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## **The possibilities of phenomenology for organizational research**

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## **The possibilities of phenomenology for organizational research**

### ***Abstract***

*Qualitative researchers have developed and employed a variety of phenomenological methodologies to examine individuals' experiences. However, there is little guidance to help researchers choose between these variations to meet the specific needs of their studies. The purpose of this article is to illuminate the scope and value of phenomenology by developing a typology that classifies and contrasts five popular phenomenological methodologies. By explicating each methodology's differing assumptions, aims and analytical steps, the article generates a series of guidelines to inform researchers' selections. Subsequent sections distinguish the family of phenomenological methodologies from other qualitative methodologies, such as narrative analysis and autoethnography. The article then identifies institutional work and organizational identity as topical bodies of research with particular research needs that phenomenology could address.*

### ***Keywords:***

*phenomenology, qualitative research, methodology, hermeneutics*

## **Introduction**

Phenomenology is both a philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies. The term phenomenology refers to the study of phenomena, where a phenomenon is anything that appears to someone in their conscious experience (Moran, 2000). Phenomenological philosophy has informed a variety of prominent concepts within organization studies including social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and neo-institutional theory (Meyer, 2008). The application of phenomenology to organizational research, however, remains limited despite frequent articulations of its power to understand human experience (Conklin, 2007; Ehrich, 2005; Gibson & Hanes, 2003).

Within organization studies, the “very rare” (Holt & Sandberg, 2011, p. 237) methodological articles that explain a phenomenological approach (Sanders, 1982) or contrast phenomenology with other methodologies (e.g., Goulding, 2005; Suddaby, 2006) suggest that there is one orthodox type. Yet, distinct phenomenological methodologies have proliferated in other social sciences, including nursing, pedagogy and psychology. Comprehending this diversity remains difficult, as no research has attempted to chart the contours of phenomenology as a research methodology. Indeed, there is a paucity of articles that systematically compare types of phenomenology across disciplines and an absence of articles that consider how these types collectively differ from alternative, recently developed qualitative approaches. Thus, for organization researchers, much of the potential scope and value of phenomenology remains unrealised.

The objective of this article is to develop a typology to classify and contrast five phenomenological methodologies from diverse disciplines. By comparing the differing assumptions, aims and analytical steps of each methodology, the article seeks to illuminate the broad possibilities of phenomenology to address a range of research questions. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to examine each type of phenomenology entirely, it

elaborates a series of guidelines to support researchers in selecting one type that is apposite to their needs. This article also clarifies the utility of phenomenological research through comparisons with other qualitative methodologies that may appear to perform a similar function, such as narrative analysis and autoethnography. In doing so, the article seeks to guide researchers through the increasing plurality of qualitative methodologies (Cunliffe, 2011) and to extend and inform their methodological choices within the interpretive traditions (Prasad & Prasad, 2002; Zald, 1996).

Six sections structure this article. First, it briefly introduces the philosophy of phenomenology to explicate the divide between its descriptive and interpretive forms. Second, drawing on this divide, the article develops a typology that classifies and contrasts five phenomenological methodologies and then generates guidelines to support researchers in selecting one type. Third, it posits that these distinct methodologies relate to one another through several inherent similarities that render them phenomenological. Fourth, it distinguishes this family of phenomenological approaches from other forms of qualitative inquiry. Fifth, it posits the need for, and timeliness of, such methodologies by highlighting their potential to support the development of original perspectives within topical bodies of research such as institutional work and organizational identity. Sixth, the article considers the possibilities of developing new phenomenological approaches to research before concluding.

### **Phenomenological philosophy**

Whilst a variety of philosophers have advanced and developed phenomenology, most types of phenomenology draw principally from the work of Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger. Given the large amount of literature that discusses their ideas (e.g., Holt & Sandberg, 2011), the aim of this section is only to draw a clear distinction between Husserl's descriptive and Heidegger's interpretive approaches to phenomenology. This distinction is important because

it illuminates many of the fundamental differences between the methodologies that this article will go on to examine.

### ***Husserl's descriptive phenomenology***

Edmund Husserl is the putative founder of phenomenological philosophy and his work directly informs 'descriptive' phenomenological methodologies, which seek to describe the essence of experiences. In his 1927 entry for Encyclopaedia Britannica, Husserl (translated by Palmer, 1971, p. 77) states that the term 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".

Husserl refers to his descriptive method as 'reduction', which underpins the analytical process of several phenomenological methodologies. In his other publications (Husserl, 1973, 2001, 2012), he discusses several kinds of reduction – the initial one being the phenomenological (or transcendental) reduction. This reduction requires the phenomenological *epoché* or bracketing, where a phenomenologist suspends their assumptions and presuppositions about a phenomenon. By disconnecting from, or transcending, the natural attitude of the "everyday life", Husserl believed his method of phenomenological reduction provided an outlook "upon 'transcendentally' purified phenomena" (2012, p. 3) where purified means free from everyday assumptions.

A further tenet of descriptive phenomenological methodologies is a search for essences. This calls for a further, different kind of reduction known as eidetic reduction. Following reduction to the transcendent there is further reduction to the *eidos* or the essence. Essence refers to the *a priori*, essential structures of subjective experiences or "that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought, i.e., without which the object cannot be intuitively imagined as such" (Husserl, 1973, p. 341). Husserl suggested

phenomenologists could see these essences through intuition or, more specifically, through the process of free variation. This process requires imagining different variations of the phenomenon under study to see what remains as its invariant or essential aspect without which it would be inconceivable. Phenomenology is “a science which aims exclusively at establishing ‘knowledge of essences’” (2012, p. 3). Phenomenology “must bring to pure expression, must *describe* in terms of their essential concepts, the essences which directly make themselves known in intuition” (2001, p. 86 emphasis retained). To Husserl, essences are the foundation for all other knowledge and phenomenological methodologies that draw on his work share his goal to describe these essences.

