

# Phenomenological Research Methods

**Clark Moustakas, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks California, 1994**

## **I Human Science Perspectives and Models**

Moustakas starts with discussing different human science perspectives and models. He illustrates five human science research approaches that utilize qualitative methodologies: ethnography, grounded theory, hermeneutics, empirical phenomenological research and heuristic research.

Ethnography means the direct observation of the activities of a certain group as well as communication and interaction with the group members. The result of ethnographic research is a cultural description.

In the grounded theory approach data is collected and the hypotheses and concepts based on data analysis are worked out during the study.

Hermeneutics involves the art of reading text or experiences in such a way that the intention and meaning behind the appearances are understood. The point of view is known as well as the cultural and social forces that may influence it. Here Moustakas quotes Gadamer, who claims that “the starting points of hermeneutic studies are to be found in art and in philological-historical insights.” Gadamer believes that “the autonomy of viewing art from the vantage point of the history of style has been shaken by hermeneutical reflection (...) including shake up of fixed presuppositions.” (Gadamer 1976, p. 38-39).

Empirical phenomenological research returns to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions. These descriptions then provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essences of the experience. First the original data is comprised of ‘naïve’ descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and dialogue. Then the researcher describes the structure of the experience based on reflection and interpretation of the research participant’s story. The aim is to determine what the experience means for the people who have had the experience. From there general meanings are derived.

Heuristic research begins with a personal question or challenge, but one that has a social or universal significance. It is aimed at discovery through self-inquiry and dialogue. The life experience of the heuristic researcher and the research participants is not a text to be interpreted but a full story that is vividly portrayed and further elucidated through art and personal documentations. From these individual depictions and portraits from research participants, a composite depiction is developed. This represents the entire group of co-researchers. The primary researcher then develops a creative synthesis from this material.

These models have certain common qualities (Moustakas p. 21):

- They recognize the value of qualitative designs and methodologies. Studies of human experiences are not approachable through quantitative approaches.
- They focus on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts
- They search for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations
- They obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews
- They regard the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behaviour and as evidence for scientific investigations
- They formulate questions and problems that reflect interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher

- The view experience and behaviour as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole

## **II Transcendental Phenomenology: Conceptual Framework.**

Moustakas then proceeds by presenting Husserl's ideas on transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgement or presupposition. It requires to look at things openly, undisturbed by the habits of the natural world. The challenge is to describe things as they are, to understand meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection. Meaning is created when the object as it appears in our consciousness, mingles with the object in nature: "what appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears to the world is a product of learning" Moustakas explains (p. 27). The act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related. Intuition is therefore essential in describing whatever presents itself and in his transcendental philosophy Husserl preferred using intuition over deduction.

## **III Phenomenology and Human Science Inquiry**

The relation between phenomenology and human science inquiry has once been complex. Transcendental science grew out of a discontent with science based exclusively on studies of material things. According to phenomenologists, science failed to take into account the consciously experiencing person. Husserl's phenomenology is transcendental because it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates. It asserts that the only thing that we know for certain is that which appears before us in our consciousness, and that fact guarantees its objectivity. To understand the objects that appear before us we must return to the self, to know and recognize ourselves in the experience that is investigated. Transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in our consciousness.

Every of these 'phenomenon' can be a suitable starting point for reflection. The challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings. Thus we can discern the features of consciousness and arrive at an understanding of the essences of the experience.

Whether the object actually exists or not makes no difference, things can as well emerge in our consciousness. Husserl preferred to use the word 'act' to refer to experiences of meaning, since the meaning of a phenomenon is in the act of experiencing it, and not in the object itself. Acts are intentional experiences. Intentional experiences are the combination of the outward appearance of something and how it looks like 'inside your head', based on memory, image and meaning. Perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge. Intentions and sensations make up the full concrete act of perception and allow the object to achieve full bodied presence. Phenomenology commits itself to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analysis. The data of experience, your own thinking, intuiting and judging are primary evidences of scientific investigation. In phenomenological research the researcher also has a personal interest in the research question.

For this Husserl starts from the presupposition that one can achieve a pure and absolute transcendental ego, that one can be totally unbiased, and without presuppositions... Another presupposition is that "that what appears to be appearing is actually appearing" (Moustakas p. 61): one sees what or who one sees.

## **IV Intentionality, Noema and Noesis**

Intentionality, noema and noesis are concepts central to phenomenology. Noema is that which is experienced. Noesis is the way in which it is experienced. Both terms refer to meanings. Husserl's "back to things themselves" is a way of emphasizing knowledge that is rooted in meanings, rather than in an analysis of physical objects. In reflecting on what one has "seen", one will start to grasp meanings that have been concealed. The challenge is to look, look again and keep looking and reflecting to obtain complete descriptions. Shifts occur

when one looks from a different angle, a different frame of reference, a different mood. No perception of a thing is conclusive and deeper layers of meaning may always unfold when you keep searching. To finally arrive at essences of a phenomenon one must unify the noema (external perception) and the noesis (internal perception).

