



Phenomenology In Qualitative Research

 simplypsychology.org/phenomenology-in-qualitative-research.html



What is phenomenology?

Phenomenology in qualitative research is characterized by a focus on understanding the meaning of lived experience from the perspective of the individual.

Instead of testing hypotheses or seeking to generalize findings to a larger population, phenomenological research aims to illuminate the specific and to challenge structural or normative assumptions by revealing the subjective experiences and perceptions of

individuals.

This approach is particularly valuable for gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, and for cutting through taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.

Aim of Phenomenological Research

The aim of phenomenological research is to arrive at phenomenal understandings and insights into the meaning of lived experience.

These insights should be “impressively unique” and “primordially meaningful”, illuminating the specific experience being studied.

Phenomenological research attempts to uncover the meaning in lived experiences that are often overlooked in daily life. In other words, phenomenology asks the basic question: “What is this (primal) experience like?”

To do this, phenomenological research examines experience as it appears to consciousness, seeking to avoid any preconceptions or assumptions.

Rather than simply describing what participants say, phenomenological research seeks to go deeper, to uncover implicit meanings and reveal the participant's lifeworld.

This is not a matter of making generalized statements, but of understanding the experience from the individual's perspective.

The aim is not to provide causal explanations or to theorize about the experience, but to “restore to each experience the ontological cipher which marks it internally.”

Characteristics of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising that emphasizes describing phenomena as they appear to consciousness.

It is not a set of dogmas or a system, but rather a practice of doing philosophy.

Here are some key characteristics of phenomenology:

1. **Focus on Experience:** Phenomenology is concerned with the “phenomena,” which refers to anything that appears in the way that it appears to consciousness. This includes experiences, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and meanings.
2. **First-Person Perspective:** Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of the first-person, subjective experience. It seeks to understand the world as it is lived and experienced by individuals.
3. **Intentionality:** A central concept in phenomenology is intentionality, which refers to the directedness of consciousness toward an object. This means that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, and this directedness shapes how we experience the world.
4. **Bracketing (Epoche):** Phenomenological research often involves “bracketing” or setting aside preconceived notions and assumptions about the world. This allows researchers to approach phenomena with an open mind and focus on how they appear in experience.
5. **Descriptive Emphasis:** Phenomenology prioritizes description over explanation or interpretation. The aim is to provide a rich and nuanced account of experience as it is lived, without imposing theoretical frameworks or seeking to explain it in terms of external factors.
6. **Search for Essences:** Phenomenology is interested in uncovering the essential structures and meanings of experience. This involves going beyond the particularities of individual experiences to grasp the shared features that make them what they are.
7. **Holistic Approach:** Phenomenology seeks to understand experience in a holistic way, recognizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and world. It rejects reductionist approaches that attempt to explain experience solely in terms of its parts.
8. **Use of Examples:** Phenomenological researchers often use concrete examples to illustrate and explore the meaning of experience. These examples can be drawn from personal narratives, literature, or other sources that provide rich descriptions of lived experience.

Is phenomenology an epistemology or ontology?

Phenomenology straddles or undermines the traditional distinction between epistemology and ontology. Traditionally, epistemology is understood as the study of how we come to understand and have knowledge of the world, while ontology is the study of the nature of reality itself.

- **Phenomenology investigates both how we understand the world and the nature of reality through its focus on phenomena.** By examining how things appear to us, phenomenology analyzes our way of experiencing and understanding the world, simultaneously addressing questions about the objects themselves and their modes of appearance.
- **Heidegger suggests that ontology is only possible through phenomenology.** According to this view, analyzing our being-in-the-world is key to understanding the nature of reality itself.

Instead of separating subject and object, or the knower and the known, phenomenology highlights their interrelation, arguing that the mind is essentially open to the world, and reality is essentially capable of manifesting itself to us.

Exploring Phenomenology: Three Key Perspectives

1. Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl viewed phenomenology as the “science of the essence of consciousness”, emphasizing the intentional structure of conscious acts.

Central for phenomenological psychology was phenomenological philosopher Husserl's understanding of “intentionality,” the idea that whenever we are conscious we are conscious of something, making the job of the researcher to better understand people's experiences of things “in their appearing” (Langdridge, 2007, p. 13).

- **Intentionality:** This key concept describes consciousness's directedness towards objects—our experiences are always *about* something. This “aboutness” isn't limited to physical objects and encompasses mental acts like remembering, imagining, or even fearing.

