



The “Things Themselves” in Phenomenology

by Peter Willis

Abstract

The following paper explores the foundations of phenomenology, and seeks to provide those new to the discipline with ways of understanding its claims to assist knowers to attend to 'the things themselves'. Practical applications of this mode of inquiry are linked to adult education practice which is the author's field of practice but most of the ideas are readily applicable to social events and practices such as nursing, social work, recreation, history and the like.

Introduction

Phenomenological approaches have been chosen to underpin interpretative research approaches that attempt to find a way to represent lived-experience in as raw and un-elaborated a way as possible. The task of this paper is to explore a continued place for phenomenology's claim to reach past various interpretations of reality to 'the things themselves' in the light of the view that human knowledge is language bound and that 'the things themselves' are of course not 'things' physically impressed upon the knower's retina and mind but the result of an active process of classification and 'naming'.

The question then can be re-phrased as to what is phenomenology's form of naming that underpins and warrants its claim to be seeking 'the things themselves'? The argument being made here is that what is meant by the phrase to seek for the 'things themselves' refers more to a particular stance of the researcher. It is not uncommon for researchers to seek validation of a hypothesis derived from a particular theoretical approach by doing fieldwork in search of evidence to substantiate it. This quest for what one has decided to look for can cloud the researcher's gaze so that significant elements of the human activity that is being researched can be overlooked. The phenomenological stance seeks to approach events

and activities with an investigative mind deliberately open, consciously trying to 'bracket out' assumptions and remain attentive to what is present. It is this last point which suggests a significant dimension of social research highlighted by the broad phenomenological approach.

Before human activities and events can be subjected to analytical abstracting knowledge, they are received as experiences. Not only do humans name reality in the light of categories already established in their mind by a Piagetian process of assimilation and accommodation but the reality that is named is not perceived in a detached purely 'objective' way almost as if the human mind was imagined as a camera. It is presented as an 'experienced' thing in which what is placed before the mind for naming, is, as it were, a result of a mixture of sensory experiences, emotional responses, memories, prejudices and the like.

The following paper explores the roots of phenomenology and ways in which its claims to assist knowers to attend upon 'the things themselves' can be understood. Practical applications of this mode of inquiry are linked to adult education practice which is the author's field of practice but most of the ideas are readily applicable to social events and practices such

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as nursing, social work, recreation, history and the like.

Definitions

Phenomenology is not so much a particular method as a particular approach which was adopted and subsequently modified by writers, beginning with Husserl, who wanted to reaffirm and describe their 'being in the world' as an alternative way to human knowledge, rather than objectification of so-called positivist science. Paul Ricoeur (1978, p. 1214) referred to phenomenological research as "the descriptive study of the essential features of experience taken as a whole" and a little later, stated that it "has always been an investigation into the structures of experience which precede connected expression in language." Valle and Halling (1989, p. 6) described phenomenology as:

... the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear so that one might come to an essential [fundamental] understanding of human consciousness and experience...

Phenomenology does not hold that the world 'out there' can be known in the way a photographic plate takes in an image of the world. All knowing is at one level subjective since it is always related to, and constructed by, the person engaged in knowing. As Spiegelberg, a renowned central authority on the phenomenological movement, wrote (1959, p. 75):

All phenomenology takes its start from the phenomena. A phenomenon is essentially what appears to someone, that is, to a subject.

Some of this subjectivity focuses on the things being experienced, while some focuses on the person experiencing the thing. Spiegelberg (ibid. p. 78) lists a range of meanings of subjectivity in order to explore the nature of more-than-purely-subjective subjective knowledge which is generated in phenomenological approaches. He writes:

I conclude that all phenomenology as a study of the phenomena, is subjective in the sense that its objects are subject-related but not in the sense that it makes them completely subject-dependent.

Research of this kind into adult education practice for example aims to make the phenomenon of adult education a meaningful named reality. Meaningful refers in the first place to the person who experienced it, but then through that person's vivid portrayal - vivid it should be pointed out, initially to the eyes of the person experiencing it - to generate some echoes

in others, particularly those with similar experiences. The goal here is the construction of such a discourse applied to adult education.

