Member checking and Heideggerian phenomenology: a redundant component

Abstract
Although member-checking has long been accepted as the gold standard in quantitative research, it is not the pinnacle for expressing rigour in Heideggerian phenomenology because it contradicts many of the underpinning philosophies. Similarly, employing ‘experts’ to confirm findings conflicts with the values of interpretivism. In this paper, the authors argue that member-checking is frequently used to cover poor interview technique or a lack of understanding of the methodology chosen to underpin the study. They debate why member-checking is incongruent with Heideggerian philosophy and suggest strategies that enhance the generation of data and render the follow-up interview redundant.

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Introduction

We will first provide a brief description of the hermeneutic phenomenology principles as posited by Heidegger to provide a context for the ensuing debate. We will then present rationales for dispensing with member-checking – the returning of findings to participants for them to validate their contributions – in Heideggerian research. Moreover, we will show that member-checking is incongruent with this methodology and argue that the need for follow-up interviews may be symptomatic of poor interview preparation or technique. We will conclude by suggesting several useful techniques for clarifying the information conveyed during interviews, rendering a clarification interview redundant.

In the article, we will use the terms ‘member-checking’, ‘follow-up interview’ and ‘clarification interview’ interchangeably: although there are subtle differences, the ideologies underpinning the re-engaging of participants are similar.

A brief overview of Heideggerian phenomenology

Heideggerian phenomenology aims to understand shared meanings. There is no intent to generalise, theorise or predict outcomes. Heidegger believed that we are all self-interpreting beings – that to live is to listen and derive meaning. Consequently, Heidegger argued the experiences, pre-suppositions and values of the researcher are legitimate components of the research. Taylor (1995) elaborated, explaining that the foundation of Heideggerian hermeneutics is for the researcher to be situated in the research and for the experience to be understood through the use of language.

Furthermore, time, space and context are pivotal to that understanding. Given Heidegger’s belief in the relevancy of context, it follows that every time an experience is re-visited, the meaning may alter, depending on the disposition, or mood, of the researcher or participant. Heideggerian phenomenology respects the concept of self-knowing and that truth is as the person sees it and experiences it. There is no one truth: truth is multiple and context-specific.

Finally, Heidegger never touted his thinking as a methodology but rather as a philosophy, so before generating data researchers must decide which aspects of the chosen philosophy they will use as a methodology to guide the ensuing study.
Member-checking is incongruent with phenomenology

Interpretive researchers have often adopted terminology, such as reliability, validity, credibility and generalisability, as a way to establish rigour. However, as we explored in previous works (McConnell-Henry et al 2009a, 2009b), interpretive researchers would benefit from establishing the foundations of rigour for themselves, rather than being pressured into attempting to fit into the language used by positivists.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Colaizzi (1978) advocated the use of member-checking as a final step in validation. But, there is no directive in interpretive research to prove or generalise, so the idea of validation is illogical. The brief of phenomenological research is to develop a comprehension of what it is like to live experiences. This type of understanding has also been referred to as empathic. By definition, an interpretation can alter, depending on the context in which it is viewed. Our overarching question – and hence concern with member-checking – is therefore how the researcher will know when the ‘right’ interpretation has surfaced. Certainty has little resonance with the interpretative domain. Taylor (1995) agreed, saying that when she fully understood the principles, such as multiple truths, that Heidegger espoused, she saw that member-checking was incongruent with this philosophy.

Some researchers choose to enlist only a subset of participants for member-checking (Coward 1990, Rose 1990, Trice 1990, Beck 1991). But why are some participants more worthy of this duty than others? How is this compatible with Heidegger’s postulations of multiple truths and people constructing meaning from their own realities? Why are these chosen participants in positions to make judgments on what is truth, when they understand truth only through their own lenses? This choice is particularly unjustifiable when researchers fail to explain why they have chosen to ask the opinions of some participants and not others.

Rigour and the halo effect

Revisiting a participant for clarification is a potential threat to the rigour of interpretive studies. When asked to revisit a concept, a participant may overemphasise it, believing the researcher must think it important or relevant to the study. The desire of participants to say ‘the right thing’ is known as the ‘halo effect’.

By going away, examining and carefully considering the data, then returning
to participants for clarification, researchers may then guide the participants in the directions they desire. As the balance of power is heavily in the researcher’s favour, a participant is unlikely to resist the direction in which the researcher is leading them. Equally, returning to participants is antithetical to phenomenology’s requirement that a recounting is presented in native, or original, form and that it considers a snapshot in time, not a generalisable right answer.

