

Revisiting Phenomenology: Its potential for management research

Abstract

To date there is much disagreement about the meaning of phenomenology possibly because the term has been used so widely. For instance, phenomenology has been conceptualised as a philosophy, a research method and an overarching perspective from which all qualitative research is sourced. The aim of this paper is it endeavours to make phenomenology more accessible and in turn a more attractive research methodology to use in management related research. The paper begins by exploring some of the well-known versions of phenomenological philosophy emanating from its founding father, Edmund Husserl. It then explores phenomenology as a research approach. Here two well-known applications of phenomenology are compared and contrasted to show some of the different assumptions underpinning these approaches. The paper makes the claim that phenomenological research methodology, while relatively unused in management research, has much to offer.

Introduction

In the literature, there continues to be much disagreement about the meaning of phenomenology possibly because the term has been used so widely. For instance, phenomenology has been conceptualised as a philosophy, a research method and an overarching perspective from which all qualitative research is sourced (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The major aim of this paper, then, is to explore the meaning and origins of phenomenology as a philosophy and research methodology in order to provide a clearer picture of its underlying purpose and utility. Given that phenomenology tends not to be taken up to a great extent by researchers in a variety of disciplines such as education (Ehrich, 1997), psychology (Giorgi, 1983) and management related studies (Gibson & Hanes, 2003; Sanders, 1982), the paper's other aim is to provide an argument that illustrates the accessibility and attractiveness of phenomenology as a potential methodology for research which is interested in exploring human experience.

The paper begins by reviewing some of the salient versions of the philosophy of phenomenology. In terms of important philosophers of phenomenology, Husserl (1913/1931, 1900/1970, 1927/1971), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Heidegger (1962) are three well-known people in the field. Due to the complexity of their work, only some key aspects of their phenomenological writings are highlighted here. The next part of the paper considers the way phenomenology has been used as a research methodology. Two prominent schools of thought are compared and contrasted to illustrate how phenomenology can be applied to research studies. Finally, the study considers the contribution that phenomenology might make to the study of management studies.

Phenomenology as a philosophy

In the late 19th century, phenomenology emerged as a reaction against the then dominant scientific (positivist) view of philosophy and psychology. Thus, phenomenology did not endorse Descartes' dualism of mind and body or consciousness and matter (Hammond, Howarth & Keat, 1991). Like other scientific realists, Descartes maintained that real objects can exist independently of our consciousness. This perspective saw subjective experiences as "appearances" and thus privileged science over experience. For phenomenologists, this separation between appearances and reality or objects and the external world was untenable since experience is always of something (Hammond et al., 1991). Husserl (1927/1971), deemed to be the founding father of phenomenology, developed a philosophy and a psychology (that was closely related to the philosophy) that would not separate mind from matter; rather it pointed to experience as one is conscious of it as a central feature of life.

Husserl's main aim for philosophical phenomenology was the achievement of transcendental subjectivity where the "absoluteness of conscious existence" (McCall 1983, p.56) could be established. In other words, he was interested in developing a means by which essential or universal knowledge would be yielded (Jennings, 1986). In order to achieve this, he proposed a number of "reductions" which involved individuals "bracketing" or suspending the natural attitude (Sanders, 1982) so they could experience a phenomenon in a new and unconventional way. One of these reductions was called a "transcendental reduction" which meant suspending everything in the world including one's own ego (McCall, 1983). Due to criticisms that were directed against him for the idealism inherent in his notion of "transcendental subjectivity" (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990) Husserl (1954/1970) revised his work and explicated the notion of the "lifeworld" or *lebenswelt*. Both hermeneutic and existential phenomenologists built upon Husserl's "lifeworld" idea.

Both hermeneutic and existential phenomenologists rejected Husserl's transcendental phenomenology since they maintained that self and consciousness are not separate (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker & Mulderij, 1985). Merleau-Ponty (1962) for example, believed that "consciousness is in dialogue with the world" (in Spurling, 1977, p.10) or human beings are situated in the world. Heidegger claimed too the importance of being or *sein* since being in the world was more important than consciousness (McCall, 1983). In other words, people are not separate from the world but are experienced as "being-in-the-world" (Spinelli, 1989).

