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Learning from the 'lifeworld'

Introduction

Joanna Brooks *(Senior Research Fellow, University of Huddersfield)*

The term 'phenomenology' is generally well-known amongst qualitative psychologists but is perhaps not so well recognised or understood by those less involved in qualitative research. Additionally, phenomenology has developed and diversified to encompass a potentially bewildering array of different traditions and methods. In this article, we will provide a basic introduction to phenomenology, with a whistle-stop tour of its history, key figures and applications in psychology. We will then turn to leading qualitative psychologists who identify themselves as taking a phenomenological stance, as they explain the particular ways in which they understand and draw upon the principles of phenomenology and apply these in their own work. We suggest that phenomenological psychology may be thought of as an umbrella term encompassing a variety of rich and useful approaches rather than a single position and we hope that in this article we are able to showcase just some of the ways in which a phenomenological stance is being utilised by qualitative psychologists in the UK today.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is generally credited as the founding father of phenomenology. Although different branches of phenomenology with their own particular variations and emphases have subsequently developed, all are usually acknowledged as stemming from Husserl's original work. Husserl was concerned with developing phenomenology as a rigorous alternative to methods traditionally used by the natural sciences. These existing methods were, Husserl believed, inappropriate for the examination of human experience. In contrast to notions of an objective reality, Husserl suggests that it is in fact only our experience of the world – that is, direct and subjective human experience - which is 'knowable'. We can, Husserl argues, only really know and understand concepts when they are grounded in concrete experience.

A fundamental concept is the *lifeworld*, the world of lived experience inhabited by us as conscious beings, and incorporating the way in which phenomena (events, objects, emotions) appear to us in our conscious experience or everyday life. Husserl conceptualised the lifeworld as pre-reflective – that is, our focus is on <u>what</u> we are perceiving rather than <u>how</u> we are perceiving it. Husserl's project was to isolate *essences* – invariant features and structures of

phenomena – and to describe these as precisely as possible. By isolating such essences from a range of experiences, Husserl argued that it might be possible to identify the qualities giving a specific experiential phenomenon its distinctiveness. Husserl believed that to do this, it was also necessary to adopt a specific attitude, to suspend – or "bracket" - presuppositions and judgements so that a clear and unblinkered view of the lifeworld could emerge. This attitude is known as the *epoché.*

How far it is possible to fully engage with and transcend the *epoché* is a topic of contention for different phenomenological traditions - and it was in fact a pupil of Husserl's, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who first developed an alternative to Husserl's original *descriptive* or *transcendental* phenomenology. Heidegger is associated with the development of *existential* or *hermeneutic* phenomenology. For Heidegger, we are, as human beings, inseparable from the world in which we live and exist –we exist <u>in</u> the world, rather than next to or outside of it. If this is the case, then notions of achieving the *epoché* as advocated by Husserl become more problematic*.* Rather than focusing on how we know what we know, Heidegger was instead interested in exploring what it means to live in and among a world which is experienced by each individual in their own way. Heiddeger saw our relation to the world as being always both interpretive and relational – we are always situated in context. This means that to understand reality, we need to understand both detailed experience and the bigger picture, and thus factors such as language, temporality, history and culture become important. Neither the whole nor the individual elements can be really understood without reference to the other – this is known as the *hermeneutic circle.* The extent to which the bracketing of presuppositions is possible, and the appropriate balance between description and interpretation in phenomenologically informed work continue to provoke considerable debate to this day.

Heidegger's writings inspired many other theorists and writers and for phenomenological psychologists, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) is often highlighted as particularly influential. Merleau-Ponty radically challenged accepted dualist notions prevalent at the time, arguing that as people are *embodied* beings, we cannot, when considering human experience, meaningfully detach mind from body, nor subject from object (*'There is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself'* – Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962)*.* Much of Merleau-Ponty's work originates from empirical psychology studies (he held a Chair in Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Sorbonne in Paris and was succeeded to this post by Jean Piaget) and the productive amalgamation of phenomenology and