- **Essence over Existence:** Husserl's phenomenology focuses on uncovering the invariant structures of consciousness, aiming to reveal the essence of experiences like perception, thought, or emotion. It is not concerned with whether the object of an experience actually exists in the world.
- **Transcendental Reduction:** To grasp these essences, Husserl introduces the "epoché," a methodological tool to bracket our natural attitude towards the world. This doesn't mean denying the world's existence; it's about shifting focus from the objects themselves to **how** they appear in our consciousness.
- **Example:** When perceiving a table, we experience it through different profiles or perspectives. We can't see all sides simultaneously, yet we grasp the table as a unified object. Transcendental phenomenology investigates the structures of consciousness that enable this constitution of objects from a multitude of appearances.

2. Heidegger's Hermeneutical Phenomenology:

Martin Heidegger, while influenced by Husserl, diverged by emphasizing the importance of hermeneutics—the art of interpretation—in phenomenological inquiry.

- **Being-in-the-World:** Unlike Husserl's focus on pure consciousness, Heidegger grounds his phenomenology in the concrete existence of Dasein—a term he uses to describe human existence's inherent being-in-the-world.
- **Facticity and Historicity:** Heidegger recognizes that our understanding of the world is shaped by our historical and cultural contexts. We don't encounter the world as a neutral observer, but through a lens of pre-existing interpretations and practices.
- **Self-Concealing Nature of Phenomena:** Heidegger contends that things don't always reveal themselves fully. Our understanding is often clouded by biases, assumptions, or simply the inherent ambiguity of existence. Phenomenology, therefore, becomes a process of uncovering hidden meanings and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions.
- **Example:** Consider the act of using a hammer. For Heidegger, this isn't just a neutral interaction with an object. It reveals a whole network of meanings related to our practical engagement with the world, our understanding of "for-the-sake-of-which" (building something), and our shared cultural practices.

3. Merleau-Ponty's Idea of Perception

Maurice Merleau-Ponty further developed phenomenology by emphasizing the centrality of embodiment in our experience of the world.

- **The Primacy of Perception:** Merleau-Ponty challenges the traditional view of perception as a passive reception of sensory data. He argues that perception is an active and embodied engagement with the world.
- **Body-Subject:** Merleau-Ponty rejects the Cartesian mind-body dualism. For him, our body is not just an object in the world, but the very medium through which we experience and understand the world. The body is the “vehicle of being-in-the-world”.
- **Perception as Foundation:** Merleau-Ponty places perception at the heart of his phenomenology. He sees it as the foundation for all other cognitive activities, including thought, language, and intersubjectivity.
- **Example:** Consider the experience of touching a piece of velvet. It's not simply that we receive tactile sensations. Our hand actively explores the fabric, and the perceived texture emerges from the dynamic interplay between our moving hand and the resistant surface. This experience can't be reduced to purely mental representations or objective properties of the velvet; it arises from the embodied engagement between the perceiving subject and the world.

Data Collection in Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research focuses on understanding lived experience, and therefore relies on qualitative data that can illuminate the subjective experiences of individuals.

Because phenomenology aims to examine experience on its own terms, it is wary of imposing pre-defined categories or structures on the data.

Many phenomenological philosophers and researchers avoid using the term “method” in favor of talking about the phenomenological “approach.”

Interviews

Interviews are a common method for collecting data in phenomenological research.

Researchers typically use semi-structured or unstructured interviews, which prioritize open-ended questions and allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words.

These interviews aim to elicit detailed, concrete descriptions of specific experiences rather than abstract generalizations.

For instance, instead of asking “What does friendship mean to you?”, a researcher might ask: “Can you describe a time you felt particularly connected to a friend?”.

This shift from the abstract to the concrete helps researchers access the pre-reflective, lived experience of the phenomenon, revealing its texture and nuance.

Researchers may also use follow-up questions to clarify or gain a deeper understanding of participants’ responses.

