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December 2002

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### Recommended Citation

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<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2002/241>

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# VALIDITY ISSUES IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH: BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN A STUDY OF IT-DRIVEN RADICAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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## Abstract

*In spite of their wide acceptance in other fields, phenomenological research methods have been greatly neglected by the IT community. In this paper, different validity threats that stem from the ontological and epistemological basis of this methodology are discussed and illustrated with a research project on IT-driven radical organizational change. In this way, it intends to provide practical guidance for those endeavoring to apply phenomenology to investigate individuals' experiences related to the design, development, and use of information technologies.*

## Introduction

Over the last decade, qualitative research based on interpretive methodologies seems to have achieved general recognition in the IT arena (e.g., Lee, 2001; Yates & Van Maanen, 2001). Among the variety of modes of investigation within the interpretivist tradition in IT, Husserl's (1960, 1967, 1970) transcendental phenomenology may be the one least used by scholars. Even in the broader domain of organizational studies, few references can be found. One of the first advocates of the application of phenomenological methods to the study of organizational phenomena is Fred Massarik (1981, 1985). He urged researchers to use phenomenology to obtain a better understanding of the nature of the human experience in organizations. Richard Boland (Boland, 1985; Boland & Day, 1982) was the pioneer in the application of phenomenology in Information Technology research. Boland (1985) argued that the study of the design, implementation, and use of information systems is essentially a hermeneutic task, in which designers and users attempt to interpret each other's intentions, as well as the socially constructed organizational reality where their interactions take place. Based on these ideas, he maintained that phenomenology is the preferred method to study such phenomena, because it "accepts meaning as the central problem on which all other knowledge of the social world will depend" (ibid., p. 196).

Although infrequently, phenomenology has continued to guide investigations of organizational life. An especially relevant work is Chikudate's (1999) study of the experiences of Japanese managers in change processes. Apparently, this is the only phenomenological investigation in the literature that focuses on organizational change phenomena, which nowadays seem to be increasingly connected to the adoption of new information technologies (e.g., Baskerville, Smithson, Ngwenyama & DeGross, 1994; Orlikowski, Walsham, Jones & DeGross, 1996). In fact, since the late 1990s, an increasing number of studies have attempted to link individual, organizational, and societal phenomena within the context of technology-enabled organizational change (e.g., Orlikowski et al., 1996; Yates and Van Maanen, 2001). Using phenomenological research methods, Chikudate (1999) was able to identify several socio-historical processes that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in Japanese companies, and thereby, to the high rate of failure of organizational change efforts in that country. In this way, his study shows how phenomenology can be used to unveil the interconnections between phenomena that take place at the individual level, and the broader structures that are prevalent in society at a particular time.

The contributions of the abovementioned studies to our understanding of IT and organizational phenomena are undeniable. In particular, they have clearly demonstrated the value of phenomenological methods to the investigation of issues that traditionally

fall within these arenas. Although IT scholars and practitioners may accept this as true, there still appear to be some barriers to a wider adoption of phenomenology in the study of the social aspects of information technologies. Indeed, the practical challenges one is prone to face when applying a phenomenological methodology have been rarely addressed in the IT or the organizational change literatures. For instance, one of the main factors contributing to the acceptance of qualitative methods by the broader IT community has been the care with which researchers address issues of validity in their studies. In fact, much has been written about validity in qualitative research (e.g., Klein & Myers, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994), where it usually refers to “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 87) put forth by the researcher. Nonetheless, it is still difficult to find references that thoroughly examine validity issues in the context of phenomenological studies.

The present paper intends to provide practical guidance for those endeavoring to apply phenomenology to the investigation of individuals’ experiences related to the design, development, and use information technologies. To accomplish this goal, I analyze different validity issues that stem from the underlying principles of the phenomenological method. In addition, I strive to bring them to the praxis of IT research, using one of my own recent investigations to clarify the conceptual aspects of my argument. The project in question focused on the multifaceted processes linking professional self-identity and social structures, in the context of IT-driven radical organizational change (Moreno, 1999, 2001). In that study, I used a phenomenological research methodology to examine the experiences described by a number of individuals whose work lives were fundamentally transformed by reengineering projects. The reengineering or Business Process Redesign (BPR) methodology prescribes the utilization of telecommunications and computer technologies to leverage the radical change of organizational structures and procedures, so that they can be optimally adjusted to the specific needs and environment of the organization (Hammer & Champy, 1993). BPR projects are thus, potential instantiations of planned, radical (rather than contingent, incremental) organizational change, catalyzed and fundamentally supported by IT. As such, they provide a fertile ground for intensive studies of how ordinary individuals experience IT-related phenomena.