psychology continues today. Phenomenology has been an important source of reference for the development of qualitative psychology as it provides a philosophical rationale for focusing on the study of human experience. However, as we alluded to earlier, there are a considerable array of different traditions and methods encompassed under the umbrella term of phenomenology. We turn now to a number of leading qualitative UK psychologists to reflect on some of the thought-provoking ways they personally draw upon phenomenological principles and approaches in their work. In alphabetical order: Peter Ashworth reflects on how his use of a descriptive lifeworld approach to phenomenological psychology can reveal 'taken-for-granted' meanings in everyday life experience, using the example of gift giving; Darren Langdridge uses an example from his research on sexualities to describe how his Critical Narrative Approach with its explicit focus on narrative works with language, power and politics within an phenomenological framework; Rosie Morrow, Alison Rodriguez and Nigel King outline Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive approach to phenomenology – little known in psychology but widely used in other fields – using an example from a study on the experience of camping; and Jonathan Smith uses two examples from his recent research into depression and chronic pain to demonstrate how his approach to experiential research (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA) draws on a range of phenomenological thinking to capture lived experience whilst recognising research as a dynamic and necessarily interpretative process. We would hasten to add that these provide a glimpse of just some of the wide variety of approaches available, but we hope that these concise exemplars give some idea of the array of approaches to phenomenology being used in psychology today.

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Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method

Rosie Morrow *(Postgraduate Student, University of Huddersfield)* **Alison Rodriguez** (*Senior Lecturer, University of Huddersfield)* and **Nigel King** *(Professor, University of Huddersfield)*

Descriptive phenomenology is concerned with revealing the "essence" or "essential structure" of any phenomenon under investigation – that is, those features that make it what it is, rather than something else. By far the best known descriptive approach in psychology is that of Amedeo Giorgi (1985), who is widely credited as a pioneer in bringing phenomenological thinking into psychology. Giorgi's method can be seen as a form of distillation, in which the analyst step by step sifts away everything that is not essential to an adequate description of the phenomenon. It is, however, not the only descriptive phenomenological method in the social and human sciences. We focus here on a method proposed by Colaizzi (1978), which is little-known in psychology but widely used in other disciplines such as the health sciences. We argue that the method has considerable potential for qualitative psychologists, especially those coming fresh to descriptive phenomenology.

Colaizzi's (1978) distinctive seven step process provides a rigorous analysis, with each step staying close to the data . The end result is a concise yet all-encompassing description of the phenomenon under study, validated by the participants that created it. The method depends upon rich first-person accounts of experience; these may come from face-to-face interviews, but can also be obtained in multiple other ways; written narratives, blogs, research diaries, online interviews and so on. The stages are illustrated in the table below:

Table 1. Steps in Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method

Step	Description
1. Familiarisation	The researcher familiarises him or herself with the data, by reading through all the participant accounts several times
2. Identifying significant statements	The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation
3. Formulating meanings	The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements. The researcher must reflexively "bracket" his or her pre-suppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced (though Colaizzi recognises that complete bracketing is never possible).
4. Clustering themes	The researcher clusters the identified meanings into themes that are common across all accounts. Again bracketing of pre-suppositions is crucial, especially to avoid any potential influence of existing theory.
5. Developing an exhaustive description	The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced at step 4.
6. Producing the fundamental structure	The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure	The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants (or sometimes a sub-sample in larger studies) to ask whether it captures their experience. He or she may go back and modify earlier steps in the analysis in the light of this feedback.

Morrow (2014) used Colaizzi's method to explore the lived experience of camping, with a particular interest in its impact on relationships. While there is a substantial literature on the use of structured camping-based interventions as a form of therapeutic intervention (e.g. Desai, Sutton, Staley & Hannon, 2013), there is very little about how people experience everyday unstructured recreational camping. Four participants were recruited on the basis that they had recently embarked on an unstructured camping trip. Through using Colaizzi's method, five themes were identified: 'Getting away', 'relationship maintenance', 'tranquillity and relaxation', 'appreciation of the natural environment' and 'freedom and adventure/exploration'. Following

the seven step process, an exhaustive description was created, which was then condensed into a fundamental structure of the lived experience of camping, which we reproduce below:

> 'Camping provides the ideal escape for friends and couples alike. The tranquil and relaxing environment provides the ideal setting for relationship maintenance and reinforcement with friends and partners, whether there are issues to resolve or otherwise. The freedom experienced by individuals encouraged adventure and exploration, which in turn allowed them to appreciate the natural environment.'. (Morrow, 2013:49).

While the fundamental structure is the end-point of the analytic process, the main themes from which it is derived are themselves useful to explore and present. Thus in Morrow, Rodriguez and King (2014) we focused particularly on the theme of "relationship maintenance".

