | first interview adopt attitude of receptivity; use "imaginative listening"; take notes |
| collect descriptions | write description of each participant's behaviour and inter-action after each interview | | write background for participant, manner and interaction after first interview; update after second |
| | transcribe interviews | | transcribe notes into longhand; organize under main questions: the experience of being a lesbian, the experi-ence of living in a lesbian community, the experience of being in crisis |
| | | | have participant read notes and make comments |
| | | | second interview; taped. Discuss notes, clarify meanings, explore further |
| read and get a feel for descriptions | read transcripts and protocols carefully | read description and get a feel for it | read notes listen to tape; get a feel for both |
| | | | integrate tape and notes |
| | | | state topics under discussion in margins of interview transcripts |
| extract significant statements | mark central themes and delimit meaning units | delineate meaning transitions with respect to focus of research | underline significant statements with respect to focus of research; delimit meaning units; state themes |
| | cluster themes for individual partici-pants. Categorize clusters on basis of participant's emphasis | relate meaning units to each other and whole | create "maps" for being a lesbian, living in a lesbian community, being in crisis |
| | develop situated structure for each participant | paraphrase meaning units into psycho-logical language | develop situated structure of being a lesbian, living in a lesbian community, and being in crisis for each participant |

| Colaizzi (1978) | de Monteflores (1978) | de Koning (1979) | Hunnisett (1983) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | underline significant statements and restate themes from the situated structure |
| | develop general structure of experience for each participant | | using situated structures, maps, and stated themes, develop general structure of being in crisis in a lesbian community for each participant |
| organize all meanings into clusters of themes for all participants using common themes | | | cluster common themes for all participants |
| validate themes; modify as necessary | | | |
| write exhaustive description of fundamental structure of experience | use latter to develop general structure for all participants | synthesize and integrate insights into structure for focus of research | using common themes and general structure of experience for each participant, develop general structure for all participants |
| validate with participants and modify as necessary | | | validate results with participants and modify as necessary |

Major modifications and additions to other studies' practices found in the researcher's column were then reviewed. The method of selecting participants, the questions that were generated for the study, and a description of my personal assumptions about being a lesbian in crisis in a lesbian community are not included below. Should reader wish further detail on these areas they are referred to the study itself.

## RATIONALE FOR METHODOLOGICAL CHANGES

The major modifications and additions to other studies' practices were in the interviewing stage and in the development of the situated structure.

The first of the two interviews with each participant was not taped; the second was. The decision not to tape but to take notes was a practical one. The first interviews lasted two and a half hours each, which allowed time for participants to build trust with me and to relax into the subject matter. Had these interviews been taped the amount of material to be transcribed, together with the second interview, would have been considerable in relation to the framework of this study. The

potential problem was that my attention would be too selective, impor-
tant statements might be lost, and confusing statements might be
ignored.

The notes were taken in shorthand and were as verbatim as I could
make them. Between the first and second interview the notes were
written out in longhand and organized under the three theses discussed
in the interviews: the experiences of being a lesbian, living in a lesbian
community, and being in crisis. The participant was asked to read these
notes prior to the second interview and write down any distortions,
omissions, or additions. The participant wrote her comments and
brought these, with the notes, to the second interview, which was taped
and took place within two weeks of the first interview. During this
interview the participant's comments were heard, explanations of points
of confusion were given, and new areas of discussion were explored.

Upon listening to the tapes later, I integrated all modifications and
relevant additions with the original notes. Relevance was judged by
whether new material was appropriate to the subject matter of the
study. When the section for each participant was written, it was read to
her so that any final comments or adjustments could be made.

The taping and feedback system considerably lessened the likelihood
that important material was missed or that distortions would persist.

