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# Demystifying Nursing Research

## Phenomenology as a Qualitative Research Method

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**P**henomenologic nursing research is the exploration and description of the deepest meanings of some part of the human health-illness experience (Drew, 1999). Since nursing has an allegiance with those for whom we care, this method provides a particularly fruitful way to gain the insight necessary for sensitive and effective practice

### Philosophical Origins

Every research method is grounded in certain philosophical beliefs about how we know or what the nature of reality is (Donalek, 2004). Phenomenologic research has its origins in a 20th century European philosophical movement. Oiler-Boyd (2001) described some of the movement's common beliefs: "Perception is original awareness of the appearance of phenomena in experience. It is defined as access to truth, the foundation of all knowledge. Perception gives one access to experience of the world as it is given prior to any analysis of it. Phenomenology recognizes that meanings are given in perception and modified in analysis..." (pp. 96-97).

These philosophers frequently understood their work as "an effort to get beneath or behind subjective experience to reveal the genuine, objective nature of things" (Schwandt, 2002, p. 192). This position differs from that of phenomenologic nursing researchers, a distinction often missed in the literature. Phenomenologic nurse researchers do not focus on the "objective nature of things" but on the subjective experience as a means to seek understanding of the life-world of human beings. Nurse researchers adopt philosophical phenomenology's intense exploration of perception in order to achieve understanding. They are committed to a belief in the intrinsic value of the subjective experience of every human being (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

### Phenomenologic Research

Despite real differences within the phenomenologic movement that have shaped research traditions, the methods of phenomenologic research have much

in common. These methods are used to study areas where little is known or to explore sensitive content. (As an example, this author used the method to examine first incest disclosure [Donalek, 2001]). The researcher recruits potential research participants who have lived the phenomenon in question and are willing and able to describe their experiences. Research participants may write of their experiences but are more often interviewed. Successful interviewing requires engagement and sensitivity. Participants are "co-researchers" who work with the researcher, not to summon up and state a prior experience like playing a recording, but to jointly explore the participant's experience and co-create a meaningful description (Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 1998). The researcher then dwells with descriptions, identifies and extracts themes, and finally integrates these themes into a meaningful description of the essential nature of the phenomenon under study (Munhall, 2001).

### What Makes Phenomenologic Research Really Phenomenological?

Good phenomenologic research is more than a simple synthesis of the contents of a group of interviews. Research is not truly phenomenological unless the researcher's beliefs are incorporated into the data analysis. "Unless we acknowledge our already meaning-endowed relationships with the topics of our research, we are deluded about grasping the essence of any phenomenon" (Drew, 2001, p. 19). The researcher's thoughts, responses, and decision-making process should be acknowledged and explicated throughout the entire research process. For phenomenologic research to be credible, documentation of this process must exist from the selection of the topic to all phases of the collection and analysis of the data and creation of the essential description of the phenomenon. Why did the researcher choose a topic, respond to a participant's narrative in a particular way, be drawn to a particular passage in a transcript, see a particular pattern? It is by this process that our work becomes phenomenological (Drew, 2001). It is also by this process that, in part, the validity of the research is demonstrated.

### The Essential Description

At the end of the research, the goal is the exhaustive, essential description of the phenomenon under study. More than anything else, the

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description must allow the reader to grasp what is central to the phenomenon. It should be a simple, tight description. Were some part of the description removed, the integrated totality would no longer exist. Were something to be added, it would be superfluous. To attain this goal, the researcher lives with the data, views it from various perspectives, imaginatively explores alternatives, identifies potential emerging themes, entertains other possible configurations, and finally creates the essential description (Munhall, 2001). The final essential description might be returned to participants for their responses, shared with others who have also experienced the phenomenon, or reviewed by experts in the field for their responses. Such measures support the rigor of the study. Ultimately, however, the researcher retains responsibility for the final description.

The final research report includes the essential description and a summary of the phenomenologic research process. Themes that have emerged from the analysis and supporting selected quotes from participants allow the reader to follow the researcher's process of discovery. The validity of the research is supported by a presentation of the decision path in the research process.

## Conclusion

Doing phenomenologic research is a challenging, exciting, and at times exhausting process. The researcher is forced into a sometimes uncomfortable self-awareness as she plums not only the meaning of the phenomenon for participants but her own responses. The final research product can provide a real sense of satisfaction for the researcher, an often expressed sense of meaningful contribution by the research participants, and insight and understanding for the reader. ■

## References

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The phenomenology of several constructs related to creativity have also been investigated by a number of researchers, at times using a stricter phenomenological method, as described above, and at times using a more general qualitative approach. Examples include Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1990b, 1996) construct of "flow" and the notion of peak experiences, most commonly associated with the work of Abraham Maslow (1968, 1971). Phenomenology as qualitative methodology. The complete reference for the finalised and published version of this book chapter is: Gill, M.J. (2020) Phenomenological approaches to research, in Mik-Meyer, N. and Järvinen, M. (Eds.) *Qualitative Analysis: Eight approaches*, London: Sage, pp. 73-94. Phenomenology to address a range of research questions. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, to examine each type of phenomenology in its entirety, it elaborates on a series of guidelines to support researchers in selecting one type that is apposite to their needs. Phenomenology designates two things: a new kind of descriptive method, which made a breakthrough in philosophy at the turn of the century, and an a priori science derived from it. *Qualitative Research Method - Phenomenology*. Shahid N Khan. 1 Department of Management, Monash University, Australia. The researcher developed a qualitative research methods chapter while conducting research on a phenomenon of abusive supervision. This paper will help the research students to analyse a phenomenon such as abusive supervision in context of its ontology, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. Furthermore, target population, sampling technique, data collection methods and the role of a researcher in this whole research process, and another essential part of a qualitative research, ethics which play a crucial role while conducting and gathering a qualitative data, have also been discussed in detail. *A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated*. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 42(1)55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104>. Abstract. This article distills the core principles of a phenomenological research design and, by means of a specific study, illustrates the phenomenological methodology. Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology have become increasingly popular as research methodologies, yet confusion still exists about the unique aspects of these two methodologies. This article provides a discussion of the essential similarities and differences between hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology from historical and methodological perspectives. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Typically, interviews are conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation or experience. One method of bracketing is memoing (Maxwell, 2013). In my study of the factors that drive employees to use compliance hotlines, I used the phenomenological approach and methods glean answers. Of the five approaches described by Creswell, the approach most closely aligned with the study's objectives.