

PART TWO: RESEARCH THEORY, APPLICATION, AND RESULTS.

CHAPTER FIVE: DESCRIBING THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH.

5.1. Introduction.

Within this chapter, the phenomenological research strategy with its underlying philosophical assumptions will briefly be described, as well as a general description of the format of such a study. Within the following chapter, the method of data gathering and data analysis, unique to this study and appropriate to its goals will be formulated.

5.2. The phenomenological approach to research.

Husserl, who has been described by many as the founder of phenomenology, formulated the dictum "to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1970/1900: 252) cited in Giorgi (1985). Many authors have cited or referred to this dictum, for example, du Toit (1991), Kruger (1979), Stewart and Mickunas (1974), Valle and Halling (1989), and von Eckartsberg (1986).

In this instance "thing" refers to a phenomenon, and that is anything of which one is conscious. Anything of which one can be conscious is a legitimate area of philosophic concern. There are many different things of which one can be aware: natural objects, values, affective states etc.. All of these things, Husserl calls phenomena. Phenomenology has then become a program for a systematic investigation of the content of consciousness (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974).

This chapter is concerned solely with an appropriate research strategy and will not therefore engage in an extended and elaborate philosophical discussion of phenomenology. This

study is therefore devoted to an understanding of phenomenology's philosophy only insofar as it pertains to a method of conducting research.

Two major research groups have employed the phenomenological approach to research various phenomena of interest. These two groups have been cited by Hedegaard and Hakkarainen (1986) and are the following: The **Duquesne group** in the USA and the **INOM group** in Goteberg. The Duquesne studies are frequently mentioned in the research literature, and some of these studies will be cited in the section that pertains to methodology.

5.2.1. A few comments on philosophical assumptions underlying phenomenological research.

The phenomenological approach to research is becoming widely recognized, and it is recently felt that justification of its use is not deemed necessary, for example Giorgi (1992b), Thorpe (1989), and Todres (1990). This partially supports an appeal from Peterson (1994) who urges phenomenological researchers to spell out what led them to their study and to spend less time on self-righteous, straw-man critiques of positivist conceptions.

The starting point for this study is the aim of entering the life-world of psychotherapy. If one accepts that psychotherapy consists of a common human bond between therapist and patient, and that they are the co-constituents of the life-world and reality that exists between them, then one must accept that the research "object" is an experiential being. The research situation is then the lived-world of therapy. One must remember that this lived-world has a unique context and process. This shift in perception of the research object and the research situation has profound implications

for the **researcher's stance**. This stance, which will be discussed in a later paragraph, is prescribed by the philosophical assumptions of this approach and merits discussion.

The personal involvement of the therapeutic relationship is contrary to the traditional requirements of scientific neutrality (Kvale, 1986, 1994), which implies that if the subject matter is a human person, he must be approached within a frame of reference that is also human (Giorgi, 1970). For this reason Giorgi (1970) feels that psychology has not been investigating meaningful phenomena in a meaningful way.

Researchers have often held the misconception that truth can only be disclosed by quantitative operations, but in **psychotherapy**, numbers have no disclosive power whatsoever (Kruger, 1986: 201). Psychotherapy cannot be elucidated by the quantitative correlational approaches of traditional scientific research procedures. This is confirmed by Hedegaard and Hakkarainen (1986) who also state that the man-world or life-world relation cannot be found within the natural scientific paradigm. Following this argument, one should aspire to use concepts, methods, and approaches that are adequate to a study within the life-world of psychotherapy.

In part one, it was clearly evident that the quantitative research on self-disclosure employed traditional methods of research. An emphasis on validity, reliability, hypothesis formulation, operationalism, all principles of this approach, placed severe restrictions on the research matter. Self-disclosure had to be broken down into specific operational constructs. The research strategy ultimately determined the nature of what was to be researched.

Kruger (1986) has noted the resultant neglected issues in the standard descriptions and case histories emanating from all schools and pertaining to research in the field of psychotherapy. He notes that in these forms of research the vicissitudes of the client are usually given in detail but that the client is given no opportunity to explicate his experiences of the therapist and therapeutic situation. This same problem, as it pertains to the studies of therapist self-disclosure, unfolded in part one of this thesis.

This corresponds closely with Giorgi's (1970) statement that phenomena are often studied more on the basis of the availability of methods than on how the phenomena appear and what they would require. The phenomenological approach stresses the necessity of the revision of psychological research methods so that they adequately correspond to the revised research object in psychology. This does not imply that this method is less empirical, objective, scientific, or psychological than psychology conceived along natural scientific lines. It simply reflects a different conception of these themes (Giorgi, 1970).

