

Phenomenological research methods



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**INTRODUCTION TO ANALYSIS IN
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Texts chosen for this course



1. **Giorgi, A. (2012).** The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, vol. 43(1), p. 3-12.
2. **Whitehead, P. (2016).** The Runner's High Revisited: A Phenomenological Analysis. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, vol. 47(2), p. 183-198.
3. **Finlay, L. & Eatough, V. (2012).** Understanding the Experience of Discovering a Kindred Spirit Connection: A Phenomenological Study. *Phenomenology & Practice*, vol. 6(1), p. 69-88.
4. **Aagaard, J. (2016).** Introducing Postphenomenological Research: A Brief and Selective Sketch of Phenomenological Research Methods. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.
5. **Paley, J. (2005).** Phenomenology as Rhetoric. *Nursing Inquiry*, vol. 12(2), p. 106-116.

Overview



1. Philosophical background
2. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology
 - An empirical example
3. Contemporary discussions
4. van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology
 - An empirical example
5. Pitfalls and purposes
6. Assignment: Applying Giorgi's five-step method

Phenomenological philosophy



- **Multiple versions:**
 - Edmund Husserl:
Intentional consciousness
 - Martin Heidegger:
Being-in-the-world
 - Maurice Merleau-Ponty:
Embodied perception
- **Family resemblances:**
 - ÷ Theoretical abstraction
 - + Concrete human existence
- *To the things themselves!*



Descriptive phenomenological research

- **Amedeo Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology**
- Non-reductionist method to study the whole person
- Primarily based on Husserl's phenomenology
- Qualitative research as a rigorous science
- Interested in what appears to a person's consciousness ("what is it like?")



Descriptive phenomenological research



- **Start with bracketing:**
Treat the phenomenon as purely present (to avoid reduction) and refrain from bringing in “non-given past knowledge” (p. 4)
- **Experience-focused interviewing:**
Please describe for me in as much detail as possible a situation in which you have experienced X



The descriptive phenomenological method



- 1. Read the entire interview transcription** in order to get a good sense of the data
- 2. Create “meaning units”** by marking each significant shift in meaning in the transcript
- 3. Condense meaning units** into shorter, psychologically sensitive expressions
- 4. Discern the essential structure** using the method of free imaginative variation
- 5. Use this essence** to clarify and interpret the rest of the raw data (“does it add up?”)

The descriptive phenomenological method



Condensation of meaning units

<i>Natural Unit</i>	<i>Central Theme</i>
<p>1. The first thing that comes to mind is what I learned about interior decorating from Myrtis. She was telling me about the way you see things. Her view of looking at different rooms has been altered. She told me that when you come into a room you don't usually notice how many vertical and horizontal lines there are; at least consciously, you don't notice. And yet, if you were to take someone who knows what's going on in the field of interior decoration, they would intuitively feel there was the right number of vertical and horizontal lines.</p>	<p>1. Role of vertical and horizontal lines in interior decorating</p>

The descriptive phenomenological method



Descriptive phenomenology, an example



- Whitehead explores the phenomenon of **runner's high (RH)**
- Rejects *cult of empiricism*, or “methods that emphasize scientific fact and ignore experience”
 - According to these approaches, RH must be reduced to underlying physiological mechanisms like endorphin production



