


# Stepping Into the Participants' Shoes: The Trans-Positional Cognition Approach

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## Abstract

To conduct a phenomenological study, researchers often follow the principles from either the descriptive or interpretive phenomenological schools of thought. This constrains researchers within the domain and limits the potentials of their data set. This paper introduces the Trans-Positional Cognition Approach (TPCA) as a novel synthesised phenomenological research method for conducting qualitative research to address this challenge. The TPCA synthesises the principles of the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological schools and helps to bridge the divide occasioned by polemical arguments between them. At the heart of TPCA is the process of trans-positional cognition or, in simple words, 'stepping into the participants' shoes'. TPCA, within the phenomenological tradition, proposes a structured methodological approach as a way to reduce the complexity of the extant methods, which novice researchers associate with phenomenology. The purpose of TPCA is not to pit one phenomenological research approach against another but to elucidate an inclusive approach to phenomenological research that can serve as a methodological alternative. A set of dimensions is used to compare TPCA with extant descriptive and interpretive phenomenological approaches in order to demonstrate its distinctiveness. Furthermore, an implementation study illustrates the use of the TPCA. Hence, the TPCA, by bridging the divide between the phenomenological schools of thought, could potentially help sustain the growing interest of researchers in phenomenological research.

## Keywords

phenomenology, phenomenological method, descriptive phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology, business and management, bracketing

## Introduction

The phenomenological tradition is rich at a philosophical level, and much has been done on the methodological side in various disciplines, particularly in psychology. In our native field, the management and organisation studies, however, phenomenological studies are rare and typically conducted by experienced senior scholars. Although many doctoral students express interest in conducting phenomenological studies, as they are interested in the lived experience, once they get to apply phenomenology, because of the complexity of extant methods, they often decide to revert to a variant of grounded theorising (usually the Gioia method, see e.g. Gioia et al., 2013). Even those who would put up with the complexity often give up as they need clearer guidelines. Scholarly papers reporting on phenomenological studies usually provide just enough details to ensure the transparency of the argument, but these are insufficient to serve as a guide for new studies. Some

books offer advice, but these are mainly philosophy books, clear on approach but less on the specific steps; these need to be dug out of what is often perceived as a quite exotic philosophical text. Added to that are the issues of being aligned with a particular phenomenological school of thought and how to effectively undertake various forms of bracketing

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that ensure their works were conducted within the phenomenological tradition.

In this paper, we address many aspects of the above problem. We offer a new phenomenological approach, which synthesises the two dominant traditions, and we offer simplified guidelines for conducting research using this approach. We do not aim at reducing the necessary complexity of the phenomenological approach, as we regard it to be essential to studying the ‘lived experience’, which is at the heart of any phenomenological framing. However, we try to reduce the unnecessary complexity of explanation and provide reasonably easy to follow yet not overly prescriptive guidelines for those who are seriously considering phenomenological research, particularly if they are relatively new to phenomenology.

The above highlighted the issues which motivated the introduction of Trans-Positional Cognition Approach (TPCA) and also implicitly deter and restrict phenomenological studies, particularly as the two dominant phenomenological schools, namely the descriptive and the interpretive approaches, maintain unreconciled philosophical and methodological differences. Previous authors have noted the need to resolve the dichotomy. Authors like Ricoeur and Savage (1970), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1977) and Finlay (2009, 2011) had at different times pointed out that description and interpretation form a continuum where each study may be more or less descriptive or interpretive. Langdridge (2008, p. 1131) also suggested that there are no clear-cut boundaries between description and interpretation in phenomenological practice because ‘such boundaries would be antithetical to the spirit of the phenomenological tradition that prizes individuality and creativity’. Also, while we acknowledge the availability of some structured methods, such as Paul Colaizzi (1978), Amedeo Giorgi (1986), Max van Manen (1997b), Clark Moustakas (1994), amongst others, we see the need for further analytical frameworks that offer easy-to-follow guidelines for structured steps.

In this paper, we introduce the Trans-Positional Cognition Approach (TPCA), a novel synthesised approach to conducting phenomenological research. TPCA utilises the principles of descriptive phenomenology to analyse the interviews (and other qualitative material) to enable the emergence of the study participants’ themes that are wholly descriptive and of interpretive phenomenology in order to enable the researchers’ interpretation of the study participants’ themes. TPCA also facilitates further idiographic explanations within context (Dasein and Lebenswelt).

This paper starts by providing a brief background to TPCA by reviewing the relevant phenomenological literature. Then we introduce TPCA in three steps, examining its philosophical underpinnings, exploring the nature of bracketing and explaining its design in terms of structure and process. This is followed by a systematic comparison of TPCA to the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological approaches. Next, we provide guidelines for applying TPCA in terms of six phases and 16 steps; using an illustrative example where TPCA was used. Subsequently, we discuss TPCA in light of the extant

literature to flash out its advantages and unique features. The paper concludes with an outlook on the usefulness and future of the TPCA in research practice and looking into its implications for undertaking phenomenological studies.

## Background to Trans-Positional Cognition Approach

At the beginning of the 20th century, phenomenology was introduced by Edmund Husserl in response to the use of methods borrowed from natural sciences, what he termed ‘psychologism’ (Husserl, 1936, p. 201 ff), in an attempt to understand and describe the essence of lived experience (Pivčević, 1970). In this sense, Husserl’s approach was, from the outset, fundamentally anti-positivist (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). As Gadamer (1989, p. 236) suggests, Husserl followed the transcendental direction of Kant, that considers objectivism naïve. The fundamental notion underlying phenomenology was that humans sought meaning from their lived experiences and the lived experiences of others (Husserl, 1936). The philosophical grounding of phenomenology enables researchers to seek to understand a person’s experiences rather than to seek a causal explanation of those experiences. For Husserl, phenomenology was the description of the events occurring in the world in so far as a subject was aware of them; his approach was to reduce the world to phenomena as they occurred to consciousness and to use language to describe what appears in this way to the attentive consciousness (Kaelin, 1988). Furthermore, Husserl inherited the interest in intentionality from his mentor Franz Brentano (1973) and saw it fundamental to understanding the lived experience. Subjectivity, as an aspect of experience, and intentionality come together in the notion of ‘personal’ posited by Michael Polányi (1962a, p. 316), which transcends the objective-subjective divide and is not simply passively subjective, but also driven, intentional and passionate.