Adult educators returning to their experience can ask themselves what the experience, for example teaching adults in a literacy class, was like as a lived-experience (identifying their objectivised subjective feelings). They can also ask how they felt while in such an experience (identifying their subjectivised subjective feelings). Answers to the first question would tell something of what *teaching literacy is like* in a way that would make it possible for others to imagine it could potentially be their experience. Answers to the second question tell more of what *the person having the experience is like*. This is the difference denoted between the two questions 'What was it like?' and 'How did you feel?' Both of these have a place in this study and are discussed at length below.

The distinction between the orientation of two questions is based on the difference between what Crotty (1996a) has called 'new' phenomenology and 'classical' phenomenology, and which are called 'empathetic' and 'intuiting' forms in this paper. This has been developed in earlier writings (cf. Willis 1999) and is explored below in the general background to phenomenology.

Background

Phenomenological research was originally developed by Husserl (1931, *etc.*), Heidegger (1962, *etc.*) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, *etc.*) and received elaboration by their great apologist, Spiegelberg (1975). It has become a major source of illumination for psychology (cf. Colaizzi 1973; Valle & Halling 1989) and nursing research (cf. Crotty, 1996a). It has also been applied with great effect to school education by van Manen (1977, 1990), and to adult education, as has been pointed out by Stanage (1987) and Collins (1984, 1987) and to a lesser extent, Brookfield (1990a, b). Phenomenology wants to slow the researcher down and hold his or her gaze on the phenomenon itself - the lived-experience of some activity - seeking not to locate it in an abstract matrix by saying how its abstracted structure might be similar to others, but rather to illumine its specific quality as an experience.

In its historical origins, phenomenology rose out of a reaction to positivism through which the discourses of the physical sciences were applied to all forms of human inquiry. Husserl (1964) and his followers created a counter move, attending to the part humans play in the actual construction of the world as it is experienced. There is a tension between objectifying views that posit that the world, as we know it, exists

‘out there’ independently of human consciousness; and mentalist views, that think the world is purely a construction of the mind. Phenomenology was to steer a middle path.

The great quest of phenomenological researchers was thus to ‘go back to the things themselves’. But what are these ‘things’? What kind of objectivity is meant here? One of the crucial fundamental points of the phenomenological approach is that when we refer to ‘things out there’, we are in fact providing a name to ‘things’ constructed and named in the mind, without which they could not be thought. As Davis (1991, p. 5) put it, summarizing the thought of Swingewood (1984):

the meaning of things is not inherent in objects, but is actually located in the individual’s inner life... The researcher’s task is to understand reality as it is, actively and consciously created by subjects, not as a pure entity that exists ‘out there’.

Having said this, it seems that ‘things’ are not simply things but rather become ‘things’ in the act of perception and naming. This basic naming is always being further shaped and distorted by all kinds of cultural influences on the knowing subject. The phenomenological agenda is an attempt to get back to the first naming: “to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual’s consciousness” (Phillipson 1972). The leading idea is that humans need to be aware of the power of the human mind to distort basic ideas of reality according to culturally pre-set prejudices and ways of thinking. The phenomenological stance does not immediately attend to, or name, the source of distortion, but rather attempts to bypass it. This process referred to as ‘epoché’ or ‘bracketing’ is discussed in detail below. It wants to bring the inquirer’s eye and mind back to the thing itself and ask: ‘What is it like?’ The ‘phenomenological eye’ seeks to ‘bracket out’ later interpretative constructions and re-constructions. As Crotty (1996a, p. 38) puts it, “the focus should lie with what manifests itself in experience rather than what the subject has made of it.”

A researcher in a particular field of human practice or endeavour (such as nursing, teaching, hairdressing, flying an aeroplane) pursuing this methodology, attempts to portray his or her lived-experience, focusing specifically on what gives the experience its unique nameable qualities as a particular phenomenon impinging on her or his experience. Phenomenology is not concerned with generating abstractions, concepts, hypotheses or theories, nor with identifying causes. The texts for this project need to avoid the

pitfalls of scientism or objectivism (by creating a text in the style of a scientific report) on the one hand, and narcissism (by creating a self-preoccupied and self-referencing text) on the other. They need to tread a fine line which somehow brings together the objective and subjective dimensions of the lived-experience. The textual genre of the research writing which presents the fruits of such inquiry needs to be able to convey some of the vividness of specific and heartfelt experience. It will need to be a text that, as Reason and Rowan (1981) suggest, retains some vitality; an approach “which is a systematic, rigorous search for truth, but does not kill off all it touches” (p. xiii).