Phenomenological interviews often explore experiences across multiple dimensions:

- **Bodily sensations:** The interviewer might ask: “What was happening in your body during that experience?” or “How did that situation make you feel physically?” These questions help uncover the embodied aspects of experience often overlooked in more cognitively-focused approaches.
- **Thoughts and cognitions:** Questions like “What sense did you make of that experience?” or “What thoughts went through your head?” help explore the cognitive interpretations participants make about their experiences.
- **Emotional responses:** The interviewer may ask: “What feelings were present during that time?” or “How did that situation make you feel emotionally?” Allowing participants to articulate their feelings without judgment or interpretation is crucial.
- **Relational dynamics:** When exploring interpersonal experiences, interviewers might ask: “What was it like to be with that person during that event?” or “How did your relationship with that person shape your experience?” Recognizing that experiences are not confined to the individual but are shaped by social and relational contexts is central to phenomenological inquiry.

Beyond interviews, phenomenological research may draw upon a variety of other methods, including:

- **Discussions:** Open-ended discussions among participants who share an experience can shed light on commonalities and differences in how the phenomenon is lived.
- **Participant observation:** This method involves the researcher immersing themselves in a particular setting or community to gain firsthand experience of the phenomenon being studied.
- **Analysis of personal texts:** Participants' diaries, letters, or other written accounts of their experiences can provide valuable insights into their subjective lifeworlds.
- **Creative media:** Researchers may use art, dance, literature, photography, or other creative media to encourage participants to express their experiences in non-verbal ways.

“Examples” are particularly important in phenomenological research. Rather than treating individual experiences as mere illustrations of general concepts, phenomenology understands examples as offering a unique window into the essence of a phenomenon.

Researchers carefully select and analyze examples to uncover and articulate the essential features of a lived experience.

Number of Participants in Phenomenological Studies

There is no prescribed number of participants required for a phenomenological study. Some researchers may choose to include a larger number of participants.

Phenomenological research emphasizes in-depth understanding of lived experiences rather than statistical generalization.

Therefore, sample size is less important than the richness and depth of the data obtained from the participants.

However, phenomenological studies that include more than a handful of participants risk being superficial and may miss the spirit of phenomenology.

Here are some examples of approaches to the number of participants in a phenomenological study:

- **Three to six participants** are considered to give sufficient variation.

- **One participant** can be used for a case study.
- Researchers can also use **autobiographical reflection**.
- Single-case studies can identify issues that illustrate discrepancies and system failures and illuminate or draw attention to “different” situations, but positive inferences are less easy to make without a small sample of participants.
- The strength of inference increases rapidly once factors start to recur with **more than one participant**.

Analyzing Data in Phenomenological Research

There are a variety of approaches to conducting phenomenological research and analyzing data.

The variety of approaches within phenomenological research can make it challenging for students to navigate, as there are no fixed rules or procedures

The specific analytic strategies used in a phenomenological study depend on the researcher’s chosen approach and the nature of the phenomenon being investigated.

Some researchers advocate for a more orthodox approach to phenomenological research that prioritizes rigorous description and aims to uncover essential structures of experience.

Descriptive Phenomenology

This approach, exemplified by the work of Giorgi and Wertz, emphasizes a rigorous, descriptive approach to capturing the essential structures of experience. It involves bracketing assumptions, focusing on pre-reflective experience, and seeking generalizable insight

For example, Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method involves a multi-step procedure for analyzing descriptions of lived experience:

- Read the entire description to gain a holistic understanding.
- Divide the description into smaller units of meaning.
- Explicate the psychological significance of each meaning unit.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Other researchers, while still grounding their work in phenomenological philosophy, emphasize the importance of interpretation in understanding the unique, lived experience of individuals.

This approach, embraced by researchers like van Manen, prioritizes interpretation and dialogue in understanding the unique, lived experience of individuals.

For example, van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the role of interpretation and reflection in uncovering meaning in lived experience.

It acknowledges the researcher's role in shaping interpretations and emphasizes the transition from pre-reflective experience to conceptual understanding.

Van Manen suggests that researchers should explicate their own assumptions and biases in order to better understand how they might be shaping their interpretations of the data.

His approach also highlights the importance of understanding the transition from pre-reflective experience to conceptual understanding.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

If you are learning phenomenology, struggling with the material is expected.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has become popular because it offers novice researchers a concrete structure, but its set structures may cause researchers to get caught up in method and lose the essence of the phenomenon being studied.

Developed by Jonathan Smith, IPA is a qualitative research method designed to gain an in-depth understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of specific situations.

It focuses on individual experiences and interpretations rather than aiming to uncover universal essences. IPA draws on a broader range of phenomenological thinkers than just Husserl.

It differs from descriptive phenomenology by incorporating an interpretive component, acknowledging that individuals are inherently engaged in meaning-making processes.

