We are all in it!

Phenomenological Qualitative Research and Embeddedness

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We are all in it!: Phenomenological Qualitative Research and Embeddedness

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Abstract

In recent decades, phenomenological concepts and methodological ideals have been adopted by qualitative researchers. Several influential strands of what we will refer to as Phenomenological Research (PR) have emerged. We will call into question whether PR has been sufficiently sensitive to the issue of the prerequisites, or basic conditions, for doing phenomenological research. The practical implementation of phenomenological key concepts is important in working with phenomenology as a research methodology. Core concepts such as "bracketing" seems to be particularly important in PR. The question we would like to raise is not whether "bracketing" is possible, or to what extent, nor how it should be understood. Rather, we wish to illuminate the prerequisites for bracketing itself. We believe that a fuller recognition of the embeddedness of research practices like PR does have some *broadly* practical implications, which we shall expand upon in the present article.

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy dedicated to the description and analysis of phenomena, that is, the way things, in the broadest sense of the word, appear (Husserl, 1911, 1913; see e.g., Hintikka, 1995). In recent decades, phenomenological concepts and methodological ideals have been adopted by qualitative researchers. Several influential strands of what we will refer to as Phenomenological research (PR) have emerged (see Giorgi, 1997; Smith et al., 2009 as examples). These different strands of phenomenological research cite phenomenological philosophy as one of their main inspirations. Hence, their practical methodology has been inspired by theoretical philosophy. Such interdisciplinary cross-fertilization is often controversial. Unsurprisingly, there has been some debate as to how faithful PR is to the central tenets of phenomenology and about the way it employs concepts like the Husserlian notion of *epoche*. PR has also been criticized for being methodologically underdeveloped and for relying on obscure notions of "meaning attribution" or "deeper meaning" (Paley, 2017; e.g., Zahavi, 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, the perspectives of prescriptive step-wise approaches to PR has been discussed extensively (see Giorgi, 2010; Rettie & Emiliussen, 2018; Smith, 2010).

We will not contribute directly to these debates, but instead discuss the relationship between PR and "proper" or "philosophical" phenomenology from another angle. We will call into question whether PR has been sufficiently sensitive to the issue of the prerequisites, or basic conditions, for doing phenomenological research. It seems to us that practitioners of PR remain attached to an ideal of presuppositionless description which, though it may superficially resemble certain doctrines of Husserl, have little basis in phenomenology, and which is neither realistic nor fruitful.

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All major phenomenologists have been concerned with the conditions for describing phenomena accurately. And they have all been aware that neutral descriptions are very difficult to come by. Even Husserl, who made ambitious-sounding claims to the "presuppositionlessness" of his phenomenological method (Husserl, 1913, §63), hardly intended this to hold unqualifiedly (Drummond, 2007). He was primarily concerned with establishing a new kind of reflective stance, not with the elimination of specific presuppositions involved in various processes of empirical study. Immediately after having introduced the *epoche*, Husserl emphasized that it "is not now a matter of excluding all prejudices that cloud the pure objectivity of research" (Husserl, 1913, §32). In his later works, Husserl's phenomenological analyses emphasise how the understanding of complex phenomena is far from presuppositionless, since it necessarily presupposes experiences of simpler phenomena (Husserl, 1966). But it was Heidegger in particular who stressed the way in which the human subject—or, as he preferred to call it, *Dasein*[1]—is always already "thrown into" and so situated in, and influenced by, particular circumstances, and highlighted its ramifications for human understanding and scientific endeavours. This central tenet of Heidegger's thinking forms the basis of our approach to discussing PR. Hence, our discussion will mostly reflect a Heideggerian approach to phenomenology. However, since we are not primarily concerned with philosophical exegesis, we will merely adopt some of Heidegger's central notions as a starting point, allowing ourselves to explain our points in non-Heideggerian terminology and departing from an orthodox interpretation in various respects. Without going deeper into the question of the extent to which Heidegger adopted or rejected Husserl's understanding of phenomenology (but see Tugendhat, 1970 for an illuminating discussion of this issue), we will also assume that there is a sufficient overlap and continuity to allow us to also refer to Husserlian notions—which are, anyhow, ubiquitous in PR.

