Philosophy of phenomenology: how understanding aids research


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Abstract

Aim To assist the researcher in understanding the similarities and differences between the Husserlian and Heideggerian philosophies of phenomenology, and how that philosophy can inform nursing research as a useful methodology.

Background Nurse researchers using phenomenology as a methodology need to understand the philosophy of phenomenology to produce a research design that is philosophically congruent. However, phenomenology has a long and complex history of development, and may be difficult to understand and apply.

Data sources The author draws from Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (2004), and nurse scholars and methodologists.

Discussion To give the reader a sense of the development of the philosophy of phenomenology, the author briefly recounts its historical origins and interpretations, specifically related to Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. The author outlines the ontological and epistemological assumptions of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology and guidance for methodology inspired by these philosophers. Difficulties with engaging in phenomenological research are addressed, especially the processes of phenomenological reduction and bracketing, and the lack of clarity about the methods of interpretation.

Conclusion Despite its complexity, phenomenology can provide the nurse researcher with in-depth insight into nursing practice.

Implications for practice/research An understanding of phenomenology can guide nurse researchers to produce results that have meaning in nursing patient care.

Keywords Phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, hermeneutic circle

Introduction

PHENOMENOLOGY IS A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE THAT helps researchers to explore and understand everyday experiences without pre-supposing knowledge of those experiences. That is, the researcher is open to what presents itself during a phenomenon.

For nurse researchers to produce philosophically congruent, phenomenological research designs, they should know the history and philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl is credited with starting the phenomenology movement in 1913 with the publication of his book, Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology (Dowling 2007, Giorgi 2005). Since then, various philosophers have re-theorised the approach to the study of phenomena as experienced.

To provide a genealogy of phenomenology, I will briefly recount the contribution of its most influential philosophers, including Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Husserl and Heidegger had the greatest influence on research methodology, so I will outline the ontological and epistemological differences between their philosophies. Finally, I will describe research methods congruent with Husserlian, Heideggerian and Gadamerian phenomenology.

Historical and disciplinary origins

The philosophical origins of phenomenology can be traced to the ancient Platonic allegory of the cave (Smith 2008). This allegory presented the idea that what people understand to be reality is only a
shadow of the phenomena of the true reality (Tarnas 1991) – reality and the phenomena of the reality are distinctly separate.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of phenomena began to develop in philosophical thought as things that take place in the mind rather than objective realities to be observed (Smith 2008). The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who was prominent in the late 18th century, believed a phenomenon is something that appears in the human mind – the thing as it exists in reality is separate and not perceptible by human senses (Kant 2003).

In the early 19th century, the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel viewed phenomenology as an appropriate way to study the path human consciousness takes to travel from ‘natural consciousness’ to ‘real knowledge’ (Hegel 1977). For Hegel, consciousness was the ability of the mind to reflect on itself. His philosophical purpose as to explore ‘how knowledge makes its appearance’ (Hegel 1977).

Franz Brentano, a 19th century psychologist, expanded the notion of phenomena to include thought. His ‘principle of intentionality’ stated that ‘every mental act is related to some object and implies that all perceptions have meaning’ (Dowling 2007). This became a central concept in the phenomenology of his student, Husserl, whom historians consider to be the ‘father’ of phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl
Husserl, a German philosopher who also studied mathematics and physics, lived from 1859 to 1938. He took Brentano’s principle of intentionality out of psychology, with its naturalistic scientific foundations, and placed it in phenomenology. For Husserl, the goal of phenomenological inquiry was to understand human thought and experience through ‘rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear’ (Dowling 2007).

What made Husserl’s phenomenology distinct from naturalistic science was the idea of philosophical reduction. This entails the stripping away of the researcher’s preconceptions of a phenomenon to experience its pure essence. This is a hallmark of Husserlian phenomenology (Kleiman 2004, Flood 2010). Husserl’s phenomenology emphasised a way of coming to know through the actual experience of a phenomenon (experiential epistemology) with a goal of describing the experience of the phenomenon. Thus methodology inspired by Husserl is often called ‘description phenomenology’ (Dowling 2007).