Ultimately one is not comparing or replacing traditional methods with more qualitative methods. Bugental (1965: 14) cited in du Toit (1991) states that: "humanistic psychology does not deny the contributions of other views but tries to supplement them and give them a setting within the broader conception of the human experience". This alternative approach is thus seen as complementary to what has already been researched quantitatively on the topic of therapist self-disclosure. With this as argument, this study needs to revise the nature of the research matter and then employ an appropriate strategy.

With this in mind, one could now refer to the goal of the

study, namely, to make explicit the **therapist's experience of self-disclosure within the therapeutic context**. The research object is the therapist, and the research situation is the lived-world of psychotherapy in which the self-disclosure is contextually and professionally embedded. Within this embeddedness, the therapist's experience must be verbally articulated and explicated. In concert with above-mentioned assumptions, the traditional concepts and formulations pertaining to research are therefore redefined to harmonize with these aims and purposes. The solution offered- and fundamental premise of the phenomenological approach is the description of phenomena as they appear. In concert with Giorgi's (1985) appeal to do justice to the lived aspects of human phenomena, the essential contents of psychological science are redefined using central concepts of phenomenological philosophy (Hedegaard and Hakkarainen, 1986).

To help formalize what is being said, Brockelman (1980: 52) has defined existential phenomenology as:

.....the attempt to reflectively evoke and verbally articulate by means of the phenomenological method of description various structures or conditions of our experience to itself as it is lived-through within the "world" or horizon of ordinary experience.

Phenomenological research therefore suggests an approach that will remain original and without preconceived notions about an expected outcome (du Toit, 1991). These preconceived notions reside within the researcher, and one is now compelled to reconsider the researcher's stance. This is now discussed in the section pertaining to the format of

phenomenological enquiry.

5.3. Format of phenomenological research.

Polkinghorne (1989: 46) has set out a general format for the phenomenological investigation of consciousness by psychologists. This follows a three step procedure in which the investigator must:

1. Gather a number of naive descriptions from people who are having or have had the experience under investigation.
2. Engage in a process of analysing these descriptions so that the researcher comes to a grasp of the constituents or common elements that make the experience what it is.
3. Produce a research report that gives an accurate, clear, and articulate description of an experience. The reader of the report should come away with the feeling that "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that".

The empirical phenomenological method focuses on the analysis of protocol data provided by research subjects in response to a question posed by the researcher which pinpoints and guides their recall and reflection. There is a clear-cut general progression in the various genres of this type of research (Von Eckartsberg, 1986).

One proceeds first from unarticulated living to a protocol or account. A "life-text" (von Eckartsberg, 1986: 27) is created which renders the experience in narrative language, as story. This comprises the data. Secondly, one progresses from

the protocol to explication and interpretation. Finally, one engages in the process of the communication of findings (von Eckartsberg, 1986).

Before concretizing this procedure for greater clarification, and before it is uniquely formulated for purposes of this study, it is imperative that the researcher's **stance** be discussed.

5.3.1. Researcher's stance: The shift from the natural- to the philosophical attitude.

The researcher involved in phenomenological enquiry assumes a different stance to the one engaged in a scientific, quantitative study. There are three terms that describe this transition from a scientific or natural attitude to a philosophical attitude, and these are the **phenomenological epoch**, the **phenomenological reduction**, and **bracketing**.

Davidson and Cosgrove (1991) have elaborated on the epoch, and the reduction and see them as occurring on different levels. This is in direct contrast to earlier authors such as Stewart and Mickunas (1974) who have stated that Husserl used these terms synonymously and interchangeably. After a review of various accounts of these terms, especially the formulations of Davidson and Cosgrove (1991), this shift in attitude/ stance can be understood in the following way.

The first step is the **phenomenological epoch**. This means that the aspiring phenomenologist must assume this attitude before any explication of narratives is attempted. This implies a bracketing of all theoretical-scientific constructs about the nature of our subject matter. As Rahilly (1993) has formulated, the researcher is required to suspend any presuppositions and prejudices about the cause of the

phenomenon under investigation.

At this stage, a distinction can be made between the terms epoche and bracketing, where the epoch is understood to be an attitude and bracketing is understood to be an active operation. A recent study by Rahilly (1993) on authentic experience helps illustrate this. She explicitly formulated her presuppositions about feeling authentic. This, although not implicitly stated, was after having assumed the phenomenological epoch, and prior to any explication of her data.