An important contribution that Merleau-Ponty (1962) made to phenomenology was he identified four key qualities that are said to be "celebrated themes" or characteristics common to different types of phenomenology. These qualities are description, reduction, essences, and intentionality and each is briefly reviewed here. The aim of phenomenology is description of phenomena. Phenomena include anything that appears or presents itself such as feelings, thoughts and objects. Reduction is a process that involves suspending or bracketing the phenomena so that the "things themselves" can be returned to (van Manen, 1982). An essence is the core meaning of an individual's experience that makes it what it is. Finally, intentionality refers to consciousness and individuals are always conscious of something (Merleau-Ponty,

1962). Intentionality is the total meaning of the object (e.g. idea) which is always more than what is given in the perception of a single perspective (Chamberlin, 1974).

An important point to make at this juncture is that the phenomenology of Husserl (1913/1931, 1927/1971), Merleau Ponty (1962) and Heidegger (1962) was written at a theoretical level and not intended for applied research. What we have witnessed over the last thirty years has been the emergence of research methodologies that have drawn their insights from phenomenological philosophy. It is to these we now turn.

Phenomenology – two research methods

Hein and Austin (2001) remind us that there is no one way to carry out phenomenological research since the “the specific method used depends ... on the purposes of the researcher, his or her specific skills ... and the nature of the research question and data collected” (p.2). For the purposes of simplicity, two prominent schools of thought within phenomenology are viewed here. (See Table 1 for a summary of the two approaches). These are perspectives which come from the Utrecht School (Netherlands) and the Duquesne School (operating out of Psychology Department within the Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in the United States). The work of Max van Manen (1990, 1982, 1991) is said to have been influenced by the Utrecht School, while Amadeo Giorgi is a proponent of phenomenological work that has come out of the Duquesne School. In contrast with van Manen’s work, Giorgi’s phenomenological research method has been categorised as “empirical phenomenological research in psychology” (Hein & Austin, 2001 p. 5). This point is taken up later in the discussion.

Table 1

A comparative summary of some features of two well-known phenomenological approaches

<p style="text-align: center;">van Manen Utrecht School Hermeneutic Phenomenology</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Giorgi: Duquesne School Empirical Phenomenological Psychology</p>
<p>Influenced by “human science pedagogy” and the Dutch movement of phenomenological pedagogy</p>	<p>Used the insights from phenomenological philosophy to develop a human science approach to psychology</p>
<p>Important concepts include description, reduction, essences and intentionality</p>	<p>Important concepts include description, reduction, essences and intentionality</p>
<p>Aim is to produce insights into human experience</p>	<p>Aim is to produce accurate descriptions of aspects of human experience</p>
<p>Focus is on the phenomenon (i.e. studying in subjects the object of their experience)</p>	<p>Focus is on the phenomenon (i.e. studying in subjects the object of their experience)</p>
<p>Outcome is a piece of writing which explicates the meaning of human phenomena and understanding the lived structures of meaning</p>	<p>Outcome is a general structural statement which reflects the essential structures of the experience being investigated</p>

May use “self” as a starting point; relies on others and other sources (i.e. fiction and non-fiction, observations, etc) of data	May use “self” as a starting point; but relies mainly on others for data
Uses imaginative variation to help illuminate themes during data analysis	Uses imaginative variation to help illuminate themes during data analysis (i.e. “meaning transformations”)
Uses less prescriptive methods of doing research	Follows a fairly strict method of data collection and data analysis
Is not inductively empirically derived	Is an empirical analytic science
Uses a literary and poetic approach	Uses a psychological approach
Has a strong moral dimension	Does not necessarily have a moral dimension

(Adapted from Ehrich, 1999).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology – van Manen

Martinus Langeveld is a key player whose work led to the establishment of the Utrecht School in Holland. To date, the Utrecht school has developed a research profile that has investigated the lifeworlds of children and adolescents (Meyer-Drawe 1997). Max van Manen, a well-known contemporary phenomenologist who has published widely in this area, was influenced by the Utrecht School and the German tradition of “human science pedagogy” (1990, p.ix) in addition to hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy. Hermeneutics is concerned with interpreting and understanding texts (Barritt et al. 1985). In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers interpret human experience as though it were a text and the outcomes of these studies are viewed as texts that offer rich and deep accounts of phenomena (Hein & Austin, 2001).