In the next section, I offer a short description of the fundamentals of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Readers interested in deepening their knowledge about this topic are encouraged to refer to the later works of Husserl (1967, 1970), as well as to the more recent developments and applications of his ideas (e.g., Kockelmans, 1967; Mohanty, 1997; Silverman, 1997; Stevick, 1971; Van Kaan, 1959, 1966). Next, I examine different intrinsic validity issues associated with a phenomenological research design. The ontological and epistemological basis of the phenomenological method are brought into light to reveal threats to validity in the selection of participants, the collection of data, and the analysis of qualitative information. Problems prone to occur in investigations of IT-related phenomena are discussed and exemplified with the abovementioned study of the experience of reengineering. I conclude with a brief assessment of the limitations of the phenomenological method.

## Philosophical Basis of the Phenomenological Method

Edmund Husserl introduced transcendental phenomenology as a science of human experience in the beginning of this century. He believed that philosophy must provide the basic knowledge upon which other sciences may be built. According to Husserl, the non-philosophical sciences are developed based on what he called the “*natural attitude*” or “*natural standpoint*”. He argued that, as human beings, we become aware of an “external world” populated with not only objects and beasts, but also our and others’ selves. Although individuals may apprehend their natural surroundings differently, they perceive their experiences as coming from the same ultimate, united “reality”. Through their interactions, they develop shared understandings and construct a common, “objective” spatiotemporal fact-world, which is then naturally accepted as reality itself. Starting from this standpoint, the traditional natural sciences attribute to the fact-world objective characteristics that make it independent of our acts of perception and deduction, i.e., of our consciousness. The “external reality” is assumed to be fully explainable through exact, objective laws, possessing a rationality that can be fully understood. The task of science, then, would be to unveil these natural laws, through the application of formal methodologies.

Husserl contended that the implicit assumptions of the natural sciences need to be reexamined. Phenomenology, as he conceived it, would then supply the means to investigate the validity of such presuppositions. For this reason, it could not itself embed similar assumptions in its ontological and epistemological framework. In fact, Husserl advocated a suspension of all presuppositions in his phenomenological method, so that the “philosopher at the beginning secures an absolute foundation for himself” (Kockelmans, 1967, p.29). Where these layers of assumptions and constructed meanings are removed, pure consciousness, or the *transcendental ego*, remains standing. Its inherent intentionality leads it to act upon the ultimate reality of which it itself is a part, bringing the world into our consciousness as perception. According to Husserl, the primordial experience of an object, beast, or man is a gateway to its ultimate *essence*, i.e., the set of conditions or qualities without which a thing would

not be what it is (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The “reflections” of essences in our consciousness (*phenomena*) are necessarily embedded in a web of meanings, which are related to previous and concurrent experiences, to things we have learned and deduced, to intuition and imagination. Essences are thus, concealed by layers of relations and meanings that usually prevent us from getting in touch with those original, pure representations. Therefore, in order to build true knowledge about the “external reality”, we must first remove those layers: we must go back “to the things themselves” Phenomenological research involves four basic stages. The first one is called *epokhé* (abstention), a term used by Husserl to refer to freedom of suppositions. The process of *epokhé*, thus, consists of a deep self-examination, to identify and “‘invalidate’, ‘inhibit’, and ‘disqualify’ all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience” (Schmitt, 1968). It challenges the “natural attitude”, the biases of all knowledge that is acquired from an external base rather than through internal reflection and meaning. The second step in phenomenological research is the process of *Phenomenological Reduction*. Its main goal is to obtain a rich, accurate, and complete textural description of the experiences as they were lived by the participants of the phenomenological investigation. In a first moment, the focus of the research is “placed in brackets” (*bracketing*), i.e., everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted exclusively on the topic and question of interest. Then, we engage in an iterative cycle of observation-description, where new perspectives are added each time. An important component of this process is *horizontalization*, or the acknowledgment of all perceptions related to a given object. Horizons and textural characteristics are examined and connected, as the wholeness of the phenomenon is gradually comprehended.

The next stage of phenomenological research is called *Imaginative Variation*. The goal of this stage is the elaboration of a detailed and accurate account of the process of experiencing a phenomenon, i.e., the underlying structure that interconnects all its textural characteristics. The structural account is created through the imaginative integration of common aspects of participants’ diverse experiences, reaching toward the essence of the phenomenon itself. It also requires a reflective process, in which different possibilities are carefully examined and explicated. By varying structures of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and to others in a experience, we search for what is essential in that experience, for what makes it the experience of the phenomenon of interest. The last step in the phenomenological research is “the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). However, we should keep in mind that the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted. New perspectives can always be added to create a more complete description of the associated phenomenon.