The situated structure was developed by various means, some of
which were traditional to phenomenology and some of which were not.
After getting a feel for the material, underlining significant words,
labelling and clustering themes, and delineating meaning units, I
created what I called a map for each person. I created simplified maps
for two areas—being a lesbian and living in a lesbian community—and
a more complex map for the experience of being in crisis. The section for
each participant called "the experience of being in crisis" was considered
thematically in terms of crisis experiences, feelings, responses, and the
relationship to the community. I drew concentric circles on a separate
piece of paper, labelling each circle with one of the above themes. All
feelings experienced in crisis were placed in one circle, all responses in
another and so on. I read through the text, placing all key words within
the circles. Then I went through the text again, and when the key words
were linked in sentences or within a paragraph through the meaning of
the section, I drew lines joining words from one circle to another. For
example, one particpant had stated:

At that point I definitely went to the lesbian community, I felt all the pain. I was
so full of jealousy, possessiveness, anger, and frustration, I laid everything on
myself: if I hadn't been in AA, hadn't been so serious. . . . I blamed myself. Half
the time I was physically sick with upset stomachs and really disturbed and
anxious.

The key words were lifted and placed in different circles according to

their category and then joined. A simplified map, just pertaining to the paragraph, is drawn below.
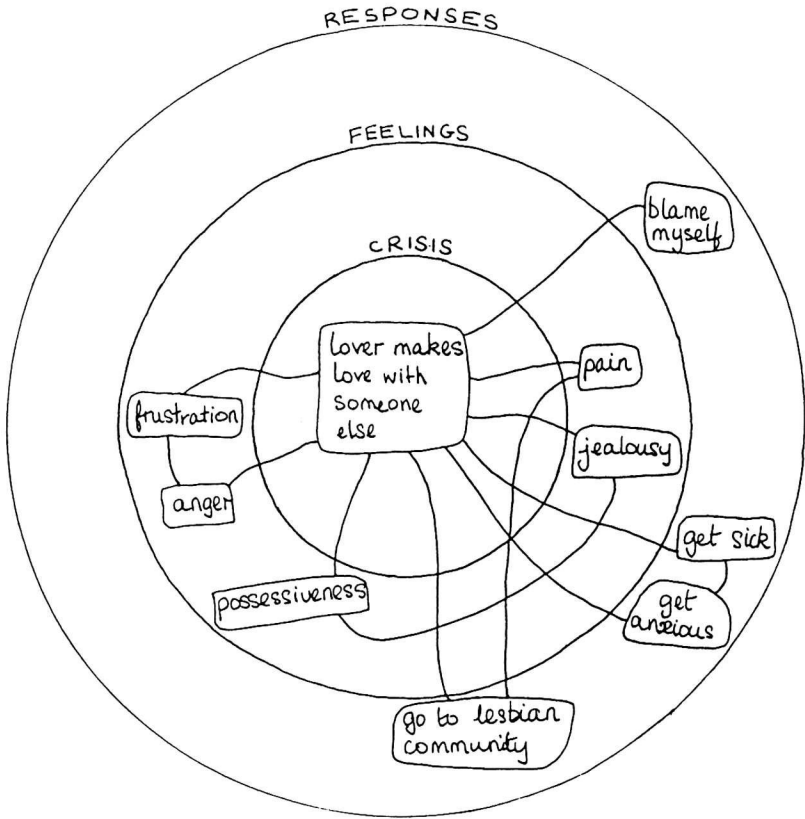


FIGURE 1
*Simplified Example of Map of Crisis Experience*

These maps, whether they were of crisis experience or the experience of being a lesbian, enabled me to see in one look how ideas, thoughts, experiences, and images were interelated. The maps also established where the weight of a person's concern lay. If one word or group of words became the centre of many references in the text, then that constituted an important theme to the participant and was weighted accordingly in the text. The maps also offered a way of systematically ensuring that all key ideas were in some way reflected in the situated and general structure of experience.

## DEVELOPING THE GENERAL STRUCTURE

The general structure of crisis experience in a lesbian community was developed for each individual and then for all the participants, considered as a group.

The general structure was more abstract than the situated structure. An image that clarifies this process of distancing from the situated to the general structure is that of focusing a movie camera close in on an image and all its surrounding images one by one (the situated structure), and then pulling back so that all the images, including the central one, can be seen together (the general structure).

The structural elements for the experience of being a lesbian, living in a lesbian community, and being in crisis were synthesized first at the



FIGURE 2
*Summary Map of Crisis Experience in a*
*Lesbian Community for all Participants*

individual then at the group level. In this way the experience of being in crisis was revealed in context and the themes and common elements could emerge clearly out of the detail of the situated structure.