**Pragmatic reasons for a single interview**

Interviews are time-consuming, can be difficult to arrange and can involve significant travel, all of which must be factored into the financial constraints of the project. Justifying budgets in grants and scholarships is paramount to successful completion of proposed research.

Re-entering the field to acquire more data does not necessarily equate to obtaining richer data. Additional information can even dilute the true essence of the experiences, subtracting from the richness of the data. This point was illustrated by Taylor (1995), who observed that by continuing to re-visit the field ‘participants tended to recall wide-ranging recollections’.

Offering full power to the participants by returning to them risks the entire project being placed in jeopardy. Participants may not agree with the researcher’s interpretation or, worse still, may change their minds. This could place undue pressure on the researcher to change completely the focus of the interpretation, endangering either the integrity of the study or increasing the length of time dedicated to it. Also, participants may feel embarrassed or even want to withdraw from the study when faced with transcripts of their words.

Revisiting the experience with the participant can border on exploitation, particularly if the study topic is sensitive. Participants may not possess the emotional energy or the desire to recount their stories again, simply so that researchers can ensure they have the ‘right’ interpretations. Seeking this outcome from participants is to risk exploiting a potentially vulnerable party. Ultimately, researchers have a responsibility to leave participants feeling at ease and not exploited for their gain.

Time delays between the initial contacts with participants and subsequent dealings can influence the recounting of respondents’ stories. Heidegger’s notion that time, space and context are pivotal renders the idea of follow-up interviews
invalid. Whitehead (2004) echoed Heidegger’s belief that experience is relative to context, concluding that re-interviewing was outside the philosophical tradition supported by Heidegger. Finally, as Taylor (1995) found, the fluctuating health – or, as Smith (1992) suggested, social status – of participants may make follow-up contact unworkable or even ethically challenging. Hence, Taylor and Smith both advocated the use of a single interview as a way of obtaining data.

**Employing an ‘expert’ to member-check**

The practice of employing ‘experts’ to verify findings has been widely endorsed (Riemen 1986, Haase 1987, Trice 1990, Beck 1991a, 1991b, 1992, Gullickson 1993, Draucker 1999, Whitehead 2004). Researchers will often state that experts have been used to corroborate their interpretations, yet rarely provide definitions of what constitutes expertise (Haase 1987, Beck 1991a). We believe that the only true experts are those who co-constructed the findings: the participant and the interviewer. Although we agree with Crist and Tanner (2003) that the involvement of an interpretive team can add insight and depth through debate and discussion, it is imperative that all team members understand and subscribe to the study’s philosophical principles. Furthermore, to ensure congruency with the study’s hermeneutic philosophical underpinnings, it is vital that all members of the team are open about their personal experiences and presuppositions before and throughout the interpretive process, as these will colour their interpretations.

**When is it the ‘right’ interpretation?**

The interpretation of data can differ each time texts are revisited and questioned, depending on the disposition, time and space of the researcher – another reason why follow-up interviews are invalid. Moreover:

- How many interviews will ensure that the ‘whole’ story or the ‘correct’ story has been obtained?
- What constitutes the whole story?
- Who decides when the whole story or the real story has been revealed?
- How is one to know for sure when the perfectly clarified version of the interpretation has been reached.

Given these apprehensions, we find it impossible to subscribe to the clarification interview as a worthy technique in phenomenological research.
Strategies for successful phenomenological interviewing

Clarification interviews may simply be a cover for poor interview technique. Stein-Parbury (2009) said that it is preferable to seek clarification during an interview, rather than as a follow up, as the aim of any interview is to gain an understanding of the participant’s situation. A successful interview constitutes asking questions and illuminating the participant’s experiences until both parties feel satisfied that a shared understanding has resulted.

The main aim of a phenomenological enquiry is to uncover and understand uncensored data as it is immediately recounted by the participant. It is not the participant’s role to interpret the experiences. Researchers must enter the worlds of their participants to develop shared understandings of their experiences. Van Manen (1990) defined phenomenology as ‘borrowing’ the stories of the participants as a way to acquire understanding. Hence, the use of ‘how’, ‘who’ and ‘when’ rather than ‘why’ questions is preferable because these probes allow the participant to elaborate and clarify which fits well with Heidegger’s notion of context-specific truth.

Listening with an interpretative intent

A research interview differs on many levels to other forms of interaction in which the ultimate objective is to generate understanding and hence new knowledge. Researchers must therefore recognise that they should listen during a research interview, with the intent of interpreting what they hear. Robertson-Malt (1999) concurred, suggesting that it is possible to explain the person’s experiences and enhance understanding by listening closely. Heidegger (1962) stated that to live is to listen, interpret and learn from the stories others convey. Seidman (2006) summarised this by stressing that the meanings of experiences are embedded in the language used to describe them and that they will arise as long as researchers affirm and maintain faith in their ability to recognise them.