These four fundamental stages of the transcendental phenomenology research method have been further developed and put in practice by a number of researchers, especially in the field of Psychology (e.g., Stevick, 1971; Van Kaan, 1959). Nevertheless, the ontological and epistemological basis of these variations remained fundamentally the same. In the next section, I discuss the different validity threats that could undermine a phenomenological research project. The aforementioned investigation of reengineering is used to illustrate such issues in the context of the study of IT phenomena. Ultimately, the validity threats can be traced back to possible conflicts with the fundamental basis of transcendental phenomenology, which is not – I must emphasize – disputed in this paper. Although critiques of the phenomenological methodology abound in the literature (see Kockelmans, 1967; Mohanty, 1997), such debate is beyond the scope of this article.

## **Validity Issues in Phenomenological Research**

The goal of the sampling process in qualitative research is the theoretically sound selection of a set of cases that allows the researcher to best study the problem under examination (Creswell, 1997; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In phenomenological research the essential criterion for the selection of participants is their having experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Stevick, 1971). Van Kaan (1959, 1966) also suggested that participants should be selected so as to include in the sample a great variety of situations in which the phenomenon was experienced. According to him, this “enables us to distinguish that which is constant from that which varies in the different situations” (Van Kaan, 1959, p. 67). Other important factors to consider are participants’ interest in understanding the nature and meanings of their experiences, their willingness to participate in a lengthy interview process, and their permission to have their interview(s) recorded and used in publications (Moustakas, 1994, p. 107).

The preceding guidelines are underlaid by three fundamental assumptions (Van Kaan, 1966): (a) the phenomenon being investigated is relatively ordinary, and thus, commonly experienced by individuals; (b) common human experience is basically identical; and (c) this basically identical human experience can be expressed under the same label. The first supposition requires that the processes or events of interest be reasonably widespread within the settings that a researcher investigates. Nevertheless, this is not enough to validate all that is implied in that assumption. The basic idea behind the phenomenological method is that

phenomena present themselves to our consciousness in similar ways. In other words, phenomenology maintains that individuals share a certain primordial awareness of their common reality. If this is true, the identification of the fundamental elements that are common to different individuals' experiences of a given phenomenon can help us unveil the essential characteristics that particular aspect of their common reality. This notion constitutes, in fact, the mainstay of phenomenological research. It follows, then, that the findings of a phenomenological study are valid only to the extent that its participants experienced the same basic phenomenon, and that this phenomenon was the same that the researcher intended to study in the first place. Therefore, the ubiquitousness of the reengineering phenomenon in the diverse forms described in the literature was not sufficient to ensure the validity of the results of my investigation. It was also necessary to ensure (as much as possible) that all participants experienced the phenomenon that was defined a priori as reengineering.

In my study, I initially tried to contact potential participants through the Internet, by sending an e-mail message to a number of newsgroups encompassing a wide range of interests. My intention was to obtain a diversified preliminary sample of cases. That first message included a basic explanation of reengineering as it was understood in the context of that study. In my subsequent contacts, all individuals who volunteered to participate in the research were asked to provide details about the change projects they had experienced, and the roles they had performed in those projects. The volunteers whose experiences seemed not to be in conformance with the phenomenon defined as reengineering were politely dismissed. Questions may be raised concerning the veracity of the information provided by those individuals. Indeed, most of the time I had to trust what each participant reported to me. In a few cases, additional sources (e.g., internal documents, newspaper articles) were made available to me and helped corroborate the participants' narratives. Nevertheless, the richness of detail provided by all participants, and the consistency of their stories throughout our several, lengthy interactions lent support to the trustworthiness of their information. In spite of this, it is important to keep in mind that what truly matters in a phenomenological study is individuals' *perceptions* of a phenomenon, i.e., how they experience their lifeworld, rather than an externally and arbitrarily defined fact-world. Therefore, although the changes in participants' lives differed from case to case, in all instances they were experienced as radical, significant events resulting from similar organizational transformation processes. Another option, of course, would be to select a single site (e.g., an organization or work group) where the IT-related phenomena of interest would take place. In fact, I did have the opportunity to observe two parallel reengineering projects over a period of one year. In both cases, my observations were consistent with the information I received from the other participants.