### ***Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenology***

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, developed his own type of phenomenology that differed in terms of both subject and method, inspiring ‘hermeneutic’ or ‘interpretive’ phenomenological methodologies. Heidegger began to outline his divergence from Husserl in his seminal treatise *Being and Time*, stating that with “regard to its subject matter, phenomenology is the science of the being of entities – ontology” (1996, p. 33). In contrast to Husserl’s epistemological focus, Heidegger considers the question of being and, in particular, explores the human experience of being, which he terms ‘Dasein’. Heidegger’s employment of such a neologism reflected his desire to develop a language unencumbered by the assumptions of the Cartesian subject-object divide. As Heidegger (1988, p. 297) explained, the “self and world belong together in the single entity, Dasein.”

To explore the concept of Dasein, Heidegger emphasised the role of interpretation in any phenomenological endeavour. He states that the “methodological meaning of phenomenological description is *interpretation*” and that “Phenomenology of Dasein is

*hermeneutics* in the original signification of that word, which designates the work of interpretation” (1996, p. 33 emphasis retained).

For any phenomenological methodology drawing on the work of Heidegger, interpretation is not a choice but an integral aspect of research. As Dreyfus (1991) notes in his reading of Heidegger’s work, Heidegger introduced the hermeneutic method into modern philosophy by explicating the necessity of interpretation in the study of human being. Heidegger suggested that individuals are “always already in an environing world” (1988, p. 164) meaning that everyone exists in a culturally and historically conditioned environment from which they cannot step outside. Existence is always set against a background that contextualises experience. In this way, an individual’s culture and traditions influence their understanding of an experience. As such, Heidegger challenges the notion that we can ever be free of assumptions arguing that an “interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something to us” (1996, p. 141). Heidegger’s interpretive approach to studying human existence denies the possibility of fully detached reflection and thereby disputes Husserl’s idea of bracketing presuppositions to articulate an essence.

### **Differences between types of phenomenological methodologies**

Any type of phenomenological methodology rests upon an interpretation of phenomenological philosophy. Though many methodological articles within organization studies describe phenomenology as one standard methodology (e.g., Goulding, 2005; Suddaby, 2006), it is important for researchers to recognise that a variety of types exist due, primarily, to different underlying phenomenological philosophies. As Heidegger insisted, “there is no such thing as *the one* phenomenology” (1988, p. 328 emphasis retained). These different philosophies inform the, often incommensurable, assumptions, objectives and analytical steps of different phenomenological methodologies.



Table 1 provides a classificatory typology of five phenomenological methodologies. The article selected these five methodologies as they originated from diverse disciplines, possess high citations in their respective disciplines, and effectively demonstrate the scope of phenomenology. The methodologies in this typology relate to one another through a hierarchy, with an overarching concept of being phenomenological. As in other typologies, the column and row categories illuminate the attributes of each methodology (Collier, LaPorte, & Seawright, 2012). The columns utilise a descriptive-interpretive (Husserlian-Heideggerian) dichotomy to classify each methodology.

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**Please insert Table 1 about here**

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This typology's rows draw out the underlying dimensions of each methodology to clarify their differences for researchers. The first row considers the disciplinary origin of each type to illuminate their heritage and to indicate the subjects that they typically explore. The second row attempts to interpret and convey to researchers the nature of each methodology, for example whether it is more of a method with specific steps or more of an artistic endeavour. The third row considers the aim of each methodology, helping researchers to discern their different purposes. The fourth row considers the participant and sampling requirements of each type, so that researchers can understand the practical implications of pursuing one particular methodology. The fifth row lists some of the key concepts associated with each type to help researchers appreciate their different analytical processes and distinct terminology. The final row provides examples of each methodology's application in organization studies to provide researchers with illustrations of their utility.

A potential consequence of categorization and classification is some degree of simplification (McKinney, 1969). Each methodology possesses its own subtleties that a

single article or table cannot capture. As such, this article does not seek to explain all the key tenets of each methodology, as various articles and textbooks already perform this task. Instead, the construction of a typology enables this article to go on to contrast each of the five phenomenological methodologies to support researchers in discerning which type is apposite to their research needs. A final sub-section reflects on these comparisons and draws on the typology's columns and rows to offer a set of guidelines for researchers contemplating phenomenological studies.

### ***Sanders' phenomenology for organizational research***

Patricia Sanders' (1982) article is one of the few attempts to outline a phenomenological approach to the study of organizations and remains one of the most highly cited. Sanders describes her phenomenology as a research technique, which seeks to "make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experiences" (1982, p. 354) by exposing the universal pure essences that underlie human consciousness. This search for essences renders Sanders' approach a distinctly descriptive and Husserlian type of phenomenology.

Sanders argues that a phenomenologist should probe a limited number of individuals as sufficient information may be collected through the intensive interviewing of approximately three to six individuals. She goes on to suggest that whilst interviews are the centrepiece of phenomenological research, researchers can use document analyses and participant observation techniques conjunctively. By recording and transcribing interviews, researchers produce narratives to analyse.