Martin Heidegger
The philosopher Heidegger studied under Husserl and worked as his assistant. However, Heidegger took phenomenology in a different direction (Smith 2008). Heidegger believed that phenomenology should be used to investigate the ontological question, ‘What is the meaning of being’, rather than focus on experiential epistemology (Welch 1999). Unlike Husserl, Heidegger stated that what is to be uncovered is not the essence of the phenomenon, but the ‘being’ of the phenomenon. The Heideggerian concept of ‘being’ is elusive, but generally, Heidegger was mostly concerned with the meaning of our understanding of what makes entities what they are. Heidegger believed that the world was an essential part of our understanding of the meaning of being and was not separate. Husserl’s notion of intentionality removed the person from the world of phenomena, but Heidegger placed being in the world (Heidegger 1962).

Heidegger (1962) also said that the nature of being is a never-ending, circular process so that the meaning of being in the world is also circular. Heidegger conceptualised this as a ‘hermeneutic’ circle rather than a logically vicious circle. Rather than a vicious circle from which there is no point to logically begin a scientific investigation, Heidegger proposed the investigation of the meaning of being of an entity through a circle of understanding that interprets (Heidegger, 1962). Before entering the circle, the researcher must have worked out or come to know his or her ‘fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception’ (Heidegger, 1962) of the entity itself. Thus, interpretation takes place with the understanding that the researcher is part of their historical, social, and political world.

Hermeneutics was originally developed as a method to interpret religious texts that took into consideration the world in which the text was written. Heidegger developed the hermeneutic circle to take account of the fact that researchers have preconceptions of something’s ‘being’ before approaching it to understand and interpret it. He believed that the circle is not logically vicious if researchers enter that circle of understanding already having worked out, and thus become aware of, their preconceptions. His basic stance was that all understanding is interpretation from a particular perspective – even the natural scientific method is interpreted knowledge (Heidegger 1962). The ‘being’ of something cannot be removed from the world, therefore. Heidegger, unlike Husserl, did not suggest a philosophical reduction of preconceptions. Instead, he argued for an awareness of how the world of the observer can influence his or her understanding.
understanding of the true nature of the object of study (Heidegger 1962).

Heidegger joined the Nazi party when it came to power in Germany. While rector of Freiburg University from 1933 to 1934, he explicitly supported the goals of Nazism (Grange 1991). This could make researchers pause to consider how embracing Heidegger's philosophical perspectives might guide their research and creation of knowledge. However, researchers should always consider the moral and ethical implications of their philosophical perspectives, not merely those espoused by particular philosophers whose philosophy can be judged from a temporal distance.

Hans-Georg Gadamer
The philosopher Gadamer lived from 1900 to 1996 and contributed to phenomenology through further development of the hermeneutic circle (Dowling 2007). Even though Gadamer did not intend his philosophy of hermeneutics to be used in creating a research method, it has inspired an interpretive method that enables the uncovering of meaning and understanding between texts and the interpreting researcher (Dowling 2007, Rodgers 2005).

Gadamer took the position that a writer is embedded in the social, cultural and historical world, and thus this 'situatedness' needs to be considered when interpreting the writer's text (Gadamer 2004). Gadamer envisioned the hermeneutic circle as a process of movement between the details of the text and the interpreter of the text. In this movement, the preconceptions of the interpreter are incorporated into the process and shifted from preconceptions to new understandings as the interpretive process moved forward (Rodgers 2005).

The philosophy of phenomenology began with Husserl, who used it to describe the experience of a phenomenon in consciousness. Heidegger built on that philosophy to investigate the meaning of 'being'. Gadamer further developed Heidegger's hermeneutic circle, emphasising text and conversation as media of interpretation. Even though there are many philosophers who discussed phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger's philosophical writings have been the most influential in inspiring research methodology, and Gadamer has been the most influential in developing a way of interpreting text.

Ontology of phenomenology
If a researcher is to use a phenomenological approach then the philosophical assumptions of the methodology must be clear and the research design must follow those assumptions. Ontology is concerned with 'being' and what it is. An ontological question of being asks what it is that makes something distinct from other things.