Husserl’s initial conceptualisation subsequently evolved through the works of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1927, 1975), who shifted the focus of phenomenology towards the hermeneutical and existential traditions (Finlay, 2008). Heidegger’s work supported the view that the meaning of phenomenological description as ‘a method lies in interpretation’ (Heidegger, 1927, p. 61). To put it differently, knowledge of the lived world can only be gained through interpretation. For Heidegger, there is no distinction between consciousness and existence, and therefore interpreting is a way of understanding what is given in our pre-ontological being in the everydayness of the Dasein. The phenomenon we aim to reveal must be disclosed in our act of discoursing upon our relationship with our worlds (Kaelin, 1988, p. 79).

Nevertheless, Giorgi et al. (2017, p. 180) note that ‘Husserl had said that the phenomenological method was descriptive based upon the intuition of the given, despite the claim by Heidegger, that the true phenomenological method was interpretation’. These divergent beliefs caused a division

amongst phenomenologists that has remained unresolved to date. Our belief is perhaps somewhat more nuanced. We note that, for example, Dörfler and Stierand (2021, p. 784) claim that reading the original German version of Husserl's work for them made the view of the founding father of phenomenology clearer; similarly to them and Gadamer, we believe that Husserl embraced subjectivity, which suggests that the description noted by Giorgi may be subjective; thus, allowing for a more interpretive consideration. However, if a researcher is studying the lived experience of the participant, then who is allowed to interpret it and when? This aspect sometimes becomes difficult to assess, and this is at the centre of TPCA. In any case, phenomenology is widely accepted in various academic disciplines as a philosophical and methodological approach of choice for studies that focus on the ubiquity of lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 2013) and enables the study of the individuals as themselves (Heidegger, 1927; Husserl, 1900).

Finlay (2009) acknowledged this development in her work, noting that many different research methods are practised under the banner of phenomenological research. Most of the phenomenological works follow either descriptive or interpretive philosophical underpinnings and corresponding methodological design. Descriptive phenomenological works include those from the Duquesne school promoted by Giorgi (1985, 2009, 2014), studies aligned with Moustakas' (1994) Transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology and others (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Then, there are those from the hermeneutic school promoted by van Manen (1997a, 1997b, 2014) and others, based on the University of Utrecht 'hermeneutic phenomenology' tradition, which highlighted the importance of the researcher's perspectives on interpretation, building on ideas of interpretive phenomenologists, such as Heidegger (1927, 1975) and Gadamer (1975, 1977).

Over the years, authors have initiated variants of the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological methods. Some specific examples include Critical Narrative Analysis (Langdrige, 2007), a descriptive phenomenological approach; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by Smith and Osborn (2008), where researchers attempt to make sense of the participant's attempts to make sense of their own experiences; thus, creating a double hermeneutic. Some others include Moustakas' (1994) method of Transcendental Phenomenology; and the 'Relational Approach' (Finlay, 2011; 2013; Finlay & Evans, 2009) that enables the researcher to uncover themes in the data through a process that involves dialogue with other researchers.

There have been also attempts to bridge the gap between the descriptive and interpretive schools of thought, such as Colaizzi's (1978) Existential-Phenomenological Alternative and Dahlberg and Drew's (1997) Lifeworld Paradigm. In recent times other attempts include the Intuitive Cyclic Phenomenology, which brings the intuition of the researcher into focus (Dörfler & Eden, 2014, 2019); and the Phenomenology-based Ethnography (vom Lehn, 2019), which draws on the 'Social

Phenomenology' by Alfred Schütz (1967, 1970), who brought together sociology and phenomenology.

Indeed, beyond the unresolved polemical arguments, the goal of both the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological schools of thought was to understand and describe the essence of lived experience, which often in practice requires both description and interpretation for making sense of the study phenomena (Pivčević, 1970). The process of phenomenological research does not 'break down' the experience that is being studied; instead, it provides 'descriptions' that are 'rich' (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985, 2014; Husserl, 1913a, 1913b, 1936) and 'full of interpretations' (Crotty, 1998; Heidegger, 1927; van Manen, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1945) that reveal what it means to be a person in the particular world being observed.

The above elucidation of the major schools of thought in phenomenology prepared the ground for introducing the TPCA, which recognises that both descriptive and interpretive phenomenological fundamentals can contribute to our knowledge of organisational, business, management practices and other human inquiry and synthesises the two approaches to achieve a more complete understanding.