Crisis experience emerged in a reciprocal relationship to the community. By this I mean that an attempt was made to show how being in crisis affected one's relationship to the community and, reciprocally, how one's relationship to the community affected one's experience of being in crisis. Individual themes that had seemed of particular importance were also retained in an attempt to maintain fidelity to the phenomena.

## RESULTS OF RESEARCH

The method as outlined above was followed in the analysis and explication of the data. Additionally, the maps used in the analysis of the data were developed into visual summaries of the text. They were presented at the end of the section for each participant, and at the end of the section that treated all participants as a group. An example of such a map appears on p. 263. It can be seen that this map summarized the main experiences and themes described in the interviews.

## FINDINGS

The crises described more often had to do with general life issues than specifically with lesbianism. However, there was repeated acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all experience with the framework of a lesbian lifestyle. Participants viewed lesbian existence positively and were mostly happy with their lifestyle. Participants also described stressful or oppressive experiences related to being a lesbian, such as hiding their lesbianism at work or at school.

Participants often saw lesbianism as a breaking with certain traditional standards of behaviour for women. The community was seen to nurture and validate new behaviours. Participants highly valued trusting and sharing in relationships. They were often concerned with balancing autonomy and intimacy both in relationships in the lesbian community. The community was often perceived as an extended family system with the attendant virtues and vices: support, validation, and closeness on the one hand; the pressure to conform or the fear of judgement on the other.

Self-confidence and self-validation played an important part in how isolated or integrated participants felt in the community. The question of one's relationship to the community was sometimes in itself a source of crisis experience. Acceptance by the community and integration as a community member was an issue that most participants had grappled with at some point. This theme was related to the theme of personal

identity both in relation to one's lesbianism and in relation to other aspects of existence, such as the biological family or work.

For some participants a feminist analysis of lesbian oppression and of women's roles helped in gaining a perspective that would be helpful in going through a period of crisis.

In these contexts crises could be both small and large events. They could last from hours to months. Many responses could be made to a crisis including spending time alone and reaching out for social contact or support. Being alone was not something the literature had discussed as a typical response to crisis, yet the participants in this study seemed to value the experience or at the very least acknowledge the significance of being alone in the resolution of crisis. On the other hand support and contact gave the women a sense of connectedness with others, of commonality of experience and a faith in the power of a women's community to provide a secure matrix to their individual lives.

## PITFALLS AND CHALLENGES

Phenomenological research is demanding and challenging. Interviewing and analysing the results of the interviews requires an ability to be very present to the speaker, committed to understanding what she/he says and to expressing both content and personal style accurately.

A difficulty arose in moving from the individual to the group, without losing a sense of the personal and the particular. Developing a general structure of crisis experience in a lesbian community for the whole group required that I move away from the personal and specific into thematic analysis and description. The process of phenomenological research requires a balance between an immediate, intuitive and creative response to the participant, and the necessity of rigorous self-discipline, methodical and clear-sighted analysis; objectivity in the sense of fidelity to phenomena. I discovered that phenomenology was truly a merging of art and science, as Von Eckartsberg (1979) had pointed out.

It is interesting and absorbing to allow one's intuition and creativity some reign in this process. It is also easy to fall prey to one's own expectations in so doing. An assumption that I had was that the participants would reach out to other people when they were in crisis. In their experience most of them valued time alone. This was not something I anticipated and it took until close to the completion of the research for me to see this. Feedback from others is very helpful in overcoming the limitations and biases of one's own vision. This experience underscores the importance of examining one's own assumptions thoroughly, and making them as explicit as possible before interviewing participants. Asking the participants for feedback can also help to navigate this problem.

The development of systematic methods of checking and rechecking

that all relevant data is included in the text also helps avoid distortion, or omission of important themes. Making lists of themes, drawing maps, relating themes to each other are all ways of ensuring accuracy.