Preconceptions Versus the Fore-Structure of Understanding

Our main point may be best brought out by considering how preconceptions are usually construed and dealt with in PR. These ways of dealing with preconceptions differ fundamentally from what Heidegger refers to as being "always already" in the world, or "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*; Heidegger, 1927, §20), which is an inalienable aspect of Dasein's whole being, including its understanding. In PR, by contrast, the researcher's preconceptions are usually considered something to be avoided, because they are a source of error or skewed results. They are, moreover, treated as items "in" or "with" the researcher (Solbue, 2011) that can be discovered and eliminated by a reflective process—" ... phenomenological reduction, epoche, or bracketing ... " (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The problem here is not so much—and at least not just—that this misrepresents the Husserlian notions of reduction and epoche, neither of which denote a "reflective process," and which are far from synonymous, having two quite distinct

meanings.[2] It has to do rather with the fact that the researcher is considered " ... the instrument for analysis across all phases of a qualitative research project" (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The researcher's central role in the PR methodology that has been described above, lead us to wonder what the researcher can actually come to know, when conducting PR.

By concentrating on specific uses of empathy, description and interpretation, there is a risk that PR researchers may ignore a substantial part of phenomenology that deals with conditions for specific phenomena and the way they constrain description and understanding.

One way of putting it in Heidegger's own terminology would be to say that PR treats preconceptions from an "ontic," rather than ontological, perspective—as items or "beings," rather than modes or aspects of the very being of the researcher. Apparently, PR does not subject the qualitative methodology itself or its practitioner to a phenomenological analysis.

By contrast, what Heidegger describes as the "fore-structure" of understanding (Heidegger, 1927/1962/2008, § 32) is an existential determination of *Dasein*, and so an ineliminable condition of the being and doing of every human being. What we encounter and take as more or less immediately given has already undergone an interpretation, which is grounded in "*something we have in advance—in a for-having*" as well as something "*we see in advance—in a fore-sight*," and, not least, in something we conceptually grasp in advance, a "*fore-conception*" (ibid. §32; 1962, p. 191; 2008, p. 150). This of course also pertains to the methodologies suggested by researchers for PR. It pertains to every specific instance of "bracketing," of any sort.[3]

The question we would like to raise is not whether "bracketing" is possible, or to what extent, nor how it should be understood. Obviously, measures can be taken to reduce the impact of at least some preconceptions. What we would like to point out is that there may be—indeed, very probably is—a level of conditioning of the understanding, and so of the research methodology, which is deeper than that of the preconceptions with which PR is concerned, and which is probably beyond the reach of any attempt at methodological control or neutralization. The question to be considered is thus rather how significant this conditioning might be for qualitative research—what are its ramifications?

The Object of Phenomenological Research

The problem, as it relates to practical methodology, is that PR often either ignores the ontological or "transcendental" structures that are revealed by phenomenology or misconstrue them as mere methodological obstacles and corresponding research techniques. As noted above, scientific cross-fertilization often seems controversial, especially to practitioners of the discipline from which notions and ideas are borrowed (and probably less to practitioners of the discipline borrowing the ideas and notions). However, some degree of constructive misunderstanding, or deliberate or unconscious ignorance, may be an almost necessary condition for scientific creativity

(Klausen, 2013, 2014). Yet, whenever phenomenology is transformed into a practical method, there is a danger of losing some of the sophistication found in philosophical phenomenology. In PR, the understanding of phenomenology seems to have been in terms of empathic psychology rather than ontological or epistemological analysis. Commonly, PR intends to investigate "experiences of lifeworlds" (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2010), that is, individuals' experiences of their personal and social world (see also Smith & Osborn 2003). It seeks to do this to uncover a phenomenon and approach a phenomenon by way of interpreting people's experiences (Grünewald, 2004, p. 44). While empathic understanding of someone's lifeworld is interesting and can lead to important insights, as documented by extant PR-studies, its exact relationship to philosophical phenomenology remains unclear. It seems to be concerned with at best a very small subset of the vast array of phenomena with which philosophical phenomenology is concerned (ranging from logical and mathematical relations to tools and technology, comprising everything that can appear to a consciousness). More significantly, it does not consider the fundamental nature of even this very narrow selection of phenomena, again in sharp contrast to philosophical phenomenology, which is primarily concerned with essential aspects of phenomena and what enables more specific and "mundane" things, like the content of everyday experiences, to appear.