Sanders notes that Husserl's bracketing is essential for any phenomenological inquiry and then set out four levels of phenomenological analysis. First, a researcher describes the phenomena experienced by a participant, as revealed in interviews. Second, a researcher identifies the common themes (*invariants*) that emerge across the descriptions. Third, a

researcher reflects on these themes and establishes the object as perceived or ‘the what’ of a participant’s conscious experience (the *noema*) and the meaning this holds for the participant or ‘the how’ this is experienced (the *noesis*). It is their relationship, or the *nomematic/noetic correlates*, which represent “the individual’s perception of the reality of the phenomena under investigation” (Sanders, 1982, p. 357). Fourth, a researcher utilises intuition and reflection, or *eidetic reduction*, to abstract the essences or ‘the why’ an individual experiences a phenomena in the way they do.

The strength of Sanders’ article stems from its provision of practical steps for organizational researchers who wish to pursue phenomenological research. However, few subsequent studies develop or elaborate her approach. In an indicative example, Kram and Isabella’s (1985) pioneering research into mentoring within organizations cites Sanders’ phenomenology as informing their data analysis but refer to her work only once. Consequently, several important aspects of conducting Sanders’ phenomenology remain unclear, such as how to undertake the different stages of reduction or bracket presuppositions fully.

### ***Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method***

Amedeo Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method is one of the most thoroughly developed and highly cited types of phenomenology (see Wertz, 2005). Unlike Sanders, Giorgi has been prolific in detailing his modifications to Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy to create a psychological phenomenology and in providing rigorous guidelines to advance a phenomenological science (2006a). His phenomenology aims to establish and present the essence of a particular psychological phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985, 1997, 2009).

Sampling between descriptive types of phenomenology is consistent as Giorgi, like Sanders, calls for at least three participants as “a sufficient number of variations are needed in

order to come up with a typical essence” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 37). A small number of participants is required, however, as researchers must thoroughly assess all data, where data is the description of a situation by an experiencer (2006a), typically through interviews.

Though Giorgi’s method appears very similar to Sanders’ phenomenology, and also requires bracketing (Giorgi, 2009), he does employ different terminology and a subtly different analytical process with an emphasis on meaning units. Giorgi (1985) prescribes four analytical steps. First, a researcher must read the full description provided by a participant to get a sense of their whole experience. Second, a researcher must read the text to identify and isolate ‘meaning units’. Meaning units are the separate sections of an interview that present a change in meaning for the participant, in relation to a particular phenomenon. Third, a researcher probes these meaning units through Husserl’s method of imaginative variation. Giorgi states that if “the imaginative elimination of an aspect causes the phenomenon to collapse, then that aspect is essential” (2007, p. 64). Fourth, a researcher integrates and synthesises the meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of the phenomenon, which equates to its essence.

Giorgi (1985, 2006b) provides guidance to other social scientists seeking to use his method, suggesting that an appropriate disciplinary attitude should be adopted within the context of the phenomenological attitude. Giorgi’s attitude is psychological because it assumes a participant’s psyche as a fact and does not attempt to bracket it away. So, “if one is a nurse, then a nursing attitude should be adopted and if a psychologist, then a psychological attitude is required, and so forth” (Giorgi, 2006b, p. 354). However, only a small number of organization scholars explicitly draw upon Giorgi’s method to develop new insights. In one example, McClure and Brown (2008) utilised Giorgi’s method to establish the complex constituents, or themes, that are essential to understanding the experience of belonging at work. These researchers interviewed 12 participants and analysed the transcribed interview

text to identify meaning units and possible themes. Through a close reading of the text, the researchers established the themes that collectively made up the structure of the experience. The strongest of which was the discovery of self within a job alongside being invited and learning to be part of a group. These researchers pointed out that this phenomenological approach enabled them to gain clarity about the underlying nature of a phenomenon and particular work experiences.

### ***Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology***

Max van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology emerged within the discipline of pedagogy. In a clear point of departure from other types of phenomenology, van Manen straddles both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology:

*“hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is descriptive (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an interpretive (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. (1990, p. 180).*

To van Manen, “the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (1990, p. 36). Like Sanders and Giorgi, van Manen seeks the essence of a phenomenon but in contrast to their conception of phenomenology as a technique or science, van Manen equates his phenomenology with an artistic endeavour. He describes his phenomenology as a ‘poetizing project’ (Van Manen, 1984) that seeks to speak to the world rather than of the world.

Unlike Sanders and Giorgi, Van Manen does not provide specific sampling guidelines though his followers also utilise small sample sizes (e.g., nine participants in Gibson, 2004).

Van Manen suggests that a researcher initially become oriented - adopt a particular perspective - to the phenomenon of interest. Then a researcher should gather experiential descriptions from others through interviews, close observations and by asking individuals to write their experiences down to generate original texts or 'protocols'.

Van Manen (1984, 1989) describes four analytical activities and, in contrast to Sanders and Giorgi, rejects the idea of bracketing, suggesting that researchers should acknowledge their assumptions as presuppositions may "persistently creep back into our reflections" (1990, p. 47). First, a researcher conducts thematic analyses to determine the themes or experiential structures that make up an experience, separating incidental themes (that can change without affecting the phenomenon) and essential themes (that make the phenomenon what it is). Second, a researcher describes the phenomena through the art of writing, which requires multiple sessions of revision to become 'depthful' (Van Manen, 1989). Third, a researcher maintains a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon, which equates to reflexivity and practicing 'thoughtfulness', whereby they consider how they act toward and understand their participants. Fourth, a researcher should balance the research context by considering the parts and whole, remembering to step back from specific details of 'what something is' to construct a piece textual expression.