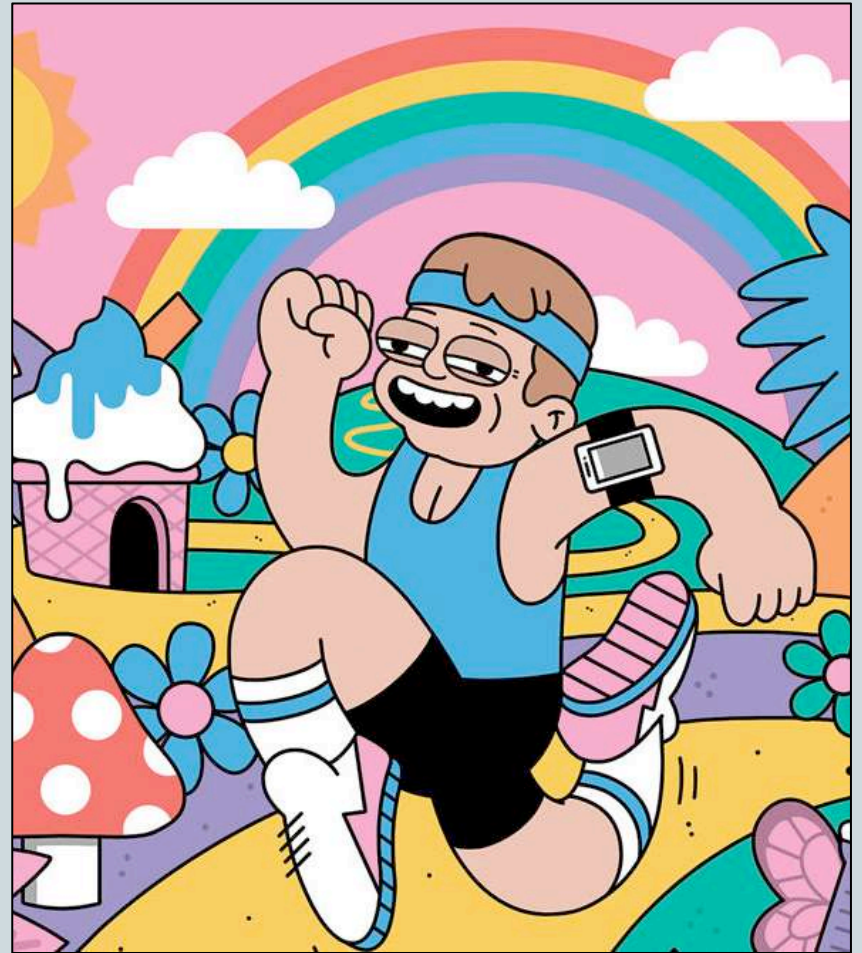
Descriptive phenomenology, an example



“...And then I’m suddenly in this amazing state where everything is perfect and I’m almost literally floating. I’m not moving. There’s no effort involved. I can’t feel my legs moving. It’s just a wonderful feeling”

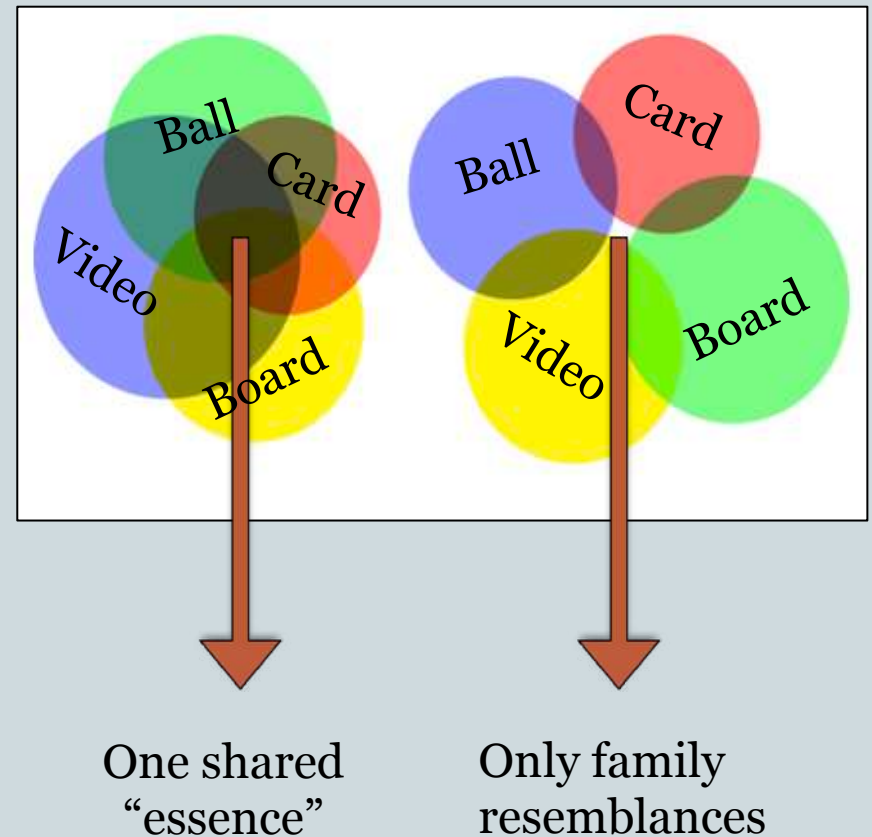
Descriptive phenomenology, an example

- RH is the experienced absence of the limits of body, time, and space
- **Free imaginative variation:**
Lack of pain described as part of RH. “Is it to be understood that you or I are currently in the midst of this experience since we are not in pain?” – obviously not
- **Uses ‘non-given’ knowledge:**
Walking vs. running in terms of gravitational impact. This puts the ‘floating’ into perspective