When looking at PR through a specifically Heideggerian lens, we must realise that experience is embedded in something that always already is—something which affects our fundamental being. Heidegger conceptualizes this as a throwness and describes how we are thrust into a world that is already structured and interpreted. This is a hermeneutical move within the framework of phenomenology about which Heidegger was adamant. He points out that there is something that is always-already given at any point and that an interpretation can never free itself completely from this, though it can modify it and use it more or less creatively and constructively. Even though Husserl, Heidegger, and others might have successfully described what is always-already, and given us formulas to understand it better, the fact remains these contributions are no less caught up in the embeddedness. This is most strongly emphasized in Heideggerian phenomenology, as Heidegger explicitly concedes that even his own analysis of *Dasein* is centrally affected by historicity and the limitations that pertain to every scientific inquiry (see Heidegger, 1975, p. 461ff).

While Heidegger and others might have raised our awareness of the problem of embeddedness by describing such things as preconceptions, throwness and the like, their philosophies have not given us the tools to move beyond this embeddedness.[4] Heidegger considers the search for such tools rather futile. Indeed, Heidegger's pupil Gadamer contended that the general lesson to be learned from the inquiry into the for-structure of human understanding is that preconceptions should be seen rather as a positive, enabling condition. The idea that one should rid oneself of all prejudices in order to minimize error is, according to Gadamer, itself a prejudice of a more negative kind (Gadamer, 1960, p. 276ff).

One may ask why this is important. What could be the point of moving beyond something that is part of, or necessarily affects, our own fundamental being? It could hardly provide us with any useful information, and it appears to be impossible, anyhow. But the point lies not in asking what we could achieve by moving beyond our embeddedness. It lies rather in reflecting on how embeddedness affects qualitative research, and on what is the most appropriate reaction to this fundamental condition. We shall return to this point in the conclusion.

Can We Sort Our Way Out of the Embeddedness?

In PR it is typically suggested that the researcher should "sort out" or attempt to "be free of" preconceptions, as an allusion to the Husserlian idea of epoché (see Crabtree & Miller, 1992). We have already noted that it is dubious whether this maxim follows from the Husserlian notion. Besides, there is much confusion about what epoché or bracketing further entails, as some suggest that bracketing is simply "when the inquiry is done from the perspective of the researcher" (Grünewald, 2004, p. 47, allegedly representing a view found in Coelli, Kvale and Davidson, among others), which seems to make it rather trivial and/or go less well with the idea of presuppositionlessness. It is still more different from the original, strictly first-person notion, that bracketing can also consist in eliminating the preconceptions of *informants*, for example by asking them to set aside certain assumptions or avoid use of theoretical terms. These are strange suggestions, and although they might, to some extent, be interpreted as examples of creative misunderstanding, they appear naïve, if not outright unphenomenological. However, the problem we would like to highlight runs deeper, and pertains to all strands of PR, regardless of the extent to which they play fast and loose with the phenomenological concepts.

Heidegger famously stated that a scientific inquiry is defined in the question it asks, and that this implies an, often implicit, understanding of that which is asked *about* and that which is asked *for* (Heidegger, 1927/1962/2008). Translating this to the pragmatic world of PR, we must look at what a research question in this field is really asking about and asking for? If the question predetermines the answer, what is it that makes us come closer to the phenomenon we intend to illuminate? Can we practically sort something from our throwness to make the phenomenon appear to us in a more authentic or original way? If we are to do so, we must first know how our embeddedness influences our being and what "parts of it" interfere with the phenomenon. Yet we cannot sort our preconceptions, or parts of them, from our experience without altering it and so actually obscuring the phenomenon in a way that is counterproductive. That is, if we try to sort what is always-already there from the phenomenon, we are also eliminating part of the actual phenomenon. It follows, that we must know much more about the phenomenon to effectively "rid ourselves" of preconceptions than could ever be available to us. Hence, the pragmatic interpretation of epoche (i.e., "I must

rid myself of preconceptions as a part of my investigation") risks leaving something out that is central to the phenomenon.