In Husserlian or descriptive phenomenology, the phenomenon is believed to be reality - a truth that exists as an essence and can be described. The essence of the phenomenon exists independently of the researcher and can be discovered through 'bracketing' out the researcher's preconceived assumptions of the phenomenon.

In Heideggerian or interpretive phenomenology, humans exist in a world that they experience and interpret (Heidegger 1962). Heidegger was concerned with being, and with the meaning of being. This shift moves the focus of the researcher from revealing the essence of the phenomenon to understanding the phenomenon in relation to the researcher.

Following in Heidegger's footsteps, Gadamer's ontological position was that researchers are deeply influenced by the traditions of their culture and as such act on that way of being in the world (Sherratt, 2006).

Epistemology of phenomenology
Epistemology is the study of knowledge that addresses the questions of what can be known and who can know it. In descriptive or Husserlian phenomenology, the researchers can 'bracket out' their preconceptions and thus be separate from the world in which they live. The goal of Husserlian phenomenology is to discover the essence of the phenomenon and come to a new understanding of it (Flood 2010). This understanding focuses on cognitive and non-cognitive meaning: cognitive meaning is concerned with the semantic and linguistic meaning of the text, which might include transcriptions of conversations, while non-cognitive meanings of the text are what is felt or intuited by the researcher during analysis (Flood 2010).

However, in Heideggerian phenomenology, preconceptions cannot be removed because people can only be understood in their world. Instead, the researcher becomes aware of preconceptions through reflexivity (Flood 2010). For Gadamer, knowledge comes through interpretation, which is a way of being rather than a way of knowing (Sherratt 2006).

Methodology inspired by phenomenology
The hallmark of Husserlian phenomenological research is the assumption that researchers put aside their culturally induced interpretation of a phenomenon. This is known as 'phenomenological reduction'. Before entering the description phase, the researcher must put aside all cultural and worldly influence to discover the essential meaning of the phenomenon (Kleiman 2004). Additionally,
the researcher must withhold any individually experienced and referenced claims relating to what is in the data (Kleiman 2004).

How the researcher is to accomplish this reduction is vague in the literature. Suggested methods are: ‘mental experimentation’, ‘determining the essential qualities’, ‘using free imaginative variation’, and using ‘imaginary conversations or scenarios’ (Dowling 2007). There is no description of the methods and nothing stating from what mental faculty these methods draw. Patton (2002) stated that suspension of judgment is critical but also stated that merely becoming aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions is sufficient. Crotty (1998) suggested that Husserlian phenomenology is a critical methodology because researchers take a fresh look at phenomena, so calling into question their existing assumptions. Although Crotty implied that this method of philosophical reduction will produce a more objective knowledge of the object of research, he glossed over details of any method by which a researcher could put aside a lifetime of culture to be open to a more objective truth.

Van Manen (1990), who drew from Husserl, directed the researcher to turn to the literature about the topic to become aware of their preconceptions and assumptions about it. Burns and Grove (2009) stated that bracketing or the phenomenological reduction process is a focused contemplation of the subject of interest. They likened it to Eastern thought and related it to meditation practices. The vagueness of this stage of the interpretation of data is a difficulty for nurse researchers wanting to use a phenomenological methodology.

Indepth interviews
In a Heideggarian phenomenological approach to research, the usual way to gather data is through in-depth interviews with participants (Patton 2002, Lopez and Willis 2004). The researcher focuses on the phenomenon as experienced by the participant (Flood 2010). Usually, one researcher will do all the interviews to help in developing an understanding of the phenomenon (Kleiman 2004). Questions that ask for participants’ descriptions of the phenomenon and its context are important data to gather (Lopez and Willis 2004).

Patton (2002) stated that participants in interpretive and descriptive phenomenology research must have directly experienced the phenomena being studied. However, the simplicity of this statement obscures the depth of the philosophy underlying the phenomenological understanding of how participants experience a phenomenon.