Few organizational researchers utilise van Manen's methodology. One study which draws on his work, though, is Gibson's (2004) exploration of the essence of women faculty's experience of being mentored. Gibson employed conversational interviewing with nine participants on this topic. She then transcribed and analysed the interviews, identifying key phrases and discerning commonalities to generate and revise essential themes of meaning. Having acknowledged and noted her assumptions, she established five essential themes; (a) having someone who truly cares and acts in one's best interest, (b) a feeling of connection, (c) being affirmed of one's worth, (d) not being alone, and (e) politics are part of one's

experience. As Gibson demonstrates, this phenomenological approach, which calls for researchers to bring their assumptions into conscious experience, generates new insights into the essential nature and meaning of a particular experience.

### ***Benner's interpretive phenomenology***

Patricia Benner developed her interpretive phenomenology (1985, 1994) to guide research into the experience of nursing and patients. In contrast to Husserlian and descriptive methodologies, Benner's (1985, p. 5) approach is "congruent with a particular theoretical stance (Heideggerian phenomenology) taken toward human beings and human experience". Benner's phenomenology places a significant emphasis on exploring practice, seeking to observe and articulate the commonalities across participants' practical, everyday understandings and knowledge (Benner, 1994, p. 103) though not their private or idiosyncratic understandings.

Unlike the small numbers of participants typically advocated in other phenomenological methodologies, Benner (1994) suggests that an adequate sample size is achieved when interpretations are visible and clear and when new informants reveal no new findings. As such, Benner and colleagues sometimes utilise interpretive teams (Crist & Tanner, 2003) or groups of researchers trained in interpretive phenomenology to interview over one hundred participants (e.g., Tanner, Benner, Chesla, & Gordon, 1993).

In recognition of Heidegger's notion of the taken for granted background meanings, interpretive phenomenology seeks to illuminate the kind of knowing that occurs within a particular social situation (Benner & Wrubel, 1989). This entails engaged reasoning and dwelling in the immediacy of the participants' worlds (1994). Uncommon in other phenomenological approaches, Benner and colleagues sometimes utilise group interviews to

create “a natural conversational setting for storytelling” (Tanner et al., 1993, p. 274) alongside observations and field notes of behaviour and interaction in natural settings (1985).

In terms of analysis, Benner advocates a thematic analysis of the texts (Benner, 1985) whereby common themes are identified with sufficient supporting excerpts. Crist and Tanner (2003) provide a detailed overview of this process and note the importance of developing paradigm cases and exemplars. A paradigm case is a ‘marker’ - a strong or vivid instance - of a particular pattern of meaning that helps researchers to recognise similarities in other cases. Exemplars, whilst smaller than paradigm cases, are salient excerpts of stories or instances that characterize specific common themes or meanings across informants (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Benner suggests exemplars or paradigm cases embody the meaning of everyday practices (1985, p. 5) and that by establishing and presenting them researchers can portray individuals’ lived meanings.

Interpretive phenomenology’s analytic guidelines are not specific to nursing and researchers in other disciplines could apply them. However, only Yakhlef and Essén (2012) appear to have utilised Benner’s approach within organization studies. Sharing Benner’s interest in examining caring practices, they employed several data generation techniques including open-ended interviews and observations across two Swedish community care organizations. Many of these observations focused on the care workers’ bodily performances. By interpreting the data and text, the authors extracted several exemplars of similarities across the participants’ experiences. These exemplars illustrated how care workers would often deviate from bureaucratic rules through their improvised performances to adjust to particular circumstances, such as when they needed more time than prescribed. By focusing on the body’s skilful coping, the researchers demonstrated how physical practices could resist bureaucratic power and how innovative action arises. This study demonstrates the power of



Benner's phenomenology to attend the experiences of the body and to examine the meaning of practices.

### ***Smith's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis***

Jonathan Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a recent type of phenomenology and since its emergence (Smith, 1996) it has become increasingly popular in psychology, producing hundreds of studies (Smith, 2010). IPA employs flexible guidelines, rendering it more of a craft than a technique or scientific method (as criticised by Giorgi, 2010). As its name suggests, IPA "concur[s] with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 32). IPA aims to explore, in detail, how participants make sense of their personal and social world, and the meanings particular experiences or events hold for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

IPA's idiographic nature separates it from most other phenomenological methodologies. In seeking to capture and convey the richness of a particular person's experience, Smith has argued for single case studies where a single participant is used to push the idiographic logic of IPA (Smith, 2004). Whilst Smith's 'interpretative' phenomenological analysis is similar to Benner's 'interpretive' phenomenology, his idiographic emphasis is an important point of a distinction. In a further point of difference, whilst IPA can employ observations and focus groups, as they are helpful for researchers to understand particular contexts (Smith et al., 2009), data collection usually occurs through semi-structured interviews.

Smith and Osborne (2008) outline four key stages of inductive analysis for researchers underlying which is the double hermeneutic, whereby a researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's sense making activity. First, a researcher reads one transcript closely for familiarity and then looks for emerging themes, annotating significant points. The

researcher then develops their notes into concise themes that capture the ‘essential quality’ of the respondent’s comments. Second, a researcher clusters together connected or related themes to create master (superordinate or over-arching) themes. Third, a researcher uses the emergent themes from the first transcript to orient the analysis of subsequent transcripts, in an iterative fashion. Once each transcript has been analysed, a final table of superordinate themes is constructed. Fourth, the outcome of the analytical process is a narrative account where “the researcher’s analytic interpretation is presented in detail with verbatim extracts from participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 4).