The soundness of the previous discussion is intrinsically dependent on the validity of the two other basic assumptions of the phenomenological method. In a project involving participants other than the researcher him/herself, it is necessary to develop a deep, shared understanding of all the complexities of individuals' experiences. The exchanges between researcher and participant in such process are mostly mediated by language. Thus, to validate the first assumption, it is necessary for both researcher and participants to develop a common set of verbal references to the phenomena that the latter supposedly experienced, and that the former wishes to better understand. To achieve such goal, it is also necessary that the fundamental elements (or the *essences*) of such phenomena can be experienced in similar ways, by a variety of individuals; otherwise they would not be the phenomena that captivated the researcher's interest in the first place. This does not mean that the researcher must achieve a thorough understanding of the multifaceted experiences of a potential participant before they can both engage in a phenomenological research process. Shared understanding is required only in regards to the basic elements that define the boundaries of the research question and the object of the investigation. For instance, in my case, I decomposed the often complex and ambiguous definition of reengineering (e.g., Hammer & Champy, 1993) into several key elements: (a) the radical, rather than incremental, change of one's work life; (b) the required connection to the redesign or transformation of a business process, instead of the mere elimination of positions or processes per se; and (c) the enabling role played by IT in these events. Even so, several exchanges were usually necessary until I was sufficiently satisfied that a potential participant had a good understanding of what I meant by such terms. Illustrations and analogies were most helpful, especially when participants were from other countries. It is also important to note that the two last assumptions of the phenomenological method constitute the very conditions for the development of a human society (Stevick, 1971). If people did not experience a similar set of sensations, perceptions, images, needs, desires, feelings, and intellectual acts, empathy would not be possible. Moreover, if terms used by individuals to refer to those basic experiences were not consistently related, even when different languages are used in diverse cultural contexts, they would not be able to communicate with each other (Van Kaan, 1966). Thus, the last two assumptions are also validated by the history as social agents.

In phenomenological research, the primary method of data collection is the long or deep interview. In general terms, it consists of a set of nonspecific, open-ended questions, with some additional "prompts" that address particular details of the interviewee's experience. Consistently with the concepts of *epokhé* and horizontalization, the goal of such interviews is to obtain a comprehensive, multidimensional account of participants' experiences, free from the influence of the interviewer's own values, beliefs and experiences. The accomplishment of this object, however, requires a form of interaction that is unusual in interview

processes. The exchanges should be “characterized by maximal mutuality of trust, the attainment of a genuine and deeply experienced caring between interviewer and interviewee, and a commitment to joint search for shared understanding (Massarik, 1985, p. 35). In my study of reengineering, I took several steps to ensure that the interviews were as close as possible to this ideal situation. In all interactions with participants, I emphasized that my main interest was to understand their experiences from *their* point of view, and that the interview was akin to a conversation between equals, where neither interviewer nor interviewee assumes the position of expert. In general, my questions were very open and no information given by interviewees was directly or indirectly (e.g., through body language) contested. From the beginning, I invited participants to call me by my first name, and stressed that I would try to answer any questions they might have, even if not directly related to the research. Moreover, participants were given the right to withdraw from the interview process whenever they wanted, without having to provide an explanation for their decision. They were also assured that their identities would be concealed, and that they would have the chance to review and even prohibit the diffusion of their information before it was published. Although mutual trust usually requires considerable time to develop, most participants felt that the interview had a therapeutic effect for them. Apparently, by revisiting their experiences, they had been able to develop a better understanding of their own feelings and behaviors, as well as of the situations that had elicited them. Such comments suggest that it was possible for interviewer and interviewee to achieve a level of trust, empathy, and understanding that approaches that of the ideal phenomenological interview (Massarik, 1981, 1985). The next stages in a phenomenological research are reasonably similar to the data analysis procedures usually performed in other types of qualitative inquiry. However, the validity of their outcomes is fundamentally related to three fundamental concepts: *epokhé*, *horizontalization*, and *Imaginative Variation*. These are actual processes that the researcher is expected to perform in a phenomenological study. Findings would be intrinsically flawed if any of them were neglected. For this reason, I will focus in the next paragraphs on issues that pertain mostly to these three processes. Two observations should be made at this point. First, it is important to realize that the usual guidelines offered in the literature to increase the validity in qualitative inquiry (e.g., Creswell, 1997; Klein & Myers, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994) can be – and should be – promptly applied in the last stages of the phenomenological method. Second, as explained before, several variations of the Husserl’s original methodology exist nowadays. Nonetheless, all of them still maintain the basic structure delineated in his transcendental phenomenology. Thus, the following examination should prove relevant even when such later methodological developments are considered.