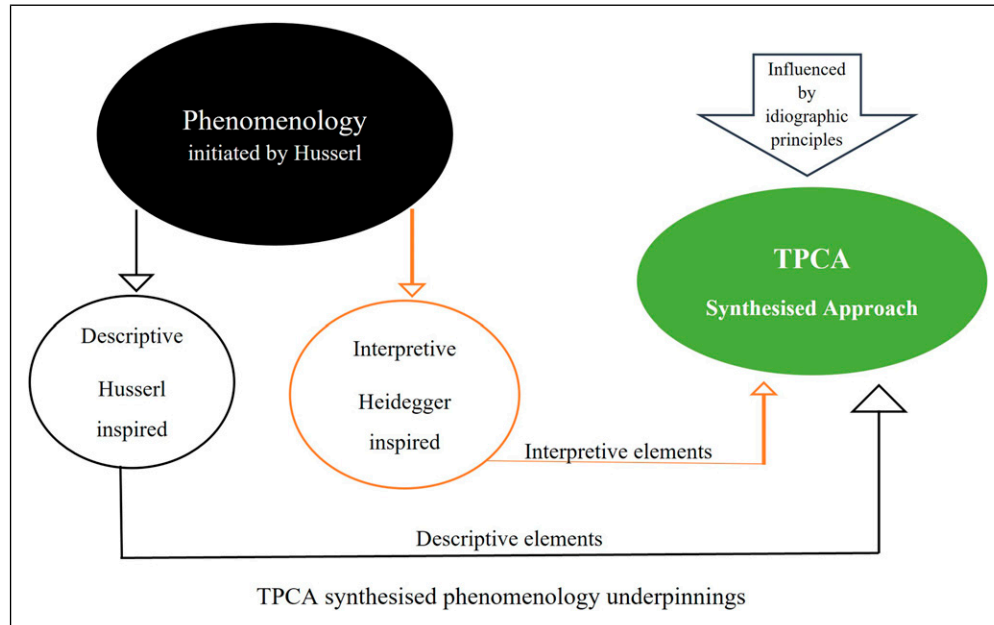
## Introducing the Trans-Positional Cognition Approach

This section introduces the TPCA as a method, using four dimensions, the philosophical underpinnings, the bracketing, the structure and the process.

### *Trans-Positional Cognition Approach* *Philosophical Underpinnings*

As all phenomenological approaches, TPCA is concerned with exploring the lived experience of the individual within its context. TPCA facilitates the interpretation of the experience uncovered from the study participants through the process of trans-positional cognition or what can be termed metaphorically as 'stepping into the participants' shoes' and providing an interpretation of the study phenomena from their perspective. As illustrated in Figure 1, phenomenology initially conceptualised by Husserl (1913a, 1913b) enabled researchers to explore and describe the lived experience of a phenomenon. The purpose of descriptive phenomenology promoted by Giorgi (1975, 1986, 1997) and others was to provide a description of a lived experience in all its purity, avoiding any external interference by way of interpretations. The descriptive phenomenologist was restricted to 'making assertions which are supported by appropriate intuitive validations' (Mohanty, 1983 as cited in Giorgi, 1986, p. 9); to us this formulation suggests that the descriptive and interpretive traditions may not be as far from each other as it may seem.

Conversely, van Manen (1997b, 2014) suggested that the interpretive school of phenomenology initiated by Heidegger (1927) was of the opinion that understanding is always



**Figure 1.** TPCA synthesised phenomenology underpinnings.

embedded in the world of language and social relationships and thus cannot escape from its historicity. Heidegger (1927, p. 61) succinctly elucidated that ‘the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation’. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) clarified that interpretations of the study phenomena are made from the researchers’ perspective. Sartre (1956) noted that the meaning-making process in phenomenological research is an activity that unfolds as we engage with the study participants’ world. Importantly, the interpretive tradition emphasises the interpretation by the researcher.

So, although we do have an ongoing debate between the two philosophical traditions, we do not see that the two positions are as far from each other as the length of the debate and the enthusiasm of the debaters may make it feel. The descriptions in the descriptive tradition are provided by the research participants; thus, including the participants’ interpretations, while the researcher’s intuitive judgement justifies the assertions made. Accepting a researcher’s interpretation is not an extraordinary leap from this point, particularly considering that as the researcher engages with the participants’ world, the meaning-making process evolves in the interaction. However, we do appreciate that the descriptive traditions insist on being true to the participants’ take on their own lived experiences. In TPCA, we try to accommodate both significant viewpoints as phases of one phenomenological research design.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the TPCA is influenced by ‘idiographic principles’ to achieve its epistemological objectives (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 6). This view of idiosyncrasy, however, does not imply that no general learning can be achieved from this type of phenomenological inquiry;

while the findings are idiosyncratic, what is learned through the researchers’ interpretations can be of more general value (Dörfler & Stierand, 2019). In the TPCA, the descriptive dimension is concerned with collecting concrete descriptions of experience from study participants in order to gain a basis for a deep understanding of the study phenomena (Olekanma, 2018).

In the interpretive dimension, through the process of trans-positional cognition (i.e. ‘stepping into the participants’ shoes’), the researcher engages with empirical materials and provides interpretations that are framed or expressed in the form of metonymy (Indurkha & Ojha, 2013, 2017) within the context that reflects participants perspective. This means that interpretation in TPCA goes beyond conceptual logic or what Merleau-Ponty (1945) refers to as interpretations made from researchers’ perspectives. While clearly, the researcher cannot adopt the participant’s mind, the researcher, as suggested by Sartre (1956) does engage with the participant’s world, and instead of using the researcher’s own perspective, adopts the position of the participant – the interpretation is still the result of the researcher’s mind, but adopting a different viewpoint. Together with the bracketing described in the next section, this can get the researcher close to the phenomenal essence of the lived experience – which is what any phenomenological approach tries to achieve in the first place.

Because idiographic principles influence TPCA, the focus is on the in-depth exploration of the lived experience of study participants in context. Burrell and Morgan (1979) termed this obtaining first-hand knowledge of the subject of interest. This action accentuates the need to be open and sensitive to the meaning that the individual participants ascribe to the

phenomena of their everyday world. Similar to other phenomenological methods, the idiographic dimension ensures that users of TPCA:

- Attempt to gain an insight into the study participant's world (Olekanma & Elezi, 2021).
- Take an 'insider's perspective' (Evered & Louis, 1981; Stierand & Dörfler, 2014).
- Interpret things (Heidegger, 1927), from the study participants' perspective or particular people, in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009).