The phenomenological concept of co-consistituancy was relevant to my experience of this research method. I valued my own experience of crisis and of being a lesbian in a lesbian community to ask appropriate questions, to know which paths to follow and which to ignore in the interviews; reading the psychological literature also influenced the preparation for the interviews. Conversely, I had to put my experience, values and theoretical knowledge aside to see others clearly. In this way the researcher is as significant a part of the research as the participants themselves. By allowing both the researcher's and the participants' presence in the study to be clear and explicit, we validate the basic insight of qualitative research that any study is a product of human relationships in a shared world constituted by the contributions of all involved.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLORS

This paper has briefly outlined the findings of the study under discussion. One important finding of this study was the significance of community in the lives of the participants in the study. This suggests that the challenge for counsellors is to understand the individual in her cultural and socio-political context, as well as in her immediate world of relationships, work, and recreation. In working with lesbians this context is the lesbian community; for other minority groups it might be the Jewish community, the Black ghetto, or the Native reserve.

A second consideration is how readers can most productively approach such research. When a counsellor wishes to learn from phenomenological research the learning does not happen through direct transference. The meaning of the subject's life cannot be applied directly to the lives of clients with which the counsellor works. Learning is achieved by proceeding from the particular (the situated structure) to the overview (the general structure). In lay terms the readers involve themselves in the text, reflect on their own experiences, make comparisons, discern similarities and differences, and use imagination to extend their understanding to other similar, but never identical, experiences. Such learning is participatory, associative, inquisitive, and creative and, as such, differs significantly from the linear, logical, critical mode of experimental thinking. Thus phenomenology demands a shift in thinking for the reader as well as for the researcher.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This paper introduces some variations in methods found elsewhere. Mapping was found to be a useful tool for synthesizing complex and

interrelated data, so that relationships between varied forms of experience can be made explicit. The table also is a valuable tool for researchers who are developing their own methods. The method outlined here was not intended as a definitive statement about the phenomenological approach. It is hoped that future researchers may use the process used here to create new methods to meet the needs of different studies. Developing phenomenological method is a creative process born of the relationship between research knowledge and experiential knowledge.

This paper draws links in a cursory fashion between phenomenology and feminism. By linking the phenomenological precept that the individual's subjective experience is a source of meaning and truth for others, to the feminist dictum that "the personal is political," this paper's conceptualization of phenomenology does have implications of a political nature for researchers. Whatever the researcher's political lens—feminist, Marxist, racial, etc.—the implicit assumption here is that individual members of a group can and do give meaning not only to that one life, but also to the life of the group, that it is possible to understand more about an emerging culture through the eyes of the individual members of that culture. It would be of value to the fields of phenomenology and feminist research, as well as to other radical perspectives, to expand and deepen our understanding of *how* we know the personal is political. A phenomological study on this epistemological question would contribute significantly to the field of phenomenology, while combatting the conceptual self-limiting that results from overexposure to experimental thinking.

*References*

Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. S. Valle and M. King, *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 48-71.

Daly, M. (1978). *Gyn/Ecology: The mataethics of radical feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press.

de Koning, A. J. J. (1979). The qualitative method of research in the phenomenology of suspicion. In A. Georgi et al., *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology, Vol III*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 122-134.

de Monteflores, C. (1978). *Lesbian sexuality: A phenomenologically based approach*. Unpublished thesis from the California School of Professional Psychology, Berkeley.

Hunnisett, R. (1983). *A phenomenological study of crisis experience in a lesbian community: implications for counsellors*. Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria Masters Thesis.

Krieger, S. (1982). Lesbian identity and community: Recent social science literature. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 8(11), 91-108.

Lewis, S. G. (1979). *Sunday's women: Lesbian life today*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Prescott, M. P., & Valle, R. S. (1978). An existential-phenomenological look at cognitive-development theory and research. In R. S. Valle and M. King, *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 153-165.

Valle, R. S., & King, M. (1978). *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Von Eckartsberg, R. (1979). The eco-psychology of personal culture building: An existential-hermeneutic approach. In A. Giorgi, R. Knowles, and D. L. Smith, *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology, Vol. III.* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 227-244.

Wolf, D. (1979). *The lesbian community.* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

*About the Author*

Rowena Hunnisett is a practicing counsellor whose research and professional interests include lesbian and gay issues, phenomenology, the psychology of women and feminist therapy.

Address correspondence to: Rowena Hunnisett, 5-305 Montreal Street, Victoria, B.C. V8V 1Z6.