More so than other phenomenological methodologies, Smith and colleagues (2009) encourage the expansion of IPA from psychology into cognate disciplines, pointing out that researchers in other disciplines also seek to examine the experiential. A small, but growing, number of management scholars have utilised IPA to yield new insights (Cope, 2011; Fitzgerald & Howe-Walsh, 2008; Murtagh, Lopes, & Lyons, 2011; Rehman & Roomi, 2012; Wise & Millward, 2005). For instance, Murtagh et al.’s (2011) IPA study sought to understand the experience of voluntarily career changes for women. Their study purposively recruited eight women with relevant experiences and utilised semi-structured interviews to interview the participants multiple times. Rich accounts of how each participant made sense of their decisions revealed how they initially took steps that they did not intend to use to change careers but that they later viewed as pivotal. The participants progressed with these steps when they experienced positive emotions, in contrast to following a systematic approach to making career decisions. Murtagh et al.’s (2011) study therefore highlighted the emotional drivers of career decisions and provided empirical evidence for the other-than-rational decision-making.

### **Guidelines for selecting one type of phenomenology**

By contrasting five different types of methodology that have emerged over the past thirty years, this article hopes to have demonstrated that there is no orthodox or standard phenomenological methodology. Indeed, the five methodologies contained in the typology are not exhaustive and numerous other phenomenological types exist each with their own attributes (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Ricoeur, 1976). Nonetheless, the typology helps researchers to consider the assumptions and implications of different types. With reference to the typology, this section closes by offering some points to guide researchers in their selection of one particular type of phenomenological approach that is apposite to their research needs.

*Descriptive or interpretive phenomenology:* A phenomenological researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions should inform their selection of a particular methodology. Beyond a connection to a broad conception of phenomenology, a researcher should establish if their assumptions more closely align with Husserl, Heidegger, or a combination of different phenomenological philosophers. Selecting one particular type of phenomenological philosophy to underpin a study can preclude the application of certain types of phenomenological methodologies. As Osborne (1994, p. 174) points out, potential researchers should appreciate that hermeneutic phenomenology makes "an interpretive leap beyond Husserlian phenomenology". For example, the practice of bracketing that is essential to Sanders and Giorgi's methodologies would be inappropriate in Benner and Smith's approaches.

*Aims:* Closely linked to a researcher's philosophical assumptions, the nature of the research question and the intended research outcomes should also guide the selection of a particular methodology. This is a subtle but important distinction between phenomenological approaches (see Finlay, 2009). If a researcher is aiming to describe an experience in general (i.e., as one shared by many) then Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology would be appropriate.

If a researcher is aiming to articulate the commonalities of individuals' experiences within a particular context then Benner's interpretive phenomenology is a suitable option. Alternatively, if a researcher seeks to explicate individual experience then Smith's IPA would be an apt choice.

***Participants and sampling strategy:*** It is important for a researcher to consider the practical elements of their phenomenological study, such as their research access, as different phenomenological methodologies necessitate different sampling approaches and numbers of participants. For example, using only one participant would be entirely appropriate in Smith's IPA but would fail to meet the basic criteria of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method that requires at least three participants. Furthermore, though both Benner and Smith's approaches are interpretive and can explore commonalities across several participants they differ in their sampling strategies. Benner's interpretive phenomenology would necessitate sampling until no new information emerges. In contrast, information saturation would be superfluous when utilising Smith's IPA.

***Key concepts of data collection and analysis:*** The selection of a particular methodology informs the practical steps of conducting a phenomenological research study. Whilst all approaches seek to capture the lived experiences of participants, they utilise different concepts and emphasise different methods of data collection. For example, all the methodologies considered in this article employ interviews but, where appropriate, van Manen favours the use of protocols whilst Benner advises researchers to conduct group interviews and observations. Furthermore, each methodology advances its own analytical steps and terminology. Thus, the selection of a specific phenomenological methodology is also a choice of particular philosophical assumptions and a certain course of action.

## **Similarities across the family of phenomenological methodologies**

Whilst different types of phenomenology exist, their differences should not obscure their similarities and the characteristics that unite these approaches as phenomenological. Herbert Spiegelberg (1982) likened the various philosophies of phenomenology to a stream, which incorporates parallel currents, each with a common point of departure but not necessarily moving toward the same destination or at the same speed. In this way, Spiegelberg argued that whilst phenomenology is not easy to characterize, it is a movement, as its various forms possess common features. The simile of the stream appears equally apt for the varieties of phenomenological methodologies. This paper posits that phenomenological methodologies are a family of approaches, related through five inter-related commonalities; a shared foundation of phenomenological philosophy, an explicit interest in the meaning of individuals' experiences, attempting to grasp the point of view of the 'experiencer', homogenous sampling and thematic analyses that necessitate creativity and imagination.

Phenomenological philosophy and its challenge to the natural sciences' treatment of subjectivity underpin all forms of phenomenology. As Moran (2000, p. 15) argues, "the whole point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity." In this way, phenomenological investigations reject the Cartesian subject-object relationship that is central to the natural sciences and challenge natural sciences' ability to examine fully individuals' experiences. Indeed, Giorgi (2006a, p. 306) notes that "to use phenomenological philosophy as a basis for psychological (or other social science) research also implies that a phenomenological theory of science is presupposed even if it is not acknowledged". As a result, many phenomenological scholars have labelled their approach as a human science (e.g., Giorgi, 2005; Smith, 2007; Van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological inquiry seeks to explore and examine experiences. Smith (2004, p. 41) suggests that different types of phenomenology, including his IPA, are “part of a stable of closely connected approaches which share a commitment to the exploration of personal lived experience, but which have different emphases or suggested techniques to engage in this project”. Van Manen (1990) expresses similar sentiments, when he suggests that phenomenologists strive to understand the meanings of a person’s experience rather than providing causal explanation of such experiences. Phenomenologists’ ultimate aim is to understand an experience, as far as possible, as opposed to using this understanding to predict or explain behaviour.