Davidson and Cosgrove (1991) interested in the phenomenology of eating disorders state that rather than investigating the physiology or genetics of eating disorders, one could begin with first-person, subjective accounts of the relevant experiences of persons who may be characterized as having these disorders. Once these accounts have been obtained another level in the shift from the natural to the philosophical attitude comes into play and this pertains to the **phenomenological reduction**. This implies that when these narratives have been read, one limits oneself to what is immanent to our subject's experiences themselves, looking more deeply "into" these experiences rather than "outside" of them (Davidson and Cosgrove, 1991: 93).

As a result of this reduction, one adopts an entirely different sphere from that traditionally taken by science to constitute our subject matter (Davidson and Cosgrove, *ibid*). To once again cite the study on eating disorders, this would imply that one restrict one's focus to what is immanent to the person's experience and disregard what is presumed to be the objective nature of hunger and concentrate instead on the meaning which the person's experienced hunger has for her.

Rahilly (1993) employed the phenomenological epoch and bracketing before she formulated her research question about authentic experience. Many researchers have explicitly bracketed and formulated their presuppositions about the phenomenon under investigation, for example, Guglietti-Kelly and Westcott (1990) and Denne and Thompson (1991).

In addition to the phenomenological epoch and phenomenological reduction, du Toit (1991) and Rahilly (1993) have followed Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation to employ the **eidetic epoch**. This implies that the researcher suspend her interest in a particular protocol in order to discover the themes emerging throughout all of the protocols of the experienced phenomenon.

Once the researcher has a thorough description of the phenomenon of interest, that is, after the formal and scientific explication, the stance may then change to an interpretive stance in which the researcher moves beyond what is immediately evident.

Giorgi (1992b) has distinguished between **description** and **interpretation**. He cites Mohanty (1989: 19) as defining description as the use of language to articulate the intentional objects of experience within the constraints of intuitive or presentational evidence. This means that one describes what presents itself precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it (Giorgi, 1992b: 121). This description then implies the employment of the attitude of phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, *ibid*) as set out above.

Interpretation as explained by Giorgi (1992b: 122) "would be the clarification of the meaning of experienced objects in terms of a plausible but contingently adopted theoretical

perspective, assumption, hypothesis, and so on". As Giorgi (1992b) has succinctly stated, description is the depositing of meanings, and interpretation is the clarification of meanings. He further recommends that with basic research, the researcher not attempt to attain closure by being interpretive of the results.

Having discussed the researcher's stance, one could proceed to the steps taken with phenomenological enquiry. The researcher will integrate the work of selected authors, for example, Polkinghorne (1989) and von Eckartsberg (1986).

5.3.2. Steps in phenomenological research.

Step one: The problem and question formulation.

The researcher must delineate a focus of investigation (von Eckartsberg, 1986). This implies that one must name the phenomenon that one is interested in.

Step two: Selection of subjects.

Subjects who participate have been referred to in a number of ways, for example co-researcher, research partner, research collaborator, and co-author (Polkinghorne, 1989). This helps to emphasize that phenomenological research interacts in a personal manner with those asked to provide examples from their experience (Polkinghorne, 1989: 47).

The fundamental criterion for participation in this study concerns the fact that the participant has had an experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The second criterion concerns the subjects' abilities to give detailed accounts of their experiences. Van Kaam (1969) cited in Rahilly (1993) proposed that participants have six important criteria to participate in a phenomenological study, and these pertain to the following.

Firstly, that the subjects have the capacity to express themselves with relative ease; secondly, that they have the capacity to sense and express their inner feelings and emotions without shame and inhibition; thirdly, the ability to sense and to express the organic experiences that accompany these feelings; fourthly, the experience of the phenomenon/situation under investigation at a relatively recent date; fifthly, a spontaneous interest in their experience; and sixthly, an atmosphere in which the subjects can find the necessary relaxation to enable them to put sufficient time and orderly thought into reporting or writing what was happening to them.

Step three: The data-generating situation.

The purpose of data gathering is to collect naive **descriptions** of the experience under investigation. These descriptions "provide specific instances from which the researcher can tease out the structure of consciousness that constitutes the experience" (Polkinghorne, 1989: 46). von Eckartsberg (1986:27) has referred to this as "**the protocol life text**".

Polkinghorne (1989) has named three sources from which to generate descriptions of experiences. Firstly, researchers can use their personal reflections on the incidents of the topic that they have studied. Secondly, other participants who can be referred to as co-researchers (von Eckartsberg, 1986) can be employed to describe the experience under investigation. This can be done in a number of ways, for example, orally in response to interview questions, for example Scholtz and Fiedeldey (1994), or in written statements. Thirdly, depictions of the experience can be obtained from outside of the context of the research project itself - for example novelists, poets, or previous psychological and phenomenological investigations.