Foundations

This section explores the meaning and significance of ‘intentionality’, one of the pivotal notions of phenomenology. This is followed by a brief exploration of the knowing process, looking firstly at stances in knowing, then different forms of interpretation and finally questions of objectivity and subjectivity.

Intentionality

Husserl’s view was that all human thinking was, in fact, linked to something - that when one thought, one always had something as an end point to the act of thinking. ‘Thinking’ is always ‘thinking something’. This fundamental and basic premise, called ‘intentionality’, meant that, in fact, the very act of thinking is an act that affirms the union that exists between the thinking subject and the object of thinking. As Merleau-Ponty says, paraphrasing Kant (1974, p. 201), “We can only think the world because we have already experienced it.”

There is, in this view of human knowing, an assumption that since we are permanently in the life world, we have always somehow a sense of being engaged in the world. The expression, ‘life world’ used in phenomenological writings, is defined by Schutz (1975, p. 15) as:

... the whole sphere of everyday experiences, orientations, and actions through which individuals pursue their interests and affairs by manipulating objects, dealing with people, conceiving plans and carrying them out.

Valle and Halling (1989, p. 9) refer to the life world as:

... the world as lived by the person and not the hypothetical external entity separate from or independent from him or her.

This idea of life world refers to the actual experienced world of a person corresponding to that person's intentional awareness.

In the act of knowing where language is used (and it is suggested there are certain kinds of knowings which do not use language), there is a presumption that everything which is known has some objective existence and that, at the same time, in the act of knowing, has been subjected to a hermeneutic through which it is named. In other words, the act of naming stands between the knower and the 'things themselves'. It is never possible to use the kind of thinking and knowing which is linked to language to get behind language to a direct intuiting of the world outside the mind.

The phenomenological perspective then goes on to suggest that abstract knowledge and forms of positivist scientific knowledge create a cleavage when people begin to imagine themselves as one thing and the world as another, rather than the whole world with people in it being the life world which is the only experienced reality people really possess. It is this experienced reality that phenomenological research wants to uncover and attend to. That desire to attend to the life world - the experienced world - requires knowledge which, as Heidegger (1982, p. 276) points out, is "not cognition in the mere spectator sense." It also requires appropriate language which is not built upon the separation between the world and the knowing person, but rather a language of attention and contemplation which allows the world to be.

Since all articulated human knowing is locked in language, the project to attend upon 'the things themselves' cannot expect to find a way of knowing that goes completely behind language. As was pointed out in the introduction, it is rather in the way human knowers position themselves towards the world that may at least contribute to a way of knowing that minimises the amount of what might be called 'secondary processing' occurring in and around the acts of knowing and naming the world. This introduces the notions of stances and modes of knowing.

Knowing stances: proactive and reactive

Crotty (1996a, p. 38) speaks of the active role of consciousness:

... the mind reaches out to the object and into the object and draws it into itself, at once shaping the object and being shaped by it.

Allowing that consciousness has necessarily an active role in every act of knowing, it is useful to make a

second distinction between active/reductive and intuitive/receptive forms of thinking. Thinking, the act of engaging in thought, does not always carry an active connotation in its use although, of course, in many cases it is imagined as a strongly active, almost transitive, process. One thinks when one 'puts one's mind to something'; when one 'gets a grip on' an idea; when one analyses, categorizes, generalizes, discriminates between things, or groups of things. The mind when engaged in these proactive pursuits, can be imagined as a kind of sheepdog grouping ideas, separating, challenging.

There are, however, other times when the mind is 'struck by', 'seized by', 'gripped by' something known. At these times, the mind seems more like a receptor, receiving ideas and images and feeling and being moved by them.