Van Manen (1990) states that a phenomenon is multi-faceted and may be experienced by different participants in many different ways: proximity to a phenomenon has no epistemological priority. During the indepth interviews, the participant reflectively recalls their experience with prompting of the researcher to bring to light the meaning of the experience. Each participant has a unique meaning of the lived experience of the phenomenon which the researcher gathers in order to come to understand the phenomenon.

The goal of phenomenological research is not to create results that can be generalised, but to understand the meaning of an experience of a phenomenon. Therefore, the number of participants can be relatively small (Kleiman 2004). The usual sampling strategy in phenomenology is a snowball, purposeful method (Kleiman 2004) that gathers participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied.

Writing the findings
The way in which researchers write their interpretations of research findings is also integral to a Heideggerian approach. Van Manen (1997) stated that the researcher’s prose should convey the ‘existential, emotive, enactive, embodied, situational, and non-theoretic’ understanding gained through phenomenological interpretation. The goal of writing is not merely to describe the participant’s experience of the phenomenon, but to ‘make explicit meaning that is felt and grasped at the core of our being’ (Van Manen 1990). This style of writing may include poetry, anecdotal portrayals and images (Van Manen 1990). Writing a record of the interpretation of data is a strength of this form of methodology, and yet the researcher needs to be skilled at capturing pre-cognitive imaginings and communicating them in a way that is meaningful to those who look to research to guide nursing practice.

Interpretation is an integral part of phenomenological research processes. The Gadamerian hermeneutic circle is one method used in the interpretive analysis of data. The interpretive process is described as a circle because of the continuous nature of this type of interpretation. Gadamer believed that there was no single objective, true interpretation, but that the researcher always comes from a particular perspective (Proudfoot and Lacey 2010). The hermeneutic circle method of interpretation is a movement from the text, which may be transcribed conversations, to the researcher, who comes to an understanding of the text and an interpretation. In that interpretation, the researcher creates meaning from the interpretation.
of the phenomenon. Usually, the interpretation comes from identifying themes, patterns or commonalities in the text. The researcher considers this interpretation while re-reading the text and interprets further – after identifying themes, the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon and the ‘being’ of the researcher come together to reveal new knowledge through a non-cognitive way of knowing (Polit and Tatano Beck 2008).

As with other interpretive forms of research, the researcher has much personal involvement in interpretation. Barriers to using the hermeneutic circle are:

- The need for experience in the field being investigated.
- The time required of the researcher in data collection and interpretation.
- The mental skill to focus on and contemplate large amounts of data to form a meaningful interpretation.

Philosophical difficulties arise in Husserlian-based methodologies because it is assumed that the researchers have the faculties to set aside their assumptions. Gadamer believed that bracketing was impossible because researchers are always interpreting through their experiences. In Heideggerian methodology, the same difficulty arises, but researchers are expected to remove their experiences of phenomena and represent the experiences of the participants. These philosophical issues are not explained and the process by which researchers are to gain this skill is not given.

If nurse researchers can develop the mental faculties to become aware of their preconceptions of phenomena and set them aside, phenomenology can yield beneficial results as a methodology. In research inspired by phenomenology, the goal is to come to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by the participant (Munhall 2007, Polit and Tatano Beck 2008). At the core of being able to care effectively for a patient is the knowledge to appreciate what the patient’s experience of health and healing might be. Although the sample size of phenomenological research may be small and the results not generalisable, this experiential way of coming to know and understand phenomena and the experience of these phenomena can help nurses to understand particular circumstances and hence be able to appraise, treat and comfort patients more effectively (Sandelowski 2009).

**Conclusion**

Phenomenology has a long and complex history of development, and may be difficult for a researcher to understand and apply. There are methodologists who have provided step-by-step procedures. However, nurse researchers need to investigate the philosophy of phenomenology themselves to create methodologies that are sound and meaningful.

Phenomenological methodologies require time and personal involvement in the research, especially during interpretation, which is not a well-defined process. Researchers must therefore create ways to produce results that reflect their experiences and those of the participants. Furthermore, methodology that is guided by the philosophy of phenomenology can provide the nurse researcher with an indepth insight into the nursing phenomena under scrutiny and thus lead to more meaningful patient care.

**References**


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**Conflict of interest**

None declared