Central to work carried out in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition is a holistic and poetic approach (Meyer-Drawe, 1997). It is holistic because it reveals a depth and insight into the human condition and poetic because it is sensitive and reflective. Citing the work of Kockelmans (1987b), Hein and Austin (2001) maintain that within the hermeneutic approach, poetic language is used because it is deemed to be “the only adequate way to present human meaning” (p.7) since it allows understanding a phenomenon more carefully. It aims to produce insights into human experience. van Manen’s work has also been described as having a moral dimension to it. For example, van Manen maintains that the outcome of any human science research should be knowing how to act tactfully and thoughtfully (van Manen, 1991). Given that so much of his work has focused on the phenomenology of pedagogy this is understandable.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach does not have a step by step formula to follow for data collection and analysis. What van Manen (1990) does provide,

however, is a set of guidelines for phenomenologists to follow. Regarding data sources, van Manen (1990) states that phenomenologists can utilise a variety of data sources including their own personal experience; gain insights into the phenomenon from tracing its etymology; obtain experiential descriptions from others via interview or observation; utilise experiential descriptions in literature (i.e. poetry, novels, plays, biographies, diaries) and art that will yield experiential data; and consult the phenomenological literature. All of these sources are said to be legitimate ways of helping phenomenologists understand the phenomenon in question. In regard to data analysis, van Manen (1990) outlines a number of considerations. For instance, a phenomenologist should conduct a thematic analysis which helps to unravel the themes or “experiential structures of experience” (p.79). van Manen (1990) maintains that themes can be isolated in three main ways. The holistic approach which asks what phrase captures the meaning of the text/data source; the selective approach which asks what is essential or revealed in the text/data source; and finally the detailed or line by line approach in which every sentence is examined to see what it reveals about the phenomenon .

The outcome of using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is a piece of writing that explicates the meaning of human phenomena and helps to understand the lived structures of meaning. van Manen (1991) uses anecdotes throughout his written work since anecdotes are concrete examples of insights which help to capture experiences. The next part of the discussion considers the work of Giorgi.

Giorgi – Phenomenological psychology

Phenomenological psychology is not a subfield of phenomenological philosophy, but rather a branch of psychology that has utilised insights from philosophy (Hein & Austin, 2001). Van Kaam (1966), Giorgi (1971), Colaizzi (1978) and other psychologists operating out of the Duquesne School drew upon the basic themes of philosophical phenomenology following Merleau Ponty (1962) and Husserl (1913/1931) and made them helpful and applicable to psychological research. For example, Giorgi (1985a, 1985b) explains fully the marrying of ideas from the two key fields into an orientation that can be used for research projects.

The aim of phenomenological psychology following Giorgi (1971) is to produce accurate descriptions of human experience. For this reason, phenomenologists operating within this tradition mainly utilise descriptions provided by others (obtained through interview or through written texts) although they can use their own experiences (Giorgi, 1985a). This is in contrast to hermeneutic phenomenology that tends to use a much greater range and variety of data collection material (for instance fiction, poetry, literature) (Hein & Austin, 2001).