Thus, the more one reflects upon one's thinking, the more one is confronted with a proactive and a contemplative modality. The proactive way is imagined to be a series of processes variously interpreted, in which a thinker moves from taking in and naming experiences in some fashion, to ordering them and locating them into the more generalized categories of one's language and ways of seeing the world.

The intuitive/contemplative way refers to more receptive and aesthetic forms of thinking and focusing attention. The thinking human positions him or herself *vis à vis* an object with a receptive stance and holds back discriminatory analytic thinking in favour of a more contemplative process. In this form of thinking the object of thought is less robustly dealt with. The mind does not 'seize upon' the object to analyse and subdue it but attempts to behold it, to allow its reality, its beauty and its texture to become more and more present. Even here consciousness is still active, but the act of thinking is different: it is an act of reception which holds the thinking mind back from closure and returns again and again to behold the object, allowing words and images to emerge from the contemplative engagement.

Heron (1992, p. 14) suggested that human consciousness could be viewed as being in four modes - affective, imaginal, conceptual and praxis - each, as it were, placed on top of the next in what he called an "up-hierarchy", so that the lower one energized the one above it. In the *imaginal* mode, which is similar to the receptive, contemplative stance mentioned here, the psyche turns presences brought inchoately into consciousness through experience, into images "through the creative role of primary imagination in perceiving the world as a whole."

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Heron says that this mode is evoked in knowing actions such as “intuitive grasp” or “metaphorical insight.”

While stressing its intuitive, receptive modality, it is important not to over-emphasize the receptive nature of this kind of direct knowing. The human knower does not open the shutters of the mind and an image of some object or experience does not physically imprint itself on the psyche. All kinds of knowing require work by the knower. Ihde (1973, p. 67), in his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s work, refers to “a world which is always pregnant with significance, but whose meaning must be re-won through an interrogation of its presence.”

Forms of interpretation

The outcomes of phenomenological reflection, like that of any other inquiry, are thoughts, discourses and written texts. As such, the person engaged in phenomenological reflection is trying to engage with the lived-experience, which, as has been pointed out above, is in fact a processed experience. The person has engaged with the things in the world in so far as they are phenomena, that is, in so far as they are presented to consciousness. As we have seen, the ‘thing itself’ is not presented to consciousness. What is presented is only a named and therefore somewhat ‘experienced thing’. Such an experienced thing is named from within the lexicon of the experiencing person.

The acts of naming and saying things about the phenomenon, even while consciously ‘bracketing out’ culturally generated abstracting interpretations, are still forms of interpretative action. There is still some kind of hermeneutic or interpretative template at work. For example, when a child learns the name of an object - the thing to which it has been pointing or touching and which it knows in an inchoate way - in that moment, it is known as named. Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 177) writes:

... for the child the thing is not known until it is named, the name is the essence of the thing and resides in it on the same footing as its colour and its form.

But of course before the thing was named, it had some kind of existence in consciousness, which was evoked in the process of giving it its name. That existence was itself already a kind of interpreted existence through the way the thing-to-be-named was already used and referred to in the exchanges of the life world. Heidegger refers to this exchange as “primordial interpretation”, which, as Cooper (1996, p. 428) writes:

... is carried out “not in a theoretical statement but in an action” (Heidegger 1980, 200), as when one “interprets something as a hammer by using it as such”... In basic interpretation, we do not throw a “signification” over some naked thing (ibid: 190) for nothing is encountered in the raw but always as a door, house or whatever. Heidegger accordingly describes *Dasein’s* [being in the world] relation to its world as “hermeneutic”, a term designating the business of interpreting. Moreover, since phenomenology, whose aim is the “disclosedness of Being”, can only proceed by uncovering *Dasein’s* own implicit understanding, it follows that phenomenology itself is hermeneutics (ibid. pp. 61ff.).

The challenge is to think (and write) focused consciously on the phenomenon. When speech, language and thought patterns generated from experience in the world are used, they always involve an interpretative process: but the aim here is to try to disclose the most naive and basic interpretation that is already there but as yet is unelaborated in the life world experience, a phenomenological hermeneutic.