Internal critique of phenomenological research

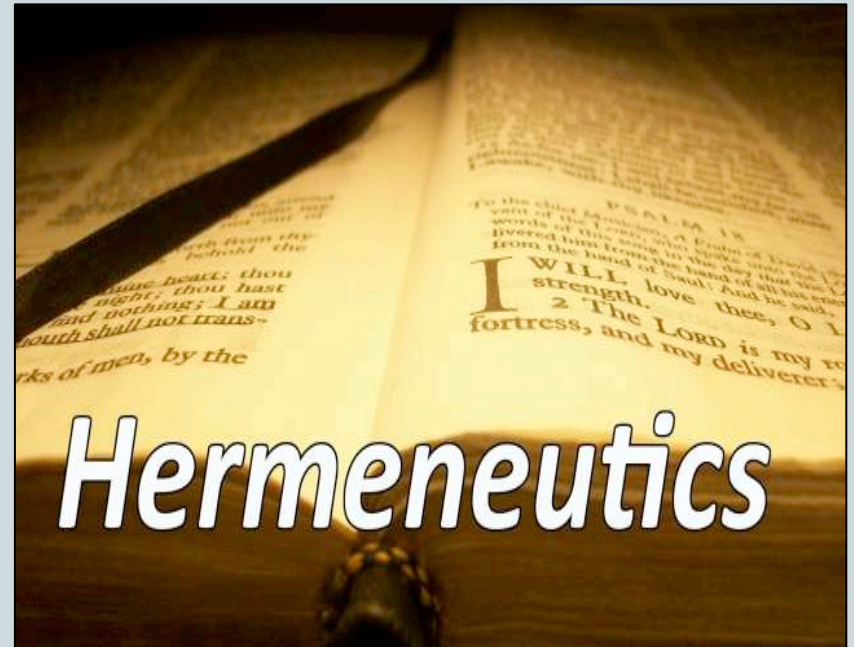
- Consciousness-centric
- Uses dualist language (e.g., Giorgi's claim that psychology is about "subjectivity")
- Relies on a modernist epistemology:
 - Essentialism as a problematic goal
 - Bracketing ('receptivism') as oddly objectivist



Hermeneutic phenomenological research



- **Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology**
- Based on Heidegger and Gadamer's philosophy.
- Less stringent than Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology
- From a **rigorous science** to more of an **evocative art**
- From describing **essences** to interpreting **meaning**



Hermeneutic phenomenology, an example



- Finlay and Eatough explore the phenomenon of **kindred spirit connections (KSC)**
- Describe their analysis as messy, fluid, dynamic, uneven, and involving
- “We found ourselves sensing, moving, empathizing, responding and resonating with our whole body-selves” (p. 72)



Hermeneutic phenomenology, an example



“It was as though we had been travelling the same journey in parallel, never meeting but experiencing the same frustrations, excitement and challenges. We had shared one email correspondence and yet I felt as though I had known him forever”

Hermeneutic phenomenology, an example



- Starts with bracketing (!)
- Evocative description of love as **flowering in the presence of the other**
- Eventually turns to Socrates, Kierkegaard, Montaigne for philosophical insights on friendship and love
- Finishes with a poem



External critique of phenomenological research

- 1. Experience/reality:**
Leaves no room for causal explanations of events
- 2. Meaning/abstraction:**
Many versions of the word 'meaning' (e.g., childbirth)
- 3. Subjectivity/objectivity:**
Bracketing as attempt at 'objective description'
- 4. Understanding/generalization:** Small samples not representative



Quality criteria



- How do we determine what counts as ‘good’ phenomenology?
- Van Manen (1997):
Phenomenological nod
- Brinkmann (2013):
Making the obvious obvious (e.g., Young’s ‘Throwing Like a Girl’)



Assignment



- 1. 15 mins:** Read the entire transcription focusing on the “what is it like?”-aspect
The group splits into two
- 2. 10 mins:** Each group reads half the text and creates meaning units
- 3. 25 mins:** Condense these meaning units into shorter expressions – keep an open mind as to the different phenomena that appear, try to retain participants’ own expressions to as large an extent as possible
The group gets back together
- 4. 20 mins:** Select a single phenomenon to be explicated based on the research question and write up a more coherent expression of this phenomenon based on the short expressions. Use free imaginary variation to decide whether a certain expression is connected to the larger phenomenon
- 5. 10 mins:** Loop the ‘essence’ back in to determine whether it covers the data