An analogy: if we are to describe the shape of a cup, we may use words like round or hollow. While these are words that could adequately describe a cup, they are also words that are "handed down to us," and so part of that which is always already there. We describe it in existing terminology that refers to specific—agreed-upon—features that we recognize. This is not just a point about the discriminatory resources of language, but rather a point about the extent of our embeddedness. Exercising epoché will not allow us to overcome it; in any case not in situations of inquiry where linguistic communication, be it ever so minimal or apparently untheoretical, is involved.

Paley (2017) makes an interesting discussion of Amedeo Giorgio's analysis of jealousy, where the author compares his own analysis to that of his co-author. Giorgio and his co-author task themselves with analysing the same empirical material in an effort to compare the results and evaluate the similarity of the interpretation. Based on this, Paley ends up concluding that: "The point is that AG and [his co-author] have produced structures that are significantly different, even though they claim to have analysed the same material using the same method" (p. 60). One might suspect that these differences reflect the embeddedness of the two authors, as it might have given rise to different interpretations. The question we should ask is: "What is it we are trying to investigate and what does the basic phenomenological condition allow us to see?" Whether or not the two authors reach different conclusions is important here only because it underlines the fact that their attempts at epoché, or whatever method of bracketing they may have employed, have—unsurprisingly, given the insights of hermeneutic phenomenology—not led them beyond that in which they are already thrown.[5] Each author presents his/her analysis with as much weight as the other, but the fact of embeddedness remains. This is expressed in the two different conclusions that are reached based upon the same data. If both authors have made everything right and conformed to the maxims of their phenomenological method, the difference must reflect deeper features of their understanding that cannot be eliminated methodologically. We hypothesize that, there could be something which the authors have not escaped or moved beyond during their work. This—something—is part of that which already is. That, which cannot be escaped.

However, what if several observers consider the same phenomenon and interact to discuss differences and clarify their individual subjective embeddedness, to enhance intersubjective agreement? While this would certainly provide a fertile ground for valuable insights, it would not move the researchers beyond that which already is. Even if they interact to illuminate their individual embeddedness, they are still doing so in a way that is already itself embedded.

Conclusion: So what?

Even though we have emphasized that we are not criticizing PR for not doing the impossible, viz. to achieve a truly presuppositionless understanding, it might still be thought that our criticism misses its mark. It might be tempting to respond with a "so, what?." A proponent of PR could accept the lessons we draw from Heidegger but insist that precisely because they are about the human condition in general, they could have no particular implications for the qualitative research practices in question. Philosophy of this kind "leaves everything as it is," in Wittgenstein's (1989, §124) words, and only enables us to understand it more deeply. Such understanding may be intrinsically valuable, but since it provides no clue as to what to do or not to do, our attempt to further it may be set aside as a purely intellectual exercise.

There is some truth to this. Pointing to the ineliminable fore-structuredness of human understanding does not directly challenge the methodology or the results of PR. Indeed, we think PR, in it is various incarnations, has produced many significant results, and we have also practiced it ourselves (Klausen et al., 2020). We have no intention to show that it is fundamentally misguided or flawed.

Yet we do think that a fuller recognition of the embeddedness of research practices like PR does have some *broadly* practical implications. It seems to entail at least two lessons. First, it calls for a greater humility. It might require more sustained attention to the fact that the researcher's understanding will always remain conditioned by factors outside her control, making it perhaps more important to take this into account than to attempt to achieve neutrality. This does not mean, however, that hermeneutically informed PR should necessarily be more cautious or minimalistic. Heidegger and Gadamer suggested that one should rather be less constrained by principles of methodological rigor, at least in the standard scientific sense, and dare to go with one's preconceptions.[6] Some varieties of PR, especially that of van Manen, do seem to understand phenomenology as supporting a more involved, rather than neutral attitude (see e.g., van Manen, 2017, where he also suggests a tension between genuine phenomenology and "simplistic schemes [. . .] step-by-step procedures and cookery book receipts"). On the other hand, this invites criticism for obscurity or arbitrariness of the sort mounted by Paley (2017), and it is debatable how far this can be squared with the conventional standards for good science. But it need not be considered unscientific,[7] and may be akin to how post-positivist philosophy of the natural sciences has recommended that research be based on "bold conjectures" or creative guesses (Popper, 1992).