The hermeneutic process refers to the way people interpret and make sense of experiences, usually by naming them according to their pre-existing values and ways of seeing the world. The question is, can we develop an, as it were, pre-interpretative hermeneutic by which we hold the phenomenon in our gaze and drink it in, waiting for it almost to name itself in our consciousness while resisting the temptation to locate it on conceptual grids and grand theories. Admitting that this process is still an interpretation, after Reason (1981, p. 79) it can be called an ‘expressive’ or ‘immediate’ interpretation so that more elaborated interpretations can be referred to as explanatory interpretative processes. The important construction of abstracting interpretations within, or consequent to, an experience can then be grounded in reality and enriched by building on the intuitive, expressive ‘reading’ or ‘interpretation’ of the experience. This is the phenomenological project by which the meanings things have in our life world experience are brought into view.

This initial hermeneutic still calls upon one’s store of language, and values generated from our ways of being in our culture. The difference will be in our stance, which will be consciously trying to avoid analytic or generalizing language, and letting the phenomenon declare itself. As van Manen (1987, p. 19) says:

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The aim is to construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviours, intentions and experiences as we meet them in the life world.

Given that the life world is what is there all the time - the lived world as it is experienced - the consciousness generated by this phenomenological exploration - contemplation - does not create new knowledge of the phenomenon; it creates a space in which phenomena manifest themselves. Merleau-Ponty's speaks about "perception" (his word for the unmediated awareness of the life world) "not giving truth like geometry, but presences" (1974, p. 198). "Presences" refers to a kind of unveiling of something that was there all the time but not explicitly present in consciousness. Stange (1987) has coined the phrase "consciencing" to refer to that permanent, implicit awareness of being in the life world of which one is a part:

... it means knowing-together, or knowing in such intimate, and logically primitive, form that all knowing and all cognitive activities or persons are constituted partly through it (Stange 1987, p. 327).

Related to questions concerning perceptual and conceptualizing knowing, and to their related modes of knowing, is the question of the subjectivity and/or objectivity of such knowing experiences, particularly when pursued under a research rubric when they are represented in language and various verbal and textual forms.

Objectivity and subjectivity

Research requiring 'objectivity', which is probably still the dominant public discourse surrounding ideas of research, has become associated with the positivist approach to research. Alternative approaches have sought to admit forms of human subjectivity into academic writing and to portray the personal as political and socially relevant. Neither of these positions has quite met the phenomenological project with its interest in, and focus on, 'the experience' that human subjects have, rather than the human subjects having the experience. The phenomenological question was to find a way to name and portray human experience which would be both somewhat subjective and at the same time somewhat objective. To meet this challenge, I have coined the phrases 'subjectivised subjective' experience on the one hand and 'objectivised subjective' experience on the other which both seem similar to Spiegelberg's 'subject dependent' and 'subject related' categories.

The phenomenological project seeks what can be called objectivising subjectivity - focusing on the

thing being experienced but still as experienced *by me* - as apart from subjectivising subjectivity. Human language carries this distinction easily when a person is asked what something was like (for example, a childhood visit to the dentist). The person might say: 'It was terrifying. I felt as if my heart would break, my palms were sweating, and I wondered if I would ever get out of it.' The listener might interrupt saying, 'I can understand what *you* felt like, but can you tell me what *it* was like?' The speaker might then talk about the shiny instruments, the white coat, the strange smells and sounds; the cold or the heat, the contoured chair, being recumbent; the pink hands of the surgeon and the grinding noise of the drill.

The phenomenological project seems to be enriched by integrating both emphases. There is a sense that the objectivities that are highlighted in an experience are those which generated a strong subjective response. In a way, elements of an experience that do not impact upon the awareness of the person narrating it may not, in fact, be part of the phenomenon. The definition of a phenomenon - 'what manifests itself in experience' - suggests this, although in the process of reflection a person may become aware of many dimensions of an experience that were, in fact, manifested but somewhat not attuned to, or at least not foregrounded in, awareness.