### Bracketing in Trans-Positional Cognition Approach

Bracketing is key in any phenomenological study, and so it is in TPCA as well. In TPCA, the trans-positionality, underpinned by the idiographic principles, is one side of the coin and bracketing is the other. In the former, the researcher tries to achieve a viewpoint as close to the participant as possible, which is why, for instance, the insider view is regarded as highly beneficial, for obtaining the lived essences (the qualia). The latter, in a sense counter-acts the previous shift, attempting to bring the insights out from the very specific narrow context; thus, being in service of producing the theorised essences. Metaphorically, we could say that we step into the participants' shoes and then we step out and learn lessons from it.

In the phenomenological research tradition, phenomena are regarded as idiosyncratic and contextual, requiring that the researcher engages consciously with an open mind, without prejudice and uncritical assumptions. Nevertheless, researchers do not come into studies 'empty-headed'; thus, bringing to the fore the importance of bracketing in the research process (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). There are numerous conceptualisations of bracketing, there is a generic agreement about its paramount role, but there is not much agreement about how to practice bracketing. The purpose of bracketing is to ensure that researchers are disciplined and open to hear what the study participants are saying, as what participants say about their own experience is their personal 'truth'. In his foundational work, Husserl distinguished three forms of bracketing: (1) the *epoché* or *phenomenological attitude* puts the research participant's lived experience in focus, the researcher just listens/observes, without judging or explaining; (2) the *phenomenological psychological reduction* focuses on the meaning of the participants, while the researcher still refrains from judgement; and (3) in the *transcendental phenomenological reduction* the researcher attempts a 'God's eye view', that is, through a complete indwelling to attain the essences of the phenomenon (cf Husserl, 1936, p. 152; Polányi, 1962b). Unsurprisingly, the first and partly the second were promoted by positivists as a way of getting rid of any subjective components – but in our view, such approach is inconsistent with Husserl's original work.

In analysing phenomenologically relevant material, Husserl suggested that all preconceptions, prejudice and pre-understandings should be 'put out of play' so that the researcher can refrain from judgment (Husserl, 1913a; 1913b; 1936; Moran, 2000). Thus, enabling the meaning that is implicit in the experience to be discovered (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997). This view connotes 'pure bracketing', linking closely with the positivist take on Husserl, and is often advocated by descriptive phenomenologists. In our view, while it is impossible to achieve pure bracketing, it is useful to attempt it, simply by being open-minded. The notion of bracketing in TPCA is not about getting rid of subjective components and removing preunderstandings, but raising awareness of them so that the 'insiderness' can be the source of insight, an enabler of a better interpretation, rather than a distortion of reality (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). Similar to many other approaches, in TPCA, bracketing also helps avoid premature explanations, conceptualisations, judgments and suspend any knowledge of the phenomenon to ensure a 'return to the unreflective apprehension of the lived, everyday world' (Finlay, 2008, p. 3).

Adopting an appropriate phenomenological attitude ensures researchers focus on the meaning of the situation as it is given in the participant's experience descriptions (Finlay, 2008, 2011, 2013). Todres and Holloway (2010, p. 181) explained that 'personal sensitivity can bring humanity to the study, while bracketing (phenomenological attitude) can bring a certain discipline and rigour that realises fresh insights beyond the preconceptions of the researchers'. Besides, in the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) research, preunderstanding and bias are both viewed as ways of expressing one's involvement with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). According to Gadamer (1989), researchers who are aware of what they bring to a study in the way of preunderstandings place these beliefs and values in abeyance, so that they can engage in true and open questioning as well as formulate research questions that seek insight rather than a confirmation of prior beliefs. In a sense, bracketing as conceptualised by Dörfler and Stierand (2021) goes a step further, it does not only become means of engaging with the participants' world, and it is not only acceptable, but it is of great value as means of better interpretation. This makes this variant of bracketing fully aligned with and instrumental to the purpose of TPCA.

Hence, the bracketing approach employed in TPCA involves personal reflexivity focused on suspending judgement and premature explanation in the process of gaining 'study participants descriptive themes', that is, accounts of their lived experiences. During the interpretation of the descriptive themes, transpersonal reflexivity is employed. This involves co-researchers interviewing the researcher that conducted the interview and obtained the descriptive themes. The purpose of practising transpersonal reflexivity was to shed light on the interviewer's intuitions and to raise the awareness of pre-susptions, previous knowledge and beliefs, of which the interviewer might not be aware. Dörfler and Stierand (2021) also explained how bracketing could be practised through

personal and transpersonal reflexivity, using preunderstandings as a source of insight while keeping the participants' viewpoint in focus. This approach to bracketing has been adopted in TPCA, as it is fully compatible with 'stepping into the participants' shoes' to ensure rigour and credibility of emergent themes.

### **Trans-Positional Cognition Approach Structure and Process**

In designing the TPCA, we tried to (1) provide a structure that comprises a more explicit methodological process, underpinned by phenomenological tradition, and (2) simplify the complex terminology of extant phenomenological approaches (such as Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1986; van Manen, 1997b; Moustakas, 1994) without compromising the values of the phenomenological tradition. Therefore, we used terms typical in qualitative methods, easy to comprehend by novice researchers, such as data collection, data transcription, text analysis, data display, data validation and idiographic explanation (Table 1) in place of the more complex and idiosyncratic language of phenomenological methods, such as horizontalisation, imaginative variation, intuitive integration, textural and structural descriptions and hermeneutic circle, etc. This also differentiates TPCA from other descriptive and interpretive phenomenological methods. Furthermore, we anticipate that the TPCA could potentially encourage existing and new researchers to explore an alternative way of doing phenomenological research.

The TPCA structure comprises six stages: data collection, data transcription, text analysis, data display, data validation and idiographic explanation. These six stages were further broken down into 16 methodological steps for clarity and transparency purposes (Table 1). Our intention is to make the process of TPCA transparent, thereby increasing the credibility of its findings. In our view, if a researcher rigorously applies the outlined steps, TPCA will facilitate a deep understanding of the study phenomena.