The final step in Colaizzi's method, returning the results to the participants, is a controversial one, criticised by Giorgi (2006) who stated that the researcher and participant inevitably have different perspectives - the researcher from a phenomenological perspective and the participant from the 'natural attitude' (our everyday taken-for-granted perception of the world). This echoes a wider debate in qualitative research as to the value of "respondent validation" or "member checking". We would certainly agree that any notion that participants can simply rubber-stamp an analysis as "correct" is untenable. Nevertheless, given the aims of descriptive phenomenology, it is not unreasonable to expect that they should be able to recognise their own experience in the fundamental structure.

Descriptive phenomenology is especially valuable in areas where there is little existing research, as was the case in the example we have given of the experience of recreational camping. For psychologists, Colaizzi's method offers a clear and systematic approach; its thematic nature may be more familiar and accessible than the "distilling" style offered by Giorgi.

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Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

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Introduction

IPA was developed and articulated as a particular approach to conducting experiential research in psychology (Smith 1996). Since then it has grown enormously and is now one of the best known and most frequently used approaches in qualitative psychology. IPA aims to provide an in-depth and nuanced analysis of participants' accounts of their lived experience. For much of IPA, the experience in question is one of major significance or existential importance to the participant. Much of the early work was in health psychology but IPA is now used to address questions in a wide range of areas both within and beyond psychology. While IPA originates in the UK, it is increasingly being used in many countries.

Philosophical background

IPA represents an attempt to put some of the philosophical principles of phenomenology into practice in the form of a methodology which can be used for empirical research in psychology and related disciplines. It does not privilege any one phenomenological theoretical position but draws on the range of phenomenological thinking. It tries, as far as possible to go 'back to things themselves' (Husserl, 2001/1900-1901, p168), to capture personal lived experience in its own terms, as opposed to those prescribed by existing scientific or personal presumptions. However IPA recognises this process as an interpretative process and is therefore influenced by hermeneutics and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology.
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What is distinctive about the approach?

IPA is meticulously idiographic, requiring the in-depth examination of each case in its own terms before moving to the next case. What comes out of this process is a detailed and nuanced analysis of convergence and divergence in participants' accounts of experience. IPA is not in principle averse to moving to more general claims but such a move for IPA will be a slow, painstaking one. Following from IPA's micro-lens, is a particular concern with the value of the *gem* (Smith, 2011) the small extract which offers powerful illumination of the topic under investigation. IPA is described as involving a 'double hermeneutic', as it recognises both researcher and participant as intrinsically sense making creatures. Therefore 'the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world' (Smith & Osborn 2003, p51).

Approach to data collection and analysis

There is not a single right way of collecting data in IPA. Any method that allows a participant to give a detailed account of their personal lived experience can be used. Thus IPA has been conducted with diaries and other personal written accounts. However, by far the most common way of collecting data is through the in-depth, semi-structured interview. The popularity of the interview lies in allowing the researcher to hear the participant's unfolding account and decide, in real-time, where and when to probe further. There is not a prescribed process of analysis. However, to help the newcomer to IPA, a guided step-by-step approach is offered- beginning with the close examination of the first case, leading to the extraction of micro-experiential themes and then a careful examination of patternings across the cases in the corpus. This primarily linear process is accompanied by a parallel operation of the hermeneutic circle, whereby pieces of text are seen as parts and wholes offering mutual illumination. Good IPA presents a stimulating and coherent analytic account evidenced with vivid quotes from participants and with some detailed interpretative commentary. For a detailed presentation of IPA, including coverage of the theoretical underpinnings as well as practical guidelines, see Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

Two examples

In a recent paper (Smith & Rhodes, 2014) we present an in-depth analysis of the experience of first-episode depression. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 patients from a mental health service in London UK. We interpreted the participants' depression as involving a three-fold existential depletion in the relational, corporeal and temporal domains. Along with this diminution, participants experienced occasional intensified emotional reactions and frenzied thinking. The paper gives a detailed interpretative presentation of these features of depression illustrated with extracts from participants' accounts. We point to the value of examining these existential features in the early stages of therapy.

Another current paper (Kirkham, Smith & Havsteen-Franklin, in press) is concerned with understanding the experience of chronic pain. It does this through an analysis of patients' accounts of their own visual representations of their condition. Participants are seven women, aged between 36-52 years, from southern England. The pictures offer striking portrayals of the pain. In some the pain itself becomes a sinister punishing object; in others the picture is of the self in relation to pain. The art works also vividly capture the biographical context for the pain with representations of self before and after it had begun. Some images look ahead to a hoped for pain-free self in the future. We discuss the valuable role pictorial representation can play in helping the expression of difficult conditions and experiences.