Variations

The distinction between these forms of subjectivity has had considerable ramifications in approaches to phenomenological research. Crotty's research (1996a) into phenomenological approaches in nursing research was to point out what he called "new" and what is called here 'empathetic phenomenology' in contrast to classical phenomenology, and to show how whole traditions of research have been built on different construals of this approach.

The explorations of phenomenology to this point in this paper have largely been brief outlines of the classical approach beginning with Husserl. According to Crotty's exposition, the alternative approach does not focus so much on the phenomenon as it becomes visible, but on the subjective experiences and meanings that are generated in or are generated by its beholders.

This "new" phenomenology focuses on the meanings and significances given to an experience by those experiencing it. Crotty writes that (1996, p. 3):

The new phenomenology works hard at gathering people's subjective meanings, the sense they make of things ("What does

giving post-mortem nursing care mean to those nurses?”).

Such knowledge is of great interest in many explorations of social science. It shows that different people participating in an event in their lives may give it radically different meanings. Thus a patient and a health professional, an adult educator and an adult learner, may engage in a shared activity but have quite radically different experiences of it. It is then possible to inquire about the nature of the experience and how it presented itself as a phenomenon as in classical phenomenology or to follow the alternative empathetic phenomenology by inquiring what the subject made of that experience: what was its significance. This latter pursuit with interviews, thematic analysis and clustering of interview transcripts looking for the common meanings an experience had for a group of subjects, represents a major way of working in qualitative social science research. Its contribution is that it brings to view the subjective states and interpretations of people who have engaged in a common experience like school, university, hospital, church and the like, and which may have been overlooked or repressed by powerful interests in society. The focus is on the subject; it protects and values the contributions of various subjects engaged in life experiences.

The interpretative or empathetic approach to phenomenological research has made a contribution by showing the socially embedded nature of human consciousness. It may not have advanced the cause of classical phenomenology, but it has defended and made known what groups of people - teachers, nurses, soldiers - have felt when involved in a shared experience, and what sense they made of it. The experience is then named in terms of the subjectivity it evokes in those who experienced it.

There is, however, a price to be paid for attending to the meanings something has for a subject. If the research focus remains exclusively with the subject it is easy to imagine that the structure of the experience itself may tend to become shadowy, and to be drowned in the subject's self-awareness, self pre-occupation and self-talk. That is why, in the adult education study I pursued, while welcoming and wanting to find a place for some subjectivity (particularly since phenomena in human awareness always have elements of subjectivity), I was concerned to move back to the phenomenon - to the lived-experience - which generated the subjective feelings and meanings. I wanted to bracket out my feelings and thoughts for a moment and let the experiences I was recalling present themselves for contemplation.

Having looked at the two complementary versions of phenomenological research, the study considers three major processes used in the quest for 'the things themselves'.

The processes of phenomenological inquiry

Phenomenology when pursued in research projects tends to use three essential processes in a variety of ways and styles: description, reduction and naming essential themes.

Description

Description is the essential task for classical phenomenology. Seamus Heaney, the poet (1990, p. 89), referred to description as "revelation", which literally means removing veils which obscure or disguise the realities of the world. It is significant that in some contexts social scientists were warned to avoid 'mere' description. There is, of course, nothing 'mere' in generating phenomenological description: attempting to get back to 'the things themselves' and to set aside preconceptions and tendencies to analyse or generalize, and rather attempt to contemplate the thing itself. As Crotty (1996a, p. 280) puts it:

The difficulty does not lie merely in seeing "what lies before our eyes" (which Husserl saw as a "hard demand"), or knowing "precisely what we see" (Merleau-Ponty said there was nothing more difficult to know than that). Additionally, we will also experience great difficulty in actually describing what we have succeeded in seeing and knowing. When we attempt to describe what we have never had to describe before, language fails us. We find our descriptions incoherent, fragmentary, and not a little "mysterious". We find ourselves lost for words, forced to invent words and bend existing words to bear the meanings we need them to carry for us. This has always been characteristic of phenomenological description. We may have to be quite inventive and creative in this respect.