### **Comparison of Trans-Positional Cognition Approach With Descriptive and Interpretive Methods**

Here, we present a comparative analysis of the TPCA, with two key approaches widely used to conduct phenomenological research, namely, Giorgi's (1997, 2014) descriptive and van Manen's (1997b, 2014) interpretive (hermeneutic) approach. Table 2 shows the results of the comparison.

The TPCA entails obtaining first-person accounts of experience descriptions. Thus, its data collection and initial data analysis are similar to the descriptive and interpretive variants of phenomenology. The three approaches rely on the insights of the researcher who worked through all the data to get a sense of the whole and then discriminated them into

meaningful units of description (descriptive), or significant words, phrases and sentences (interpretive) or ideas (TPCA).

The descriptive phenomenologist seeks to 'encounter an instance of the phenomenon that one is interested in studying and then use the process of free imaginative variation in order to determine the essence of the phenomenon' (Giorgi, 2006, p. 354). In other words, the dimensions of the phenomenon are varied until its invariant, respective essential characteristics emerge, and the researcher 'carefully describes the essence that was discovered' (Giorgi, 2006, p. 354). However, the interpretive phenomenologist employing the hermeneutic cycle provides interpretations, which in some instances are endless (van Manen, 1997b). Other interpretive variants such as the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (Smith et al., 1997; Smith & Osborn, 2008) employ the double hermeneutics, which entails interpreting the study participants' interpretations.

In contrast, the phenomenologist adopting the TPCA, through the process of trans-positional cognition, engages with the participants' themes derived from their described experiences and 'independently' provides interpretations. TPCA does not indulge in endless interpretation like the hermeneutics (van Manen, 1997b), nor does it necessarily involve participants in the interpretation process like double hermeneutics of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). However, themes that emerge as the researcher's interpretations are further interpreted at a higher level of abstraction to allow for the emergence of an overarching narrative that epitomises the essence of the study phenomenon.

### **Applying the Trans-Positional Cognition Approach**

We illustrate the use of TPCA with a study (Olekanma, 2018) that explored knowledge workers lived experiences in a financial setting. As TPCA is a qualitative method underpinned by an interpretivist philosophical position, the purpose of the study was to facilitate an in-depth exploration of a subjective phenomenon of interest, which focused on 'cognition of the participants' (termed official knowledge workers in the study).

In this section, we use the six stages and 16 steps of TPCA to illustrate its application using a case. To avoid repetition, we only refer to context-specific procedures to focus on the application of the TPCA and do not again explain the features included in the section *Trans-Positional Cognition Approach Structure and Process*.

#### **Data Collection**

Step 1: In the underlying study (Olekanma, 2018), a purposive method was used to select 16 participants from the research setting. Prior to and during the data collection, the researcher assumed bracketing. Semi-structured face to face interviews

**Table 1.** TPCA Six Stages and Sixteen Analytical Research Steps.

Stages of TPCA		Steps of TPCA
<p>Stage 1: Data collection Suspension of 'judgements' and 'explanations' about the study phenomenon essential The bracketing continues</p>		<p>Step 1: Use the appropriate technique to collect phenomenologically relevant data. Before data collection, observe all ethical protocol and assume the bracketing approach explained in the section <i>Bracketing in Trans-Positional Cognition Approach</i> of this paper before commencing data collection</p>
		<p>Step 2: Assume phenomenological attitude (bracketing approach as explained in the section <i>Bracketing in Trans-Positional Cognition Approach</i>) before commencing data transcription Step 3: Transcribe verbatim the audio recordings of participants' concrete experience descriptions. Ensure one is open and attentive to participants' descriptions by assuming the bracketing approach throughout the transcription process of all participants' interview recordings into study text Step 4: Read study text(s) generated for a sense of the whole</p>
<p>Stage 3: Text analysis</p>	<p>Using the process of trans-positional cognition, the process facilitates the researcher's interpretations within context, with emergent themes mostly in the participants' community language</p>	<p>Step 5: Delineate each participant's text into units of meaning containing one idea each Step 6: With full awareness of the study research question and objectives, discriminate the units by highlighting those containing ideas relevant to the inquiry in each of the participants' text Step 7: Colour-code these units with ideas beneficial to the inquiry and group them into types around set objectives or study phenomena of interest Step 8: Review colour-coded units to identify and integrate units with repeated/similar ideas within each typology without altering the meaning of the integrated units. Do this for each of the participants' study text Step 9: After the integration of units with similar ideas in step 8, what emerges are meaningful units in each type that represent the individual participant's themes. (Steps 5–8 are repeated for each participant's text). Step 10: Combine all the individual participant's themes that emerged in step 9, code them into an appropriate typology. Then review all themes to identify repetitions/similar themes in each typology and integrate appropriately to eliminate repetitions. After that, convert the first-person characteristics of the themes into third-person characteristics without altering the meaning of the themes. What emerges are the study participants' themes (PT) that are wholly descriptive in nature Step 11: Consciously assume the bracketing mode to ensure focus, discipline and rigour during the interpretation of the study participants' themes Step 12: While still assuming the bracketing mode, the researcher provides interpretations by cognitively engaging with the study participants' themes through the process of trans-positional cognition, as if the researcher is a member of the participants' community experiencing the experience (i.e. 'stepping into the participants' shoes' metaphorically). This process of trans-positional cognition helps sense-making of the study participants' themes allowing the researcher to provide interpretations that characterise the participants' lived experiences. Emergent themes are mostly in the form of a 'metonymy or metaphor' or phrase couched in participants' community language. The themes that emerge are termed the 'Researcher's interpretations' of participant themes (Ri-PT) within context (cf 3.2)</p>
<p>Stage 4: Data display structure</p>	<p>Construction of a data display structure that organises all the findings</p>	<p>Step 13: To allow for the emergence of the overarching theme or study essence while still assuming the bracketing mode, use the trans-positional cognition process to engage with and interpret the Ri-PT themes produced in step 12 at a higher level of abstraction. The theme that emerges symbolises the essence of the study phenomenon</p>
<p>Stage 5: Data validation</p>	<p>Sending the emergent study findings (themes) to purposively selected participants for validation; this can create a feedback loop to any of the previous stages</p>	<p>Step 14: Construct a data structure that displays the three levels of themes (study participants, researcher's and study essence) to facilitate further analytical activity</p>
<p>Stage 6: Idiographic explanation</p>	<p>Elucidates the researcher's interpretation themes in the form of narratives within the interpretivist tradition so to provide a narrative explaining the essence of the studied phenomenon</p>	<p>Step 15: All themes in the data display structure in step 14 are sent to purposively selected participants for validation. This step ensures the validity and reliability of the study themes Step 16: At this stage, the researcher provides an idiographic explanation that elucidates the researcher's interpretation themes in the form of narratives within the interpretive tradition. The narrative (write-up) can be supported with quotes from participants' texts (that elucidates the social, cultural and historicity – Dasein of the study participants) and contextualised knowledge</p>