In contrast with hermeneutic phenomenology which uses less prescriptive methods of data analysis, phenomenological psychologists analyse the data utilising a systematic and rigorous process. For example, Giorgi (1985b) outlines four key steps and these include (i) reading the entire description to get a sense of the whole statement; (ii) discriminating meaning units within a psychological perspective; (iii) transforming the subject’s every day expressions into psychological language; and (iv) synthesising transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of the phenomenon. Specific statements are written for individual participants and a process

of analysis is used whereby common themes across these statements are elicited and then form a general structural description which becomes the outcome of the research. The general statement represents the most general meaning of the phenomenon (Hein & Austin, 2001). Giorgi's phenomenological approach is empirical because it bases itself on factual data that are collected for the purpose of examination and explication (von Eckartsberg 1988). Another reason it is viewed as an empirical research method is that it follows strict data collection and analysis processes (Hein & Austin, 2001). This is in contrast to hermeneutic phenomenology which takes a more creative approach and does not necessarily rely on factual data provided by others.

There are a number of points of commonality between the two approaches. Firstly, both research approaches underscore the importance of description rather than explanation. Not only are participants invited to provide concrete descriptions or examples of their experiences, but also the outcome of the data analysis is a description of the essential structures of the lived experience. Secondly, reduction which involves bracketing or suspending one's beliefs is needed so the phenomenologist can return to the things themselves (Husserl, 1900/1970) in order to uncover the essential structures of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Thus, the phenomenologist endeavours to put aside his or her biases and presuppositions so the phenomenon can reveal itself. Thirdly, the use of imaginative variation is common to both approaches and it helps to illuminate the themes or essences during data analysis. Both van Manen (1990) and Giorgi (1985a) contend that imaginative variation is a reflective process which allows researchers to discover which aspects or qualities of a phenomenon are essential and which are incidental. Both approaches are concerned with unravelling the essence of particular human experiences. Finally, an important point of commonality is that the focus of any phenomenological investigation lies with the phenomenon itself not the subjective experience of participants. Each phenomenon consists of an objective and subjective pole and the subjective pole becomes of interest to the phenomenologist only as a way of understanding the phenomenon itself. Gibson and Hanes (2003) explains this when they say, "phenomenology as a research methodology focuses on finding the essence of the phenomenon rather than the essence of singular experience" (p.193). In Giorgi's (1985b) method, the phenomenologist writes a specific description which pertains to each of the individuals' experiences but that description is only part of the process of data analysis. As alluded to earlier, the outcome of his approach is a general statement which is a reflection of the essential structures of all of the specific experiences. For both phenomenological approaches reviewed here, the phenomenologist's task is to utilise the data and to create a text (van Manen, 1990) or general statement (Giorgi, 1985b) which represents the essential structures of the lived experience of the phenomenon.

Contribution to management studies

The final part of the paper considers the contribution that phenomenology might make to the study of management studies or management research. Management research is said to encompass fields of endeavour "including general management, leadership, marketing, organization, corporate strategy [and] accounting" (Gummesson, 2000, p.1). Sekaran (2000) adds to the list by suggesting studies of employee attitudes and experiences, human resource management, production operations management and

various types of management practices. As the above indicates, the field of management studies is broad and wide reaching.

Dominance of quantitative approach

For a number of decades, researchers have made a strong case for qualitative methods to be used in research fields such as organisational and management research (Gummesson, 2000; Morgan & Smirchich, 1980), education (Burns, 1994; Van der Mescht, 2004), and the social sciences (Lazarsfeld, 1972). Such a case has been necessary because qualitative research methodologies have been marginalised in many disciplines with more traditional approaches grounded in quantitative or positivistic research taking centre stage. In referring to marketing management as a case in point, Hill and McGowan (1999) provide three possible explanations for the dominance of positivistic research approaches in this type of management research field. Firstly, many management researchers have drawn upon traditional sciences such as economics, psychology or sociology that have had a long history of utilising quantitative methods for understanding particular phenomena. Secondly, these researchers have worked with student researchers and encouraged them to use similar approaches thus perpetuating this type of research from one generation to another. Finally, Hill and McGowan (1999) refer to the expectations of government funding agencies which are more in line with quantitative research approaches than qualitative. Another plausible explanation is the commonly held perception that qualitative methods are “second rate ... [and] not good enough for research purposes” (Gummesson 2000, p.1) and they “lack the rigor and objectivity of the quantitative approach” (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003, p. 60).