This significant quotation succinctly points to the project of classical phenomenological writing and its challenges to build adequate, or perhaps better, less inadequate texts. It points to the challenge of inventiveness, of ways to 'get past oneself'. The project has a kind of infinite end-point in that it can never be absolutely achieved; that there will always be some kind of hermeneutic - some kind of processing - involved in the choice of intuitive words and language in the very act of rejecting intermediate interpretative processes. The significant thing in the argument of phenomenology is that to take steps to

bracket everyday understandings, even when the task can never be perfectly achieved, is to perform a service to human science by going back attentively and receptively to the experience itself - to the phenomenon.

One of the ways phenomenological description can be attempted is by using various texts from various perspectives to generate a “layered picture” of a phenomenon rather like a series of transparencies overlaid on an overhead projector. These are then explored for common elements that recur not in the idea of the thing but in its experience narrated from different points of view. This process creates a multi-perspective text. I attempted this in my thesis (cf., Willis, 1998).

Valle and Halling (1989, p. 13) support this view. They suggest that:

Phenomena as they present to us, seem to reveal themselves in many different ways depending on how we look at them or “take them up” in our many, varied perspectives and life situations... The perceived phenomenon is analogous to a mineral crystal that appears to have many different sizes and shapes depending on the intensity, angle and colour of the light that strikes its surface. Only after seeing these different reflections and varied appearances on repeated occasions does the constant, unchanging crystalline structure become known to us.

Of course there is a presumption here that phenomena have a “constant unchanging structure”, whereas it seems that some phenomena, like adult education practice or religion, do not seem to have a strictly univocal structure, but appear to be more of a grouping of characteristics under a common name held together by what Wittgenstein called (1953) a “family resemblance.” What is suggested, however, is that even gaining insight into elements that mostly, but not always, occur in a phenomenon, can contribute considerable illumination.

Bracketing

‘Bracketing’ refers to the process of standing apart from one’s usual ways of conceiving the world and the things in it, and attempting to intuit ‘the thing’, the object of interest, the phenomenon, directly in an unmediated way. Van Manen (1990, p. 175) defines it as “suspending one’s various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world.”

The term “essential structures” of the world has a hard and substantifying feel to it, as if ‘the world’ was understood as something ‘out there’, whose structures - another term implying reification - could somehow be discovered. This is not van Manen’s intention at all. The ‘world’ in this phenomenological discourse is the ‘experienced life world’, understood as a fluid overlaying of which the person finds her or himself as a part of all the familiar and recurrent experiences of body, time, space and social relations which make up a person’s felt world. The ‘structures’ of such a ‘world’ refer more to recurrent central themes within the experience: ‘what’ makes the experience what it is, and the ‘world’ in this sense ‘what’ *it* is. The concept of themes or essences is explored further below. To turn one’s mind back to these experiences in their raw unclassified or unanalysed state requires developing a way to bypass rather than extinguish the ordinary, habitual ways people develop to interpret and name their world. This is the function of bracketing.

Husserl (1973, p. 53) suggested that there is, in ordinary consciousness, a pre-existent bracketing (or what he calls universal “epoché”), which shuts out the unmediated perception of the world and replaces it with overlays of perception, judgment and the like:

The universal epoché of the world as it becomes conscious (the “putting it in brackets”) has the effect of shutting out from the phenomenological field the world as it simply exists; its place however is taken by the world as it is given in consciousness (perceived, remembered, judged, thought, valued etc.).

Husserl then suggested that people have to take on a transcendent attitude to avoid being imprisoned by one’s everyday awareness and judgments of the world. He suggested that people should make their pre-judgments explicit so that they could be laid aside.

Heron (1996, p. 120) explains that a person seeking to pursue the phenomenological task needs to:

... bring these implicit everyday epistemic frameworks into clear relief and become fully aware of them. Then we can become relatively independent of them, peer over the edge of them and regenerate our vision.

The research of Heron and his colleague has been enriched by their explorations of psychotherapy and forms of human transpersonal and spiritual activity. Their writings have no difficulty with this notion of

'peering over the edge of one's everyday epistemic frameworks.' It bears the stamp of practice - on which this paper is also based, and moreover it is common enough in the experience of people attempting to learn or re-frame their way of seeing the world by developing skills in 'standing apart from' or 'aside from' their habitual ideas, feelings, convictions, etc., so as not to allow them to cloud the whole of their awareness. Heron (ibid. p. 122) cites Reason (1994a, p. 34), who puts it thus:

Behind the attachment of the everyday mind to its constricting perspectives, there is a "mind which is able to see through this attachment and is open to the ways in which we create ourselves and our world moment to moment" and which is available through meditation.