As a related point, phenomenological approaches usually attempt to describe experiences from the point of view of the ‘experiencer’. Phenomenology assumes that human beings seek meaning from their experiences and that their accounts convey this meaning. Therefore, to describe this meaning, entails staying close (Smith et al., 2009) to research participants’ language to provide a faithful account that clearly connects a researchers’ interpretations to the participants’ experiences.

Phenomenological studies utilise homogenous and purposive samples. They recruit participants who can offer a meaningful perspective of the phenomenon of interest and who share a certain lived experience. Although phenomenological approaches typically employ small sample sizes this is not always the case, for example Benner and colleagues’ (Tanner et al., 1993) use of interpretive teams facilitated the study of hundreds of participants. Nonetheless, generalizations are usually limited to the specific groups researchers are studying and all forms of phenomenology emphasise rich qualitative accounts over the quantity of data (Sanders, 1982).

All the types of phenomenology considered in this article apply some form thematic analysis to unravel the experiences under study. Giorgi, for example, “thematizes the

phenomenon of consciousness” (1997, p. 236) and Smith (2009) calls for researchers to analyse the structural or thematic aspects of experience. For phenomenologists, thematic analysis necessitates creativity and imagination. This could take the form of Giorgi’s free imaginative variation or an “artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life” as articulated by Smith (2009, p. 39).

Whilst different types of phenomenology exist, often with differing assumptions or processes, their differences should not obscure their fundamental similarities. All phenomenological methodologies operate within a broad tradition of phenomenological thought and associated principles. These commonalities enable this article to distinguish phenomenological methodologies collectively from other, similar qualitative methodologies.

### **Contrasting phenomenology with other qualitative approaches**

Whilst several articles compare phenomenology to grounded theory (e.g., Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Suddaby, 2006) and ethnography (Goulding, 2005), the extant methodological literature provides little examination of how the phenomenological family of approaches remain distinctive from other qualitative methodologies. This absence obscures the specific and unique value of phenomenology for researchers and clouds the issue of when phenomenology is appropriate to address research questions. In light of the wide variety of alternatives available, the article focuses on distinguishing phenomenology from qualitative approaches that may appear, on cursory inspection, to perform a similar function. These methodologies include those that also focus on the accounts or experiences of individuals (narrative inquiry, autoethnography), utilise similar analytical processes (template analysis), or have emerged from phenomenological theories (ethnomethodology).

Narrative analysis or inquiry is interested in “biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (Chase, 2000, p. 651). Although many narrative inquiries consider

the story of an individual's entire life, or their life history, it would be inaccurate to suggest that this is the sole focus of such studies. As in phenomenology, a narrative could refer to a story about a particular event or a significant aspect of an individuals' lived experiences (Chase, 2000). Narrative inquiry typically investigates the narrative of an individual or a small group of individuals, which is also strikingly similar to phenomenological approaches and particularly to those with an idiographic emphasis (e.g., Smith et al., 2009). However, narrative and phenomenological approaches differ in their conceptualization of data. Narrative inquiry tends to view meaning as originating in words and "takes as its object of investigation the story itself" (Riessman, 2002, p. 218). In contrast, phenomenological researchers use verbal data to access individuals' lived experiences. Phenomenological approaches therefore assume a 'chain of connection' (Chapman & Smith, 2002) between what a participants says and their experiences. In this way, phenomenological approaches are appropriate to address research questions that view an experience as the main object of investigation and not the story of an experience.

Autoethnography is a research approach that is predominantly associated with the work of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Although the label of autoethnography is relatively new, researchers have employed similar approaches in organization studies (e.g., Dalton, 1959; Gephart, 1978). A shared interest in personal experience renders autoethnography and phenomenology somewhat similar approaches. However, the aims of phenomenological inquiry remain distinct from both the autobiographical and ethnographic elements of autoethnography. In terms of the 'auto', although some phenomenological approaches do use the experience of the interviewer to access the depth of the other (e.g.,



Moustakas, 1994), phenomenological researchers typically explore other individuals' experiences rather than "writing their own experiences as a story" or viewing the researcher as the subject (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). In terms of the 'ethnographic' element, autoethnographers seek to understand a way of life by initially gazing through an ethnographic lens to connect the personal to the cultural. In contrast, though interpretive forms of phenomenology are sensitive to context, they seek to explore individuals' experiences without necessarily connecting these to a particular cultural identity. As van Manen (1989) points out, phenomenology does not aim to explain meanings that relate to particular cultures as ethnography does. As such, phenomenological approaches are appropriate to address research questions that seek to examine how others experience particular phenomena without necessarily relating to a particular culture.

Ethnomethodology is the study of the ways in which ordinary people construct a stable social world through everyday actions (Garfinkel, 2011). Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology, clearly acknowledges his work as originating from Husserl and phenomenology (Garfinkel, 2011, p. ix). Furthermore, many social scientists view ethnomethodology as phenomenological sociology (Rogers, 1983). Yet, whilst phenomenological thought inspired ethnomethodology, the two approaches are distinct in their content. Ethnomethodology examines how individuals organize and 'account' for their everyday activity (see Gephart, 1978) where as phenomenology seeks to examine how people experience particular phenomena. Indeed, as Zimmerman notes, "the term 'phenomenological' is inappropriate as a blanket characterization of the working tools, methods, and problems of ethnomethodology, if for no other reason than that it blurs the distinction between intellectual heritage and intellectual content" (1978, p. 8). The phenomenological approaches in this article are appropriate to explore individuals'

experiences, and the meanings these experiences hold, but not to establish how individuals enact and organize their everyday social activities.