Jumping to conclusions and making assumptions – especially early in interviews, before participants have had adequate opportunities to divulge their full accounts – is a mistake that can happen when researchers think they ‘know’ the experiences being described. It is imperative that researchers acknowledge that the participants are the experts, even if they have had similar experiences. Again, understanding the philosophical standpoint from which the research is being
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conducted is paramount. For example, Heidegger stresses that each experience is different so by assuming that they ‘know’ an experience, researchers contradict Heideggerian beliefs in multiple truths and meaning being derived from context.

Exposing the inner voice
The overarching aim of the interview is to encourage the participant to share as much depth and relevant breadth as possible. Another objective is to elicit information in the participant’s own words. Interviewees will commonly offer responses that they think are socially, culturally or professionally acceptable, until they feel a rapport has been developed. However, as hermeneutics aims to interpret concealed meaning, the researcher must venture below the face value of the words to explore what the participant really means. Seidman (2006) referred to this as exposing the ‘inner voice’; James (2007) agreed, pointing out that the only tool available when interviewing is the language of the participant.

Investing time in generating data
Dedicating insufficient time to generating data is a classic barrier to developing understanding. High standard, qualitative research relies on high quality data. In contrast to quantitative research, obtaining this data has little to do with the number of participants or interviews involved. Skilled interviewers do not rush, but make the most of their time with the participants, seeking immediate clarification rather than using follow-up interviews as a safety net. This ensures the data generated is truly co-constructed and reflective of a shared understanding.

Techniques useful for seeking clarification
Probing
Researchers use ‘probing’ when they have failed to grasp fully what participants have said and want to clarify the responses, eliciting further information to improve their understanding. The most important aspect of probing is to resist making assumptions. For example, Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) differentiated between questions such as ‘Didn’t that make you feel strange?’ and ‘How did that make you feel?’ – the first question is directive and close-ended, whereas the second question allows participants to disclose their feelings in ways they see fit. Example of probing questions include:
Tell me more about...
How did that make you feel?
What were you thinking at that point?
Describe the environment.
What time of day was it?
Who else was there?
What did you do?

**Paraphrasing**
Judiciously-used paraphrasing is invaluable for demonstrating active listening. It allows the participant to hear the researcher’s interpretation and to be immediately able to confirm or deny the accuracy of the interpretation.

Researchers must remain mindful when paraphrasing to avoid adding or subtracting from the content expressed. By amending the content, researchers expose participants to feeling misunderstood or even exploited. Additionally, Tollefson et al (2001) cautioned that researchers risk the halo effect if they use paraphrasing injudiciously.

It is therefore of paramount importance that researchers are acutely aware of the potential influence the words they use can have on the remainder of the conversation.

**Open-ended questions**
Open-ended questions are synonymous with unstructured interviews such as those used in phenomenology because they allow participants to share their experiences in their own words and allow for further questioning linked to the responses. Cohen and Manion (1989) championed the ‘funnel’ technique as an approach to unstructured interviewing. This strategy involves asking the participant general opening questions and then focusing on specifics as rapport develops. We can see merit in this idea, but we believe that it does not fully take into account the importance of disengaging. Hence, we believe that an ‘hourglass’ approach that starts with general questions, works towards more focused questioning and concludes with general questions is more suitable. Furthermore, finishing the interview with a broad question, such as ‘Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish?’, serves two
purposes: it signals that the interview is almost over and returns the balance of power to the respondent, while reorientating them back to the present.

*Overcoming the fear of silence*
While paraphrasing and probing are invaluable tools, arguably the greatest skill to master in interviewing is respect for silence. Researchers are often too quick to intervene when faced with moments of silence, because they want to understand or gather more data. If the interviewer is more patient and allows participants the time and space to gather their thoughts, the interview may prove richer.

**Conclusion**
We have shown that member-checking has no place in phenomenological research. Phenomenology is not underpinned by the positivist need for

**references**


**McConnell-Henry, TE, Chapman Y, Francis K** (2009a) Husserl and Heidegger:
‘right’ answers – Heideggerian phenomenology aims to develop an empathic understanding that is cognisant of the multiple nature of truth and that context determines the meaning of the experience. Hence, member-checking threatens the rigour of phenomenological studies. A far better strategy is to seek clarification during the co-construction of the data and we offered several strategies to enhance in-interview clarification. With careful planning, including a sound appreciation of the chosen philosophy, the emergent data and interpretation will prove rich and meaningful and member-checking can be made redundant in phenomenological research.

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