Step four: The data analysis.

Polkinghorne (1989: 50) has described the data analysis in the following way:

Its purpose is to derive from the collection of protocols, with their naive descriptions to specific examples of the experience under consideration, a description of the essential features of that experience. The researcher must glean from the examples an accurate essential description of their contents and the articular structural relationship that coheres the elements into a unified experience.

There is a variety of steps that can be included in this explication (von Eckartsberg, 1986). A literature review on phenomenological research studies shows that most of the psychological studies that have been carried out at universities throughout South Africa, for example the University of Pretoria, the University of the Witwatersrand, Rhodes University, and the University of Zululand, are all strongly anchored in the Duquesne tradition. They all draw heavily from the works of Giorgi (1985).

Giorgi's (1985) steps will now be very briefly outlined. In the next section of this chapter, the steps as they have been selected for the study of therapist self-disclosure will be discussed in more detail. The method of analysis as set out by Giorgi (1985: 10) contains four essential steps and can be expressed most generally in the following way:

Firstly, one reads the entire description to get a general sense of the whole statement. **Secondly**, the researcher goes back to the beginning and reads through the text with the

specific aim of discriminating meaning units from within a psychological perspective and with a focus on the phenomenon being researched. In the **third instance**, once these natural meaning units (NMU's) have been delineated, the researcher then goes through all of the meaning units and expresses the psychological insight contained in them more directly. **Finally**, the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject's experience.

Step five: The presentation of results.

This is where the results are presented for sharing and criticism (von Eckartsberg, 1986). There appear to be no consistent guidelines as to how the results need to be presented, and this can be done in a number of ways.

There is an additional step that has not been explicitly stated, and refers to **validation**. This remains a contentious issue in phenomenological research (Polkinghorne, 1989), and will therefore be discussed.

5.3.3. Comments on the validation of phenomenological research.

According to Polkinghorne (1989: 57) the validity of phenomenological research concerns the question: "Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected?"

A frequently encountered method of validating data is that of returning to the co-investigators that they may validate their own data. As an example, Rahilly (1993) following Polkinghorne's (1989) guidelines returned to co-researchers to obtain concurrence with the general structural

description.

Polkinghorne's (ibid: 53) rationale expressed in his own words is that the general structural description of the experience be communicated to the co-researchers to obtain their feedback as to whether it accurately reflects their experience. Du Toit (1991) in a phenomenological explication of the mid-life experience also employed this method to validate his descriptions.

The researcher has however discovered controversy in the literature as regards this method of validation. This pertains to the work of Ashworth (1993), who casts serious theoretical doubt on this method. These doubts are grounded in his call for attention to the fact that resistance to being understood and eager acceptance of understanding are both pervasive possibilities of all social interaction (Ashworth, ibid: 11). He states further that it is not surprising that the subject who when asked to approve a finding, may show resistance to being understood, which can be seen as a resistance to objectification, or that at the other pole, the reaction may be of delight at "really being understood".

This implies fundamentally that resistance to being understood as well as the eager acceptance of descriptions are possible reactions to **objectification**, and are based in fundamental anxiety about self-presentation. This argument has profound ramifications for the use of participants as validation.

Other methods that could be employed are the use of auxiliary subjects or additional unanalyzed protocols, for example Brice (1991), who conducted a phenomenological study of maternal mourning. Scholtz and Fiedeldey (1994) made use of

an external registered clinical psychologist uninvolved in the research, yet experienced with phenomenological interpretation, to confirm delineation of themes. A comparison and correlation in this regard could aid in the demonstration of validity.

There are also studies that have not attempted validation of results, for example, Ablamowicz (1992), Angus, Osborne, and Koziey (1991), Giorgi (1992a), and Johnson (1988). In this regard, Quail and Peavy (1994) have stated that the client's description is considered valid data. They assert that what is important is that the subject has experienced what is sought and is able to illuminate this experience through his or her description. They cite Giorgi (1989) who has attested that the phenomenological framework emphasizes essential meaning and the sense of the empirical, rather than facts, and that in phenomenological research, no reality claim is being made.

Register and Henley (1992) echo similar concerns, and they defend the issue of the validity of generalizing research results. They assert that the intention of the method is to describe, not to test hypotheses, and that the purpose of phenomenological research is "to illuminate recurring themes of human experience with the understanding that across time and location the nature of human experience will change" (472).

As validation remains unresolved and contentious, upon completion of this study, it will be reappraised in regard to the results. With a theoretical understanding of phenomenology's philosophical underpinnings, as well as the researcher's stance, and the format of such a research project, one can now turn to the application of the method for this particular study.

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