Template analysis is an approach to the thematic analysis of qualitative data. As King (2004), a leading proponent of template analysis, acknowledges, this thematic approach is different to phenomenological approaches because it typically starts with *a priori* codes, which identify themes strongly expected to be relevant to the analysis (e.g., Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). Moreover, it does not analyse cases in the same depth as phenomenological investigations and is therefore more amenable to large sample sizes. In contrast, phenomenology seeks to conduct investigations to establish themes through the thorough investigation of participants' accounts. However, researchers should note that template analysis does not necessarily have to begin with *a priori* codes and could focus on smaller numbers of individuals. In this way, its analytical process is similar to phenomenology, particularly Smith's IPA or indeed any other approach that utilises thematic analyses. However, template analysis does not possess a particular philosophical foundation or a connected aim whereas phenomenological philosophies inform phenomenological methodologies and direct researchers to explore lived experiences. As such, researchers should adopt phenomenological approaches when they possess an associated philosophical orientation and when they do not begin with *a priori* codes.

In drawing these comparisons, this article does not suggest that phenomenology should supplant existing qualitative approaches. Instead, this article posits that phenomenology is a further, valuable option that is appropriate to address particular research objectives. In particular, phenomenology can enable researchers to examine how others ascribe meaning to, or makes sense of, their particular experiences within the broad tradition of phenomenological thought.

## **The timeliness of phenomenological methodologies**

This article has explicated when it may be appropriate to employ phenomenological methodologies. To demonstrate their timeliness, this section suggests that these methodologies are opportune for developing new insights within current and popular bodies of organizational research. As this article is constrained by space, consideration is limited to two such opportunities: institutional work and organizational identity.

### ***Phenomenological studies of institutional work***

Modern or neo-institutional theory has become the dominant perspective in organization studies (Clegg, 2012; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). Phenomenological philosophy informed the development of new institutional theory (Holt & Sandberg, 2011) and scholars have pointed out the “phenomenological orientation of new institutional scholars” (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997, p. 412; Meyer, 2008). However, at the time of writing, no institutional scholarship appears to have employed any form of phenomenology as a research methodology.

It is strange that phenomenology’s tenacious focus on the experience of individuals has led to the emergence of neo institutional theory, which has been criticised for its macro perspective and for failing to consider individuals (Suddaby, 2010). Institutional theory’s recent development has begun to address more micro level considerations. For example, the role of individuals in creating, maintaining, and disrupting the institutions in which they are embedded is the focus of an increasingly prominent body of research known as institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Within institutional work, there have been growing calls for further examinations of individual and their experiences. Suddaby (2010, p. 16) suggests that “[m]ethodologically, if we are to take seriously the ideational aspects of institutions, we need to [...] incorporate

interpretivist methods that pay serious attention to the subjective ways in which actors experience institutions”. As this article has argued, phenomenology is a powerful tool for scholars seeking to examine and explore how individuals subjectively experience and give meaning to particular phenomena, such as institutions. Furthermore, phenomenological methodologies share an interpretivist heritage (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) with institutional work. Indeed, both phenomenological methodologies and institutional work emerged from the concepts of phenomenological philosophy. As such, phenomenological methodologies are both pertinent to the purpose and apposite to the assumptions of institutional work scholars.

### *Phenomenological studies of organizational identity*

Phenomenological methodologies are both suitable and timely in supporting scholars investigating organizational identity, in terms of those researchers who adopt a traditional view of identity as enduring and those who consider identity as more dynamic. From a traditional perspective, David Whetten and Stuart Albert first developed the concept of organizational identity, defining it as that which members believe to be central, enduring, and distinctive about their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Although the concept has continued to develop over twenty five years, particularly in terms of how organizational identity changes, Whetten and colleagues (Foreman & Whetten, 2002) lament the lack of empirical research that explores the enduring properties and nature of organizational identity over time. Whilst all phenomenological approaches attend to experience, Giorgi and van Manen’s methodologies are particularly well suited to address this gap given their explicit intention to establish the enduring essence of phenomena such as organizational identity.

Furthermore, Whetten (2006, p. 220) recently noted that his formulation of organizational identity contained a “phenomenological component [which] posited that identity-related discourse was most likely to be observed in conjunction with profound

organizational experiences”. This indicates the value of phenomenological studies to examine organizational members’ experiences of significant events to illuminate the meaning of organizational identity.

Phenomenological methodologies may also support research that adopts a more dynamic view of organizational identity. This dynamic view assumes a social constructionist perspective and considers identity as a product of individuals’ shared interpretations and therefore as more malleable (Corley et al., 2006; Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013). Proponents of this perspective believe that organizational identity is truly phenomenological (Corley et al., 2006), meaning that it is something that is experienced as a phenomena by organizational members. These scholars have noted that the process by which organizational members ‘make sense’ of their organizational identity “is an intriguing question for future research to explore” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 164). Given its focus on how individuals interpret and make sense of particular experiences, Smith’s IPA appears to offer an appropriate and powerful tool to refine our understanding of organizational identity.

Currently, there is an absence of any phenomenological methodologies within the existing corpus of organizational identity studies. Yet, in both enduring and dynamic approaches, scholars expressly refer to organizational identity as phenomenological and as something that is experienced. This suggests that phenomenological studies may aid the development of fresh insights into how organizational identity is experienced.