For these and other reasons, it is not surprising that phenomenology, as a particular qualitative research approach, has had very little take-up by researchers in the management field. For instance, Sanders (1982) noted that phenomenological studies are infrequent in organizational research and dominating the field is “[t]he scientific/normative research paradigm” (p.357). Twenty years on, Gibson and Hanes (2003) came to similar conclusions about the almost absence of phenomenology in the field of human resource development. To support their position, they undertook a database search to explore the extent to which phenomenology was utilised as a research approach in human resource development studies. Drawing upon three databases (i.e. ABI/Inform, ERIC and PsycINFO) over the period 1998-2003, the authors located only a small number of phenomenological research studies. These included four research studies published in journals and nine studies published as conference proceedings. Gibson and Hanes (2003) noted that many of these studies related to career development and the experiences of HRD professionals in particular areas of practice. While database searches are limited in that they do not reveal the full extent of published journals and conference proceedings, the above illustration does give support to the notion that phenomenological studies are still not widely utilised although there does appear to be some slight interest in this methodological approach.

In this paper I am not arguing that phenomenological methods are a substitute for other qualitative methods or should be used instead of quantitative methods. As others before me have argued, the nature and design of any research study should dictate the particular research methodology utilised. Rather, the point of this paper is to consider

phenomenology as an appropriate research approach to explore human related experiences within management studies. The next part of the discussion identifies some possible ways in which phenomenological studies could be considered.

Possibilities for phenomenological methods in management studies

The traditional or classical view of management maintains that management is a rational set of activities that sees managers perform functions such as plan, lead, organise and control (Mukhi, Hampton & Barnwell, 1988) yet, as de Santo and Moss (2004) suggest, research over the last forty decades has revealed the picture is more messy and complex than this. Management, like leadership, is a highly complex interpersonal and relational activity that is very much concerned with the development of the human side of the enterprise (Ehrich & Knight, 1998). For this reason, phenomenological methodology whose concern is to shed light upon the meanings of human experience, could be used effectively to explore a range of human experiences within management. For example, what is the nature of managerial practice or competence? What does it mean to be a manager? What is tactfulness and thoughtfulness in management? are all possible research questions. Four phenomenological research studies that have been published in recent years are identified here as further illustrations. These are the experience of being mentored for women faculty (Gibson in Gibson & Hanes, 2003); how people experience transformation of their work lives through IT change (Moreno, 1991); the experience of team emotion (Crosetto, 2004) and the experience of professional development for school principals (Ehrich, 1997). Phenomenological explorations such as these have the potential to help us “understand the complexity of human experience and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of participants’ experiences” (Gibson & Hanes 2003, p. 201) in order to understand the phenomena themselves (i.e. mentoring, transformation, team emotion and professional development respectively).

It was alluded to earlier in the paper that phenomenology turns away from science and scientific knowledge and returns to the things themselves. The effects of investigating particular human experiences outside the confines of pre-existing theories and well-established constructs can yield “startling new insights into the uniquely complex processes of ... managing and leading” (Van der Mescht, 2004, p.1). Hence, the outcome of phenomenological studies, can and does hold much potential to contribute to, strengthen and complement current research in a particular field (Gibson & Hane, 2003).

Conclusion

Over twenty years’ ago, Sanders (1982) argued that phenomenology was “a new star on the [organizational] research horizon” (p. 353). In many ways, it remains new and largely unknown not only in management studies but also other disciplines. The point of this short paper was to introduce phenomenology as a worthwhile and valuable methodology for exploring human experiences in management studies. To help with this process, two distinctive versions of phenomenological methodology were explicated. As underscored in this paper, the contribution of phenomenology is its ability to uncover and unravel the essence of lived experience. For this reason, it has great potential to use in understanding management phenomena because management

is more than simply a technique of control (DeSanto & Moss, 2004); it is a process and practice that has a strong human dimension.

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