### **V Epoche, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation and Synthesis**

Other important principles of phenomenological research are epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis. First person reports of life experiences are what makes phenomenological research valid. The freedom from suppositions needed for this is named Epoche: things can not be felt to be known in advance or felt to be known without internal reflection and meaning. Only your own perception can point to truth. After epoche comes phenomenological reduction: describing just what you see, external and internal, the relationship between phenomenon and self. You look and describe again and again, always with reference to textural qualities like rough and smooth, small and large, angry and calm, colourful or bland,... : descriptions with a context in experiencing. This is transcendental because it uncovers the ego and phenomenological because it transforms the world into mere phenomena. It's called reduction because it leads back to our own experience of the way things are (Schmitt 1968 p. 30). Because it is a never-ending process the approach of this unlimited possibility for discovery is called horizontalization. The next step in the research process is that of imaginative variation: varying the frames of reference and the perspectives, employing polarities and reversals. In this stage, intuition is purely imaginative and not empirical. Through imaginative variation the researcher can derive structural themes. The final step in the phenomenological research is the synthesis of meanings and essences. The essence is the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is: it is 'the final truth'.

### **VI Methods and Procedures for Conducting Human Science Research**

Methods and procedures for conducting human science research include (Moustakas p. 103):

- 1- discovering a topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance
- 2- Conducting a comprehensive review of the professional and research literature
- 3- Constructing a set of criteria to locate appropriate co-researchers
- 4- Providing co-researchers with instructions on the nature and purpose of the investigation, and developing an agreement that includes obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and delineating the responsibilities of the primary researcher and research participants, consistent with ethical principles of research
- 5- Developing a set of questions or topics to guide the interview process
- 6- Conducting and reporting a lengthy person-to-person interview that focuses on a bracketed topic and question. A follow-up interview may also be needed.
- 7- Organizing and analyzing the data to facilitate development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences

Methods of preparation are reviewing the professional and research methods, formulating the research question, illustrating the topic and research question and selecting the participants. In phenomenological research, the question should have both social meaning and personal significance. Ethical principles of human science research should be taken into account, and participants should be fully informed and respected in their privacy. Also data can be validated by participants.

To collect data phenomenological researchers typically use long interviews. It's an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. When questioning a

co-researcher on her or his experiences of a phenomenon, it might be a good idea to use a general interview guide.

Organization and analysis of data begin with regarding every statement relevant to the topic as having equal value. The meaning units are listed and clustered into common themes.

These are used to develop a textural description of the experience. From this an integration of textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the phenomenon are constructed.

### **VII Phenomenological Research: Analyses and Examples, Summary, Implications, and Outcomes**

After organizing, presenting and analyzing the data the researcher summarizes the entire study. He distinguishes his findings from prior research, suggests further investigation and discusses the outcomes in terms of social meanings and personal and professional values. Moustakas concludes with ample examples of this process in past investigations.

# **Outline Summary of the Phenomenological Model**

Clark Moustakas, Phenomenological Research Methods, p. 180-182

## **Processes**

### Epoche

Setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence

### Phenomenological Reduction

Bracketing the Topic or Question

Horizontalization: Every statement has equal value

Delimited Horizons or Meanings: Horizons that stand out as invariant qualities of the experience

Invariant Qualities and Themes: nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents clustered into themes

Individual Textural Descriptions: An integration, descriptively, of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant

Composite Textural Description: an integration of all of the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural description

### Imaginative Variation

Vary Possible Meanings

Vary Perspectives of the Phenomenon: From different vantage points, such as opposite meanings and various roles

Free Fantasy Variations: consider freely the possible structural qualities or dynamics that evoke the textural qualities

Construct a list of structural qualities of the experience

Develop Structural Themes: cluster the structural qualities into themes

Employ Universal Structures as Themes: Time, space, relationship to self, to others; bodily concerns, causal or intentional structures

Individual Structural Descriptions: For each co-researcher, integrate the structural qualities and themes into an individual structural description of the experience

### Synthesis of composite Textural and Composite Structural Descriptions

Intuitively-reflectively integrate the composite textural and composite structural descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience

## **Methodology**

### Preparing to Collect Data

1. Formulate the question: Define terms of question
2. conduct literature review and determine original nature of study
3. Develop criteria for selecting participants: Establish contract, obtain informed consent, insure confidentiality, agree to place and time commitments, and obtain permission to record and publish

4. Develop instructions and guiding questions or topics needed for the phenomenological research interview

#### Collecting Data

1. Engage in the Epoche process as a way of creating an atmosphere and rapport for conducting the interview
2. Bracket the question
3. Conduct the qualitative research interview to obtain descriptions of the experience.  
Consider:
  - a. Informal interviewing
  - b. Open-ended questions
  - c. Topical-guided interview

#### Organizing, Analyzing, and Synthesizing Data

Follow modified van Kaam method or Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method

Develop individual textural and structural descriptions; composite textural and composite structural descriptions, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences of the experience

#### Summary, Implications, and Outcomes

Summarize entire study

Relate study findings to and differentiate from findings of literature review

Relate study to possible future research and develop an outline for a future study

Relate study to personal outcomes

Relate study to professional outcomes

Relate study to social meanings and relevance

Offer closing comments: Researcher's future direction and goals