Bracketing can thus be seen as an implied activity when researchers want to focus their eyes on a phenomenon in itself, and resist taking on alternative analytic or generalizing agendas. As such, the process amounts to nothing more than attempting to focus on the phenomenon and allowing it as it were, to 'declare itself'.

The third process in the applications of phenomenology to human science research - naming essential themes or thematic analysis - must now be considered.

Naming essential themes

Phenomenological research brings the mind to a phenomenon as it presents itself through different windows of experience and at different times. Phenomenology wants to discover the essential elements of a particular phenomenon. In other words, as Spiegelberg (1975, p. 64) wrote, to seek "what is essential and what is merely accidental or contingent" in the phenomenon. Valle and Halling (1989, p. 13) put it this way:

Regardless of which of the phenomenon's particular variations is revealed at any given time, this phenomenon is seen as having the same essential meaning when it is perceived over time in many different situations.

Thematic analysis is known frequently to suffer from the difficulty of being mistaken for a conceptual rather than phenomenological exercise. When one looks for phenomenological themes one's eyes are held on the phenomenon as it is experienced in a range of settings and episodes, looking for recurrent themes in its lived-experience. The act of separating accidental elements from necessary or substantial ones in a recurrent *experience* is very different from

looking for accidental or contingent elements, in contrast to substantial or necessary elements in an *idea*, which is characteristic of forms of conceptual analysis. The reducing or distilling process, applied as it is to such different entities, ends up quite different in its notion and its practice. In practice, searching for themes in phenomenological research means to resist the tendency to leave the phenomenon behind in the reducing process. Van Manen has made some strong points here about the drawing out of themes and phenomenology needing to keep its attentive and contemplative stance. He writes (1990, p. 88) that theme analysis is the process of insightful invention, discovery and disclosure:

As I arrive at certain thematic insights, it may seem that insight is a product of all of these; *invention* (interpretative product), *discovery* (the interpretative product of my dialogue with the text of life) and *disclosure of meaning* (the interpretative product 'given' to me by the text of life itself).

These quotations highlight the importance of ensuring that this process, subsequent to description, keeps with the phenomenon - the lived-experience. It needs to tread a middle way between two extremes. One is succumbing to too much subjectivity, where themes would end up being linked to a person's recurring feelings and not elements of the experience itself. The other is being caught up in too much analysis, by which the experience would be located in an explanatory category and the characteristics of the category imputed to it.

There is a holographic perspective in searching for phenomenological themes in that the whole of the experience is represented in each theme, which presents more like different windows on the whole experience. This correlates with Valle and Halling's (1989) notion of the phenomenon as crystalline (quoted above), with many facets each presenting the whole. The structures of experiences, by which they are accorded some commonality, are the recurring elements that are most meaningful to us. Thematic analysis is a way of uncovering those elements that constitute the phenomenon as experienced.

The interpretation followed here departs from a strict Husserlian view which tends to presume that there are 'essences' in phenomena which phenomenology seeks to disclose. The view here is that focused attention to the felt lineaments of an experience whether imagined to have essences or not, is still a useful way to attend upon and attempt careful description of lived-experiences. Unfortunately, these can still suffer from a lack of such attention under the influence of

analyzing and categorizing approaches of so much social science inquiry.

And so the quest for 'the things themselves' is thus revealed as nothing quite so absolute. In allowing for the essentially constructivist, interpretative view of human consciousness, the quest is however revealed to have two concerns. The first is to cultivate an active suspicion of assumptions and prejudices that

might tacitly influence and subvert honest inquiry. The second, which has been the theme of our recent project (cf., Willis, Smith, & Collins 2000) is the importance of understanding and developing expressive approaches to rigorous inquiry which can complement and underpin analytic or explanatory approaches.

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