**Table 2.** Comparison TPCA with key phenomenological approaches.

Subject	Descriptive Giorgi (1986, 2009, 2014)	Interpretive van Manen (1997b, 2014)	TPCA Synthesised Method Olekanma (2018)
Approach adopted	Descriptive phenomenology, using the concept of lived experience	Interpretive phenomenology, using the concept of lived experience	TPCA synthesises the principles of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology, using the concept of lived experience
Aim of the adopted approach	It aims at the conscious essences of phenomena	It aims to understand and explain human existence	Focuses on existential themes such as the person's sense of self-identity and embodied relations with others
Phenomenological reduction approach adopted	Adopts Husserlian epoché, which here means setting aside one's pre-existing knowledge and preunderstandings about the phenomenon. That is, it assumes the attitude of the phenomenological reduction	Does not accept that phenomenological reduction, as Husserl proposed, is possible. Thus, it outlines and recognises the existence of preconceptions (reflection) and the impossibility of setting them aside	Employs an approach to bracketing that entails suspending judgements and explanation about the phenomenon during the research, as it is impossible to extricate all pre-knowledge. As researchers do not come into the study empty-headed, this, and particularly insiderness, can be exploited for achieving insight through transpersonal reflexivity (cf section 6)
Analytical approach adopted	Descriptive approach. It uses the free imaginative variation, first introduced by Husserl, which meant that the phenomenon is varied in different dimensions until its invariant essential characteristics emerge. This approach is neither transparent nor explicitly understood. Also, users of this approach do not have the benefit of explaining what was learned, as it does not support the idiographic explanation	Hermeneutics approach. The interpretive phenomenologist employs the hermeneutic circle whereby the researcher tries to make sense of the whole text and the particular descriptions with reference to each other	Synthesises elements of descriptive and interpretive principles into a stepwise methodical approach that bridges polemical gaps and allows for an inclusive approach
Feature of study	Experience of the participants in the context of Lebenswelt	Focuses on the experience of the participants in Dasein, as a way of being in the Lebenswelt	TPCA enables sense-making and emergence of participants' themes and utilises trans-positional cognition to interpret the participants' themes
Focus of study	Inductive, output abstract themes that are mostly academically oriented that may be useful in practice and lead to theory building	Alternatively a double hermeneutics is employed, which is a double loop of interpretation, where the participants interpret their experience, and the researcher interprets the participants' interpretations as used in IPA (Smith et al., 2009)	The researcher engages with the actual described concrete experience of participants' (themes) and provides interpretation from the participants' perspective. Also, because of the idiographic component of the TPCA approach, the researcher can explain what was learned
Phenomenological stance	Wedged to the descriptive approach	Wedged to the hermeneutic approach	Experience of the participants in Dasein and Lebenswelt Output is primarily abductive in nature, oriented towards individual perspective. Adoption of TPCA leads to the emergence of new ideas that explain the studied phenomena. TPCA, with roots in organisation and management studies, is useful for practice and academic work Not wedged to any specific approach but takes a balanced phenomenological approach based on synthesis



were used to gather empirical material from the study participants. All the interviews were audio-recorded.

### Data Transcription

Step 2: To transcribe the audio recording, the researcher practised bracketing, which introduces a level of discipline that ensured ‘what was heard from the recording was what was transcribed’. Step 3: Each of the 16 participants’ interviews was transcribed verbatim. Step 4: Each of the participants’ text was read over thrice while listening to the audio recorder playback to ensure accuracy and to get a sense of the whole phenomenon.

### Text Analysis

The TPCA text analysis stage comprises steps 5 to 13. We briefly describe the application of these nine analytical steps for the case study.

Step 5: Each participant’s study text was broken down into units. Each unit could be a statement, sentence, phrase or paragraph, each of which contained only one unit of a meaningful idea. Step 6: Next, the researcher discriminated the units by highlighting and coding those that contain ideas relevant to the study research objectives in each participant’s study text. Step 7: After that, the colour-coded units of ideas in each participant’s text were grouped into types matching the research objectives. Step 8: The coded units of ideas were reviewed to identify those with similar ideas within each type. Those containing similar ideas were identified and aggregated.

Step 9: Following the coding, a further examination of the units with beneficial ideas was carried out to identify and eliminate any repetitions. The emergent units of meaningful ideas represent structures of the participant’s lived experience of the study phenomena. After analysing each participant’s study text, the researcher practised bracketing before engaging with the next participant’s study text to avoid any perceived notions being imported from the previous study text. The above process led to the emergence of the individual participant’s themes.