### **Future possibilities for phenomenological research**

This section briefly outlines some opportunities for organizational scholars to advance and develop phenomenological approaches to research. It does so by widening the article’s focus beyond the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger to draw inspiration from other phenomenological philosophers. For example, one opportunity would be for scholars to consider the

phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964). Merleau-Ponty differed from Husserl and Heidegger by focusing on the relationship between consciousness and somatic (bodily) experiences (Moran, 2000). Whilst existing research methodologies have incorporated aspects of Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body (e.g., Benner, 1994; Giorgi, 1997), there remains the opportunity to develop approaches grounded more explicitly in his philosophy. By interpreting and applying his particular phenomenology, researchers could develop approaches that examine more closely the embodied experiences of organizational members.

Perhaps the most promising opportunity for researchers to advance phenomenological approaches is to revisit the work of Alfred Schütz (Schütz, 1967; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). Schütz developed a framework of sociology based on phenomenological concepts, synthesising the work of Husserl and Max Weber (Schütz, 1999). Central to Schütz's work is the notion of intersubjectivity, which describes the shared or mutual subjective understanding between individuals, or the 'we-relationship' (Calhoun, Joseph, James, Steven, & Indermohan, 2007; Schütz, 1966). Schütz re-focused phenomenology away from a Husserlian emphasis on individual consciousness and onto intersubjectivity, theorizing that individuals' shared meanings create institutions, organizations and social reality (Overgaard & Zahavi, 2009). Schütz's attempts to understand how actors sustain their social reality laid the foundation for several theories that are prominent in the field of organization studies, such as social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). In this way, Schütz's phenomenology appears to be a rich source of theories to understand organizations and institutions.

However, Schütz's phenomenology provides little explanation of how to employ his ideas to the study of organizations. One of the rare resources for researchers seeking to conduct Schützian research is the work of George Psathas. Inspired by Schütz, Psathas (1973) appears to be one of the first scholars to employ the term phenomenological sociology,

describing it as the study of how individuals' subjective experiences of groups, communities and formal organizations inform the externalization and objectification procedures that create social reality (Eberle, 2012; Nasu, 2012). Psathas (1973) used this term as the title for an edited collection of contributions from phenomenologists and sociologists. In one contribution, Jehenson (1973) explicates a Schützian approach to examine the organizational setting of a psychological research hospital. Jehenson revealed how employees' social interactions can transform the subjective meanings that they ascribe to organizational roles. Yet few scholars went on to elaborate or employ Jehenson's approach over the following forty years (but see Jehenson, 1984). Indeed, although phenomenological sociology has passed through several waves of development (Bird, 2009; Ferguson, 2006; Rogers, 1983), its application to the study of organizations remains limited.

Organizational scholars could revisit Schütz and phenomenological sociology to develop research approaches that examine how individuals' shared experiences and meanings create their social world. This would be particularly valuable given that the established phenomenological methodologies discussed earlier in this article tend to examine individuals' subjective experiences rather than inter-subjective experiences. As Psathas (1968, p. 520) noted, "phenomenology has a great deal to offer the social scientist".

## **Conclusion**

This article has classified and contrasted a range of phenomenological methodologies. In doing so, it provides guidance for researchers attempting to navigate through the increasing plurality of qualitative methodologies (Cunliffe, 2011). It has also explicated how and when to employ a variety of phenomenological research approaches. As such, this article equips researchers with more tools to describe or interpret the meanings replete within organizations, which is an important but often neglected aspect of organizational research (Gephart, 2004).

Although this article provides classifications and guidelines, it stresses that these function as an introductory aid to, rather than a replacement for, becoming familiar with the nuances of a particular phenomenological approach. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, researchers should seek to understand their selected methodology's complete interpretation of philosophical ideas into practical research principles. These interpretations have profound implications for what each type of phenomenology aims to achieve and how it proposes to examine experience.

Phenomenology, as a family of methodologies, can address a variety of topical research questions that consider subjective experiences and meanings. Max van Manen (2007) wrote that phenomenology should stir the reader by directing their gaze to where meaning originates. This article hopes to have illuminated the meaning of several phenomenological methodologies to stimulate the research decisions of organizational scholars.

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**Table 1: A typology of phenomenological methodologies**

	<b>Phenomenology</b>				
	<b>Descriptive phenomenology (Husserlian)</b>		<b>Interpretive phenomenology (Heideggerian)</b>		
	<b>Sanders' phenomenology</b>	<b>Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method</b>	<b>Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology</b>	<b>Benner's interpretive phenomenology</b>	<b>Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis</b>
<i>Disciplinary origin</i>	Organization Studies	Psychology	Pedagogy	Nursing	Psychology
<i>Methodology as</i>	Technique	Scientific method	Poetry	Practice	Craft
<i>Aims</i>	To make explicit the implicit structure (or essences) and meaning of human experiences	To establish the essence of a particular phenomenon	To transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence	To articulate practical, everyday understandings and knowledge	To explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world
<i>Participants (sampling)</i>	3-6	At least 3	<i>Unspecified</i>	Until new informants reveal no new findings	1 or more
<i>Key concepts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bracketing (epoché)</li> <li>• Eidetic reduction</li> <li>• Nomematic / noetic correlates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bracketing (epoché)</li> <li>• Eidetic reduction                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imaginative variation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Meaning units</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depthful writing                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Thoughtfulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The background                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exemplars</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Interpretive teams</li> <li>• Paradigm cases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Double hermeneutic</li> <li>• Idiographic</li> <li>• Inductive</li> </ul>
<i>Applications in organization studies</i>	Kram and Isabella (1985)	McClure and Brown (2008)	Gibson (2004)	Yakhlef and Essén (2012)	Murtagh et al. (2011)