Secondly, recognizing that "phenomena" are always partly constituted by pre-given conceptual structures, attentional habits, existing practices and other things that are "always already" there makes it a task for phenomenology, including PR, to *attend* consciously to these aspects of the phenomena, as far as this is possible. While there is no point in trying to sort them from the "real" phenomenon, as we have argued above, describing subjects' "life-worlds" or their "lived experience" adequately requires also describing the pre-conceptions and conventional modes of thought, as far as these are constitutive of the way things appear to the people in question. Of course,

this description can itself be no more neutral or unconditioned than other descriptive enterprises. But again, embeddedness does not render phenomenological inquiry impossible or pointless; it is just a fact to be reckoned with.

Realizing the embedded nature of the knowledge we can extract via PR, may also call for a more active use of preconceptions in PR. Rather than attempting to sort one's private preconceptions at the risk of losing important parts of the phenomenon, one should attempt seeing the preconceptions for what they are: part of the embeddedness and part of what constitutes the experience of the phenomenon. This means that a more complete—so to speak—analysis rests on the utilization of preconceptions. Some complex phenomena cannot be brought to intuition without the proper preconceptions. For example, it is hard to see how a researcher aiming to describe the informal norms of practice at an eldercare institution phenomenologically, can recognize such norms, if she has no preconception whatsoever of what an informal norm of care practice can amount to.

In other sciences there are very active uses of presumptions—statistics for example. In statistics, assumptions form the basis of good research. To employ statistics, you must assume that certain things are true, before you are able to employ your methods. This goes beyond the basic research hypothesis that statistics test but forms the basis of the interaction with data—the assumption of a normal distribution etc. Even though we are not able to point to the same active use of preconceptions in PR presently, we will suggest however, that presumptions and assumptions (willful preconceptions, if you will) can be employed in PR and remain both scientific and rigorous.

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Notes

1. We will ignore the, otherwise significant, fact that Heidegger conceived the notion of Dasein in opposition to both traditional notions of subjectivity and philosophical anthropology. Overgaard (2005) argues convincingly that Dasein can be understood as a refined notion of subjectivity, and points out that Heidegger himself explicitly stated that he used "Dasein" as his own term for the subject (see Heidegger, 1996, p. 115). This makes it less contentious to apply his thinking to PR.
2. Thus, in Ideas I, Husserl clearly distinguishes the epoche, as preliminary and preparatory exercise (§§27–32; especially §33), from the "phenomenological reductions" (characteristically in plural), as

a much more comprehensive and constructive enterprise, aiming at ontological clarification (§§56ff.).
3. While it also invites a parallel to abductive, or hypothesis-driven reasoning, an important difference is that the scope of Heidegger's description is much wider, pertaining not just—and not primarily—to reasoning driven by explicit hypotheses, but to all sorts of understanding, and especially to the way it is formed by implicit conceptions.
4. The limitations of phenomenology in this regard could excuse practical/empirical application of phenomenology from being partial, incomplete or un-phenomenological.
5. Paradoxically, if the authors had reached identical conclusions and made identical analysis, this may also be taken as evidence of thrownness. However, the phrase "we're all in it" should not be taken to imply that we are all embedded in one and the same, or even a similar way, as rightly pointed out by a reviewer. While the basic condition of embeddedness is general, its specific forms and manifestations may differ,
6. A reviewer suggested, along similar lines, that one might be able to focus more deeply on embeddedness by being less concerned with the risk of misinterpretation.
7. One should, however, distinguish between allowing for more engaged and hypothesis-driven phenomenological qualitative research and championing a more esoteric or subjectivist approach. Thus, when van Manen requires of genuine phenomenological inquiry that it must be "originary and existentially compelling to the soul" (2017, 779), he does seem to depart very radically from accepted criteria of good (or at least normal) science, even when these are understood in a broad and inclusive manner.

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