Step 10: The process of developing the study participants’ themes started with creating a typology that allowed the themes from the 16 different participants’ text to be combined into similar types. Subsequently, the themes in each type were carefully reviewed to identify repetitions, types containing similar meaningful ideas were combined into clusters, then the clustered types were aggregated. This resulted in a typology in which each type contained only themes common to all participants in the clusters. Finally, all the themes in each type were converted from their first-person characteristics into third-person characteristics without altering the meanings as ‘lived’ by the participants. What emerged following the preceding procedure is the participants’ themes mostly in the ‘language of the participants’, as only minor modifications were undertaken during the conversion of the combined unit of ideas from the first-person format to the third-person

format. Hence, the study participants’ themes that emerged were wholly descriptive in nature. The 21 participants themes that emerged from the study (Figure 2) represent the structure that characterises the official knowledge workers’ lived experience of service productivity in the research setting.

Step 11: To start the process of interpretation of the study participants’ themes, the researcher assumed bracketing once again to guard against any perceived notions prior to interacting with the study participants’ themes. Step 12: The process of trans-positional cognition led to the emergence of five themes, each expressed as phrases or labels in the form of a metonymy (Langacker, 2008; Nishimura, 2008), which highlighted the common trends or patterns embedded in the study participants themes. The themes include:

- Highly regulated workplace,
- Unfriendly operational environment,
- Dysfunctional service operations strategy,
- Knowledge gap and
- Subjective deposit mobilisation quantitative assessment criteria.

The labels that emerged represent the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ themes (PT) which in the underlying study was designated ‘Ri-PT’, where R is the researcher, i refers to interpretation and PT means participants’ themes. The trans-positional cognition process of interpreting the participants’ themes was not a linear process but rather an iterative one, and it involved alternation between reading over the PTs within each cluster, reflecting on what was read, and multiple rewritings of the formulated meanings (cf undertaking nuanced examination, telling apart and interpreting the study themes, in *Trans-Positional Cognition Approach Structure and Process*). This process was repeated for all clusters of the participants’ themes (Figure 2) to achieve the researcher’s interpretations for the complete typology. It is important to highlight that during steps 11–13 the researcher did not conduct fresh reflection about the study participants’ experiences but undertook a nuanced examination of the PTs, to notice, tell apart and provide interpretations within the context of themes. Thus the interpretation is focused on the study phenomenon and not on self (Laverty, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Bracketing in the form of transpersonal reflexivity (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021) was also undertaken by the authors in steps 11–13 to further ensure rigour and credibility of the emergent themes.

Step 13: To allow for the emergence of the study essence, the researcher, through a further process of trans-positional cognition, combined and cognitively engaged with the five second-order themes at a higher level of interpretation. The process led to the emergence of a third level or overarching theme, the ‘service capacity deficit’ that typifies the study essence, serving as a basis for constructing a narrative that explains the participants’ experiences.



### Data Display Structure

Step 14: Following the text analysis, the researcher constructed a data display structure that organised the findings (themes) that emerged in such a way that facilitated further research (Figure 2).

The data display structure shows the 21 study participant themes, five researcher's interpretations and one theme that represented the 'study essence'.

### Data Validation

Step 15: The data display structure presentation of the study themes facilitated a better comprehension of the study output and validation by the participants. Thus, the themes that emerged from the study were sent to eight purposively selected participants using the data display structure format. All the eight selected participants confirmed that the study outputs presented in the data display structure represented their experiences.

### Idiographic Explanation

Step 16: In the underlying study (Olekanma, 2018), a 'discussing the findings' section was used to write up the narrative from the second level themes and the study essence. The write-up was supported with quotes from the individual participants' interview text that illuminated the social, cultural and historical aspects of the study participants' Dasein. In the study, the idiographic explanation write-up utilised a conceptual model derived from study output, metaphors and metonymies (Indurkha & Ojha, 2013; 2017; Langacker, 2008; Nishimura, 2008). It also utilised established knowledge such as the viable system model (Beer, 1979) to better explain the study findings within context. The study concluded that the service capacity deficit related factors impaired the capability and potentiality of the study participants, with implication for the solvency prospects of their banks.

### Discussion

In the section *Comparison of Trans-Positional Cognition Approach With Descriptive and Interpretive Methods*, the TPCA method was compared with the Giorgi's descriptive and van Manen's interpretive methods that belong to the two major phenomenology schools of thought. Reflecting on the outcome of the comparison in Table 2, we note the similarities between the two schools and their differences. Hence, it is our opinion that viewed from how problems are solved in practice, descriptive and interpretive approaches are potentially two sides of the same coin that need to be taken together if a problem is to be solved from a wholistic standpoint.

In other words, we view the interpretive method as a continuation of the descriptive method. Without first obtaining descriptions of experiences and establishing a coherent view

of the phenomenon from a wholly descriptive themes perspective, there is nothing to interpret. Heidegger (1927, p. 37) hinted implicitly about this when he noted that 'the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation'. We believe that viewed from strictly solving a messy phenomenological problem of an individual or group of persons, methodologically it is plausible to suggest the utilisation of a method that enables the researcher to explore the nature of the knower's knowledge as well as the nature of being, the context of how the experience was lived, its historicity.

Research output that incorporates these elements, we think, can be abductive in nature, more detailed and informative with potential for better comprehension of the study phenomenon by users/readers/decision-makers than studies that do not. Therein lies the strong motivation for initiating the TPCA synthesised phenomenological approach. The TPCA is useful as it facilitates the development of a deep understanding and new knowledge that is all encompassing about an individual's or a group's lived experiences. This is an aspiration that aligns with Husserl's main epistemological concern, which is to provide a foundation for knowledge through the study of *Lebenswelt* (Husserl, 1936).