Critical Phenomenology

Critical phenomenology expands upon traditional phenomenology by examining the impact of social structures on lived experiences of power and oppression.

Critical phenomenology acknowledges that societal structures like capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy shape our lifeworlds and cannot be fully put aside

A key goal of critical phenomenology is to identify practical strategies for challenging oppressive structures and fostering liberatory ways of being in the world.

In psychology, phenomenology is linked with a critical realist epistemology; here, the real world exists, but it cannot be fully discovered because our experiences of it are always mediated (Shaw, 2019).

Regardless of the specific approach, several key principles should guide data analysis in phenomenological research:

- **Focus on description:** Phenomenological research aims to describe the lived experience of a phenomenon, rather than explain or theorize about it.
- **Attend to pre-reflective experience:** Researchers should strive to move beyond participants' initial, surface-level descriptions to uncover the deeper, often implicit, meanings embedded in their experiences.
- **Adopt a holistic perspective:** A thorough analysis considers various aspects of experience, including embodiment, intersubjectivity, and the influence of social and cultural factors.

Reflexivity in Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research acknowledges that researchers are active participants who bring their own perspectives and experiences to the research process.

It's important for researchers to practice **reflexivity** by setting aside their own assumptions and previous knowledge in order to see the world anew through the lens of the participants' lived experiences.

This process, known as **bracketing**, is an attempt to approach the research with "fresh eyes," free from contaminating assumptions. It involves:

- **Adopting a self-critical, reflexive meta-awareness:** This means questioning “common sense” and taken-for-granted assumptions to reveal more about the nature of subjectivity.
- **Abstaining from judgments about the truth or reality of objects in the world:** For example, if a participant mentions seeing a ghost, the researcher focuses on what the ghost means to the person and how they experienced it subjectively rather than questioning the existence of ghosts.
- **Recognizing the impossibility of completely removing subjectivity:** Rather than trying to eliminate subjectivity, researchers should actively recognize its impact and engage with their own (inter-)subjectivity to better understand the other.

Bracketing is an ongoing process that requires mindfulness, curiosity, compassion, and a “genuinely unknowing stance” to remain open to new understandings and avoid imposing the researcher’s own biases on the data.

This is essential for rigorous phenomenological research, as subjectivity is central to the investigation.

However, different schools of thought within phenomenology emphasize different aspects of bracketing:

- **Descriptive phenomenologists** focus on reflexively setting aside previous understandings to prioritize the participant’s perspective.
- **Hermeneutic phenomenologists** strive for transparency in their interpretations.
- **Critical phenomenology** acknowledges that societal structures like capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy shape our lifeworlds and cannot be fully put aside.

By acknowledging the researcher’s role and emphasizing reflexivity, phenomenological research aims to ensure that findings remain grounded in the participants’ lived experiences, avoiding the imposition of the researcher’s own assumptions or biases.

Pitfalls of Phenomenology Research

A common pitfall of phenomenology research is failing to fully grasp the nuances of phenomenological philosophy.

For example, some studies that use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) do not adequately acknowledge their hermeneutic foundations or the need to engage in the Epoché, which helps limit the researcher's pre-understandings.

Without this philosophical anchoring, the research is merely thematic analysis instead of phenomenology.

Other pitfalls in phenomenology research include:

- 1. Missing the Phenomenon:** Researchers should not solely focus on what is observed or said, or merely reproduce participant statements. Instead, they must uncover implicit meanings and insights into the participant's lifeworld, providing an idiographic or general description of the phenomenon. Focusing too heavily on analysis can obscure the phenomenon, while excessive thematic structures can result in presenting "results" rather than phenomenological description.
- 2. Misunderstanding the Phenomenological Attitude:** Husserl's bracketing is often misinterpreted as striving for objectivity, when in reality it is a profoundly subjective act to perceive the world from a fresh perspective. The focus should not be on judging reality, but on exploring experiential appearances and uncovering taken-for-granted aspects of experience. Reproducing participants' words without going beyond their taken-for-granted understandings can cause research to get stuck in the "natural attitude".
- 3. Presenting an Insufficiently Holistic Account:** Phenomenological studies should not just explore one aspect of consciousness or experience without considering intersubjectivity. A study that only examines an individual's thoughts or feelings without considering the body or social context misses the point of phenomenology. Good analysis acknowledges existential being and lifeworldly dimensions like embodiment, relationships, time, and space.
- 4. Seeing Subjectivity as Located Within an Individual:** Ascribing cognition or emotion solely within individuals perpetuates the dualisms that phenomenology aims to dismantle, such as individual/social, body/mind, self/other, and internal/external. Phenomenology emphasizes a worldly matrix of meaning formed through relationships, shared language, and cultural history, highlighting the interconnectedness of individuals and the world.