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Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA)

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The method of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) that I have been developing was created to serve a specific purpose in my own research programme on sexualities and also resolve some of the epistemological tensions that I saw with other similar methods (Langdridge, 2007). It draws heavily but not uncritically on the hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1970, 1981) and is an attempt to work with language, power and politics within an overarching phenomenological framework. It is distinct from other forms of phenomenological analysis firstly through the explicit focus on narrative. Whilst this is not commonly seen amongst the better-known methods of phenomenological analysis featured here, it is common to a number of phenomenologically informed narrative methods (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988). This theoretical focus on narrative reflects a Ricoeurian (1971, 1991) stance where meaning is appropriated through the critical interrogation of the stories we tell of our lives.

The second distinctive element to this method is the inclusion of a moment of critique, in which hermeneutics of suspicion are deployed. To be more precise, this method engages with two analytic moments in a hermeneutic arc. The first moment is what Ricoeur would refer to as a 'hermeneutic of empathy', and is that descriptive mode of understanding common to all phenomenological methods. The second moment involves the use of specific methods of interpretation - or in Ricoeur's terms 'hermeneutics of suspicion' - to critically interrogate the social imaginary, the world of stories into which we are all immersed and that allow and limit our ability to understand and narrate our experience. Ricoeur (1970) identifies Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as the 'three masters of suspicion' but here I depart somewhat from Ricoeur and argue that we need to turn to critical social theory for our critique rather than, if we take Freud as our example, by engaging in an archaeological trawl through the unconscious for hidden meaning. For me, the key to using hermeneutics of suspicion is to draw on social theory like queer theory or post-colonial theory as 'imaginative hermeneutics of suspicion'. This enables us to critique the ideology of the social worlds of researcher and participant alike for how it allows and limits understanding and narrative expression.

Studies using this method are likely to be idiographic, with a focus on individual stories of particular life experiences. So, for instance, I conducted a piece of case study research with one of my therapy clients in which we worked together to examine his life as it related to being a sexual slave (Langdridge, 2009). But this need not be solely about the case study, as data from participants can be combined as seen, for instance, in the study of ethnicity and sexuality

conducted by David Mair (2010a,b). The data collection method is likely to involve a life story interview of some kind designed to encourage the telling of a story or stories related to the topic of interest. With the above-mentioned study, I asked my participant to tell me the story of his life as it related to his interest in being a sexual slave. Several hours later and with few interventions from me we stopped, with me having the privilege of considerable new insight into his 'lifeworld' through the stories he told me. I suggest a number of analytic stages for CNA but these are open to modification: (1) a critique of the illusions of subjectivity; (2) identifying narratives, narrative tone and rhetorical function; (3) identities and identity work; (4) thematic priorities and relationships; (5) destabilising the narrative; (6) synthesis. These stages guide the researcher around a hermeneutic circle of analysis such that there is a critical but also ethical examination of the stories being told of the life, or lives, in question.

Where the topic is notably inflected with power and politics, as we see with minority sexualities or ethnicities, and is also amenable to understanding through the stories told of personal experience, then CNA is likely to be appropriate. Should your research interests lie elsewhere then other methods from the phenomenological family may better suit your needs. CNA should be understood as 'open source', amenable to modification, to be used - or not - as you see fit. I do not want this contribution to be seen as simply promoting a new method but rather as an opportunity to think through your methodological needs across the range of phenomenological methods. We need to avoid rigid adherence to methodological guidelines and dogmatic fights. That is not to say 'anything goes', not at all, but rather we should avoid the debates and politics so often associated with the marketing and branding of methodologies. Instead, we should focus our energy on achieving our shared research goals as phenomenologists, notably our desire to improve our understanding of the human condition.

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Phenomenological Psychology: Experience in the lifeworld

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Phenomenological psychology does not aim at discoveries of precisely the kind experimental psychology seeks. Experimental psychology uncovers the causal conditions of human behaviour, where the individual is seen as an intrinsic part of the objective system of mechanisms of the natural world. Phenomenological psychology, instead, aims to reveal the taken-for-granted meanings by which our experience is constituted. For example, when giving a gift (Ashworth, 2013) what are the meanings involved for the giver and the recipient? What constitutes 'giving a gift'? Such meanings are by no means always explicitly *known* but are usually *lived through* and these are to be brought to light. I will use the phenomenology of gifting below as an example.