This approach is supported by Dilthey (1989) comments cited in van Manen (1997b, p. 181), which make clear that 'we can grasp the fullness of lived experience by reconstructing or reproducing the meanings of life's expressions found in the products of human effort, work, and creativity'. Put differently, the study of human phenomena requires interpretation and understanding, or as van Manen puts it, 'human science is the study of meaning; descriptive-interpretive are studies of patterns, structures, and levels of experiential and textual meanings' (van Manen, 1997b, p. 181).

One distinctiveness of the TPCA lies in implementing its data analytical process structure outlined in the section *Trans-Positional Cognition Approach Structure and Process* and in Table 1 that comprise six stages and 16 methodical steps. Furthermore, in TPCA, the usefulness of preunderstanding is also acknowledged through the adopted mode of bracketing. However, this comment is situational and circumscribed by specific conditions; for instance, a former banker is researching lived experiences of bankers working in the financial sector. With some insider knowledge of the social and cultural historicity of the participants' community, the researcher may connect better to the participants as well as use it to find 'correct' interpretation of the raised issues. For example, when dealing with the participants during sampling/selection of participants for the study, dealing with issues of access and arranging interviews with participants requires some knowledge of the community norms and idiosyncrasies, like understanding the usage of the participants colloquial (language) in their *Lebenswelt*, which can be challenging. Excluding such pre-knowledge can have a negative impact on the quality of data collected from participants and its analytical process with potentially detrimental implications for the relevance of the study outcome; therefore,

in TPCA bracketing is employed to raise awareness and make use of such pre-knowledge. We experienced this first-hand during our study that involved top bank executives, as the lead author was a former bank executive.

The other issues that differentiate TPCA and which, in our view, constrict our knowledge and full understanding of researching phenomenology include:

1. The issue of contextualisation. We agree with [Heidegger \(1927\)](#) that accepting self-consciousness as the dominant element of the subject is not sufficient to determine the self-understanding of the subject because self-understanding is always determined by way of the Dasein's mode of being the context.
2. Adopters of the TPCA researching phenomenology are not aligned to any of the two major phenomenological schools. TPCA method synthesises the principles of the descriptive and interpretive approaches to achieve its epistemological objective; thus, bridging the polemical gap and ensuring methodological inclusivity.
3. Output from the study adopting the TPCA method is abductive in nature. It leads to creating new ideas that best explain the studied phenomenon ([Olekanma, 2018](#); [Olekanma & Elezi, 2021](#); [Olekanma & Soomro, 2020](#)) in lieu of most extant phenomenological methods.

Ultimately, the usefulness of the TPCA, as highlighted in [Table 1](#), stems from its easy-to-follow step-by-step approach that provides structure and facilitates the gathering of concrete descriptions of experiences from study participants, analysis of data and interpretation of themes, as well as helping to elicit an understanding of studied phenomena. The synthesised nature of the TPCA ensures that the researchers using it in their work are not aligned to any phenomenological school of thought. The methodical process of the TPCA thus supports the researcher's capacity to interpret the participants' emergent themes that 'point to something' within context ([Gadamer, 1977](#), p. 68).

## Concluding Remarks

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a methodological approach for undertaking qualitative research. However, the polemical arguments around the philosophical underpinning of phenomenological research practiced by the descriptive and interpretive schools of thought create confusion. Hence, researchers often follow the principles from either the descriptive or interpretive phenomenological schools to conduct a phenomenological study. This extant approach constrains researchers within the domain and limits the potentials of their data set. TPCA aims to address this issue and provides pragmatic support to researchers interested in phenomenology. The TPCA (a form of 'stepping into another person's shoes') synthesises the principles of both descriptive and

interpretive phenomenological schools. As a result, researchers adopting TPCA in their work utilise a more inclusive approach instead of being aligned to either school.

The other notable differences of TPCA compared to other extant phenomenological methods include the approach to bracketing as explained in the section *Bracketing in Trans-Positional Cognition Approach* and its six-stages structure and 16-step process. Also, the TPCA analytical process considers the nature of the knower's knowledge and the nature of being, which is the context of the lived experience and its historicity. Thus, it accounts for the Dasein as well as the Lebenswelt of the study phenomenon. We believe that output from such a study would make it easier for readers/users to understand the studied phenomenon. Additionally, we note that 'stepping into the participants' shoes' principle has been used as a research method in several works from other approaches (see e.g. [Greenwood, 2015](#); [Heggstad, 2018](#)). However, TPCA is the first to apply it in this way and in a synthesised phenomenological approach.

There are a number of implications for undertaking phenomenological research that emerges from this paper. First, taking a more pragmatic approach to dealing with the extant 'strict' descriptive and interpretive philosophical dichotomy of phenomenology proposed in TPCA can help resolve some of the polemical arguments within the domain. Second, as illustrated with the [Olekanma \(2018\)](#) study, TPCA can help researchers operationalise the complex philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological inquiry with abductive reasoning leading to practical application. Third, this paper highlighted and applied bracketing as explained in the section *Bracketing in Trans-Positional Cognition Approach*, which we believe is attainable by researchers wanting to adopt a phenomenological method for their studies.

Although TPCA is presented as a novel synthesised phenomenological approach worth exploring and as an alternative to the extant phenomenological methods, it is important to emphasise that the purpose of this paper is not to pit one phenomenological research approach against another. Many researchers moved back and forth between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology during their research without an explicitly formulated framework. Our purpose is to provide such a framework, which could help sustain extant interest, encourage and attract further researchers to phenomenology. The TPCA can also provide practical tools to help novice phenomenologists develop new skills and perspectives. Furthermore, as [Baker et al. \(2004, p. 169\)](#) suggest, the 'purpose of academic discourse is not only to describe and explain the world but also to change it'. With this in mind, the purpose of introducing the TPCA into phenomenology provides an opportunity for reflection and change.

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