5. **Killing the Phenomenon in Trying to be Scientifically Rigorous:** Phenomenological studies that include a large number of participants in a misguided attempt to generalize findings risk being superficial and missing the essence of phenomenology. Similarly, reports that use overly intellectualized language or a detached “scientific” voice compromise the description of the lived experience.

Convincing phenomenological research should:

1. Provide a rich and evocative description of the phenomenon.
2. Focus on pre-reflective experience and consciousness rather than reproducing participant statements or researcher assumptions.
3. Be grounded in phenomenological philosophy.
4. Engage with the layered complexity and ambiguity of embodied, intersubjective, and lifeworldly meanings.

Despite ongoing debates among scholars about the best way to apply phenomenology, they share a commitment to an approach of openness and wonder.

This requires discipline, practice, and patience throughout the research process. Phenomenology has the potential to reveal new insights into the nature of lived experience.

Further Information

- Dorfman, E. (2009). History of the lifeworld: From Husserl to Merleau-Ponty. *Philosophy Today*, 53(3), 294–303.
- Hanna, R. (2014). Husserl’s crisis and our crisis. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 22(5), 752–770.
- Held, K. Husserl’s Phenomenology of the Life-World. In D. Welton (Ed.), *The New Husserl: A Critical Reader* (pp. 32–62). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Nenon, T. (2015). Husserl and Heidegger on the Social Dimensions of the Life-World. In L. Učník, I. Chvatík, & A. Williams (Eds.), *The Phenomenological Critique of Mathematisation and the Question of Responsibility* (pp. 175–184). Heidelberg: Springer.
- Dillon, M. C. (1997). *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*. 2nd edition. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

- Overgaard, S. (2007). *Wittgenstein and Other Minds: Rethinking Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity with Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Husserl*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Steinbock, A. (1995). *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Theunissen, M. (1986). *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, trans. C. Macann. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ferguson, H. (2006). *Phenomenological Sociology: Insight and Experience in Modern Society*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Garfinkel, H. (1984). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Schutz, A. (1972). *The Problem of Social Reality: Collected Papers I*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Broome, M. R., Harland, R., Owen, G. S., & Stringaris, A. (Eds.). (2012). *The Maudsley Reader in Phenomenological Psychiatry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Finlay, L. (2009). Debating phenomenological research methods. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 3(1), 6–25.
- Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D. (2012). *The Phenomenological Mind*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Katz, D. (1989). *The World of Touch*, trans. L.E. Krueger. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fodor, J. (1987). *Psychosemantics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- From, F. (1953). *Om oplevelsen af andres adfærd: Et bidrag til den menneskelige adfærds fænomenologi*. Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag.
- Galileo, G. (1957). *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*. New York: Anchor House.
- Gadamer, H. (1991). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd ed.). New York: Crossroads. (Original work published 1975)
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kohut, H. (1984). *How does analysis cure?* (A. Goldberg & P. Stepansky, Eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Orange, D., Atwood, G., & Stolorow, R. (1997). *Working intersubjectively: Contextualism in psychoanalytic practice*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Stolorow, R., & Atwood, G. (1992). *Contexts of being: The intersubjective foundations of psychological life*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1985). *Teachers' Work*. Sydney, Allen & Unwin.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, Aldine.
- Gorden, R. L. (1969). *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics*. Homewood Ill, Dorsey Press.
- Husserl, E. (1970) trans D Carr *Logical investigations*. New York: Humanities Press.
- Hycner, R. H. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. *Human Studies*, 8, 279–303.
- Measor, L. (1985). Interviewing: A Strategy in Qualitative Research. In R Burgess (Ed.) *Strategies of Educational Research: Qualitative Methods*. Lewes, Falmer Press.
- Shaw, R. (2019). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Forrester & C. Sullivan (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research in psychology: A practical guide* (2nd ed., pp. 185–208). SAGE.
- Landridge D. (2007). *Phenomenological Psychology*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.

© 2025 Simply Psychology