The concept of *epokhé* has attracted significant controversy since the beginning of the last century. Indeed, many authors have pointed out the impossibility of researchers *bracketing* in their inquiries all values, beliefs, theories, etc. that guide their interpretations of social reality (e.g., Maxwell, 1996; cf. Kokelmans, 1967; Mohanty, 1997). Otherwise, how would it be possible for researcher and participant to socially interact and reach a mutual understand about an experience? Hence, some *a posteriori* meaning must remain, a common ground upon which meaningful exchanges can take place. Would this represent then, the debacle of transcendental phenomenology as a scientific method? The increasing amount of research conducted based on its principles in several areas of human knowledge constitutes undeniable evidence against this. Even though the absolute abandonment of all *a posteriori* meaning and presuppositions may not be reached, *epokhé*, as a process or an ideal goal, is still worth being pursued by researchers. The value of such endeavor lays on its power to unveil facets of a phenomenon that would be overlooked if a restrictive, preconceived framework were used to look into it. For instance, the standpoint traditionally displayed in critical studies of reengineering fosters debates about politics, domination, and class conflict in organizations (e.g., Knights & McCabe, 1998). If I had adopted that perspective and accepted its implicit worldviews from the beginning, I probably would have missed the vital connections between self-identity and the participants’ responses to the transformation of their work lives.

*Epokhé* is put in practice before and during the data collection, and later, in the data analysis stage. In this phase, *epokhé* is fundamentally linked to the processes of *horizontalization* and *Imaginative Variation*. In phenomenology, the understanding of the essence of an experience is achieved by the exam and integration of the set of meanings and related events that are woven together into the phenomenon under investigation. In other words, essences are brought into light through an iterative process of examination where the focus moves between the phenomenon as a whole, and each of its fundamental “parts” or aspects. To develop a good understanding of an individual’s experience, the researcher needs to engage in recurring hermeneutic cycles with the participant, where the meanings that each of them ascribe to the experience and its account clash and come together as shared understanding (Klein & Myers, 1999). The ultimate outcome of this process is the elaboration of an encompassing explanation of the essence of participants’ experiences.

Two questions may be raised in relation to the validity of this final description: (1) how can we be sure that it is an account of the participants’ experiences, rather than an artifact created by the researcher? and (2) is it truly a description of the phenomena of interest in the study, or of something else? By striving to apply the *epokhé* principles during his/her analysis and grounding the horizontalization and Imaginative Variation on the participants’ narratives, the researcher can be reasonably confident that

his/her findings will resonate with the essence of the original experiences. It is important to keep in mind that, although phenomenology allows researchers great latitude in their exploration of a certain phenomenon, Imaginative Variation requires one to keep referring back to what makes the described experience an instantiation of the phenomenon of interest. Nevertheless, ultimately, no description of the essence of a phenomenon can be valid if it is not legitimated by those who experienced it. These ideas can be illustrated with some of the steps I took in the data analysis stage of my research. Firstly, all telephone and face-to-face interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions included not only the verbal content of the tapes, but also comments that indicated significant pauses, hesitation, emotional responses, and so on (Kvale, 1996). All transcriptions were checked against the original tapes and then sent to interviewees for further verification. Later, as a means of implementing triangulation, three interviews were randomly selected and independently analyzed by two assistant researchers that were familiar with the phenomenological method. Overall, the invariant constituents and core themes identified by the three of us were fairly consistent, suggesting that our interpretations were not strongly biased by our own personal views. In addition, the essences and related conclusions were examined by an independent expert researcher to rule out any alternative explanation that I had not considered in my analysis. Finally, the verified composite descriptions were submitted to participants for critique and suggestions. Their comments confirmed that my final description represented adequately their experiences of reengineering.

## Limitations of the Phenomenological Methodology

The phenomenological method presupposes the possibility of generalizing, at least to a certain extent, its findings. Husserl's notion of a "thing in itself" implies the existence of a reality that can be revealed to our consciousness in a uniform, essential way. His method was developed to be a systematic, scientific process, capable of unveiling the essential constituents of human experience. However, as discussed in a previous section, the soundness of the method depends on the validity of three major assumptions, one of them being that the phenomenon under investigation is commonly experienced by individuals. The basis of the validity of this fundamental supposition establishes, in fact, the first limits for the generalizability of the findings of a phenomenological study. No matter the phenomenon being investigated, the conclusions derived by the researcher apply only to that aspect of reality that was perceived by all participants and mutually identified by both parties. The characteristics of the sample of participants place additional limitations to the possibility of generalizing the findings of an investigation. Although diversity should be a goal of the sampling process, it may never be fully achieved in a project. In this case, the researcher must clearly offer demographic information that can adequately qualify his/her participants. Phenomenological research findings may then be generalized to situations that share a significant portion of the characteristics of the original research setting, i.e., where individuals may essentially experience the phenomena that were the object of that original research project (see Baskerville, 1996).

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