Principle of analysis (1) Keep in the realm of experience by the epochē

Husserl (e.g. 1913/1983) insisted that to seriously scrutinize an experience purely as experience, an *epochē* is required, a setting aside of the presuppositions with which we approach it. William James (1890/1950) made a similar point specifically for psychology, pointing out how easily a researcher can unintentionally impose their own meanings onto research participants' accounts or actions (for James's *psychologists' fallacy*, see Ashworth, 2009). Following Giorgi (2009), I regard it as imperative to adopt the discipline of the *epochē*, even though it can never be complete and in any case the researcher has to start trying to understand by using their own categories of thought. Be this as it may, the researcher must continually, self-critically question the accuracy of their understanding to minimize the danger of the psychologist's fallacy.

For example, in investigating giving a gift, the scholarly literature (e.g. Mauss, 1925/1990, and Derrida, 1991/1992) almost unanimously argues that the recipient experiences an implicit obligation to reciprocate. (Gifting is thus reduced to the structure of economic exchange.) The presupposition that the *obligation to reciprocate* is part of the experience must, however, be subjected to the *epochē.* What is the experience itself like? Of course such things may re-appear in the findings (gifts might indeed evoke a sense of obligation). But these are not *imposed* prior to the description of the experience.

The difficulty of the *epochē* has led some qualitative researchers to downplay its importance and to emphasize the role of interpretation. The danger of this move is that of succumbing to the psychologist's fallacy, and is only justifiable if the research plainly remains within the phenomenological realm – experience.

Principle of analysis (2) Notice both what is experienced and how it is experienced

The realm of experience uncovered in the *epochē* has two thoroughly interdependent parts. In being conscious, one's mode of approach to the experience (the *noesis*) will entail some elements of memory, imagination, perception and so on, as well as various emotion-tones. At the same time what is experienced (the *noema*) is affected by, and affects, the *noesis*. Both aspects of *intentionality* (the approach of consciousness to its object) must be studied. The phenomenon entails both.

Principle of analysis (3) Idiography alternates with essential structure

An individual's 'noematico-noetic' experience of a phenomenon is not free-floating or abstract, but is set in that person's specific lifeworld. A phenomenological research report will seek the essential 'conditions of possibility' of such-and-such an experience – the features without which the experience would not be one of *this* kind. But in any particular personal instance, the experience will be thoroughly linked with other aspects of the individual's lifeworld. Research therefore alternates between the idiographic understanding of an individual's experience within the lifeworld, and the description of the essential features of a specific experience.

Principle of analysis (4) Awareness of the lifeworld

To help grasp the idiography of an experience some features of essential to any lifeworld should be noted (Ashworth, 2006 – developing especially Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Then those aspects which are bound up with the conditions of possibility of gifting can be sought.

- Selfhood. How does the situation implicate identity, the person's sense of agency, their feeling of their own presence and voice in the situation, etc?

- Sociality. How does the situation affect or depend on relations with others?

  When accounts of giving and receiving are used to describe the conditions of possibility of gifting in general, the lifeworldly elements *self* and *other* predominate. The giver assumes for themselves the right to give, and by the act of giving defines a relationship with the other. The recipient may or may not accept the gift. These dynamics may well be problematical. Gifting may then not 'fulfilled'.

- Embodiment. How is our body implicated in the lifeworld? For instance, since our projects are to pursued through bodily action, illness, gender, age etc can have personal reality in the thwarting of our activities. Part of illness may be an inability to give.

- Temporality (and its events). How is the meaning of time, duration, or biography intrinsic to the situation? How is the past echoed now and the future anticipated in an act of giving?

- Spatiality (and its things). Consider the meaning of the staging of giving and the form of the actual gift.

- Project. How does this event of giving relate to activities to which the person is fundamentally committed?

- Discourse. The gift relationship is surrounded by social conventions and linguistic formulae. However, important though it is, gifting discourse is by no means fully determinative or limpid. How the person speaks and enacts gifting must be carefully analysed.

- Mood-as-atmosphere. A feeling-tone is an essential element of any situation, and in gifting the mood dynamics of the expression of gratitude are extraordinarily sensitive: gratitude seals the meaning of the gift as an affective affirmation. (Not, it is clear, as an economic exchange.)

I have mentioned four principles of analysis. More detailed recommendations are beyond the scope of this article (generally, Giorgi's 2009 approach is to be recommended). The key perspective is this: The material of phenomenological psychology is precisely the intentional realm under the *epochē*, and the taken-for-granted meanings by which our experience is constituted. Research participants' idiographic accounts are investigated, embedded in each personal lifeworld. Taking such idiographic evidence together, a description of the features without which the experience would not be of the *kind* under scrutiny is achieved. Such a description is phenomenological.

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