

## **The Phenomenological Approach in Psychological Research**

**Madelene Sta. Maria**  
De La Salle University

The principles of the phenomenological approach are initially explained by examining how the use of introspection in the approach differs from its use as understood by the empirical psychologist. In phenomenology, it is assumed that subjectivity constitutes reality, and with this assumption we are given another viewpoint with which we may be objective about the mind. Objectivity in a phenomenological study is to capture the invariance in the appearance of phenomena in consciousness or in subjectivity in varied circumstances of lived experience. Integral to this is the researcher's abandonment of the "natural attitude" and the use of the researcher's own subjectivity in revealing meanings as a phenomenon is re-experienced through phenomenological analysis.

More and more students of psychology are considering the use of the phenomenological approach in their researches. This trend is largely due to a greater recognition currently being given to the appropriateness of a more qualitative, interpretative methodology in answering questions about human life experience. There still, however, are difficulties being experienced by researchers who decide to use the approach because of the heavy emphasis given to the positivistic prescription to doing science, and thus to the requirements for measurement and statistical analysis, in the training for and conduct of psychological research.

For a long time, in fact since the birth of the psychological science, the positivistic approach has provided psychologists with a sense of security that indeed what they are engaging in is "scientific", and with the certainty that the knowledge arrived at is based on and corresponds to an objective reality. One arrives at this certainty when

descriptions of reality are rid of value judgments of all those who have the capacity of observing or sensing this reality. In other words, it is only possible to be "objective" of an individual's conscious experience if a description of this experience does not entail the value judgment about the experience from the same or other individuals. This requirement which has for so long guided many of us in research is, however, not what is called for in the phenomenological approach so that one may arrive at objectivity in accounting for an understanding of an individual's conscious experience. To provide clearer understanding of what is entailed in the conduct of a psychological phenomenological research, an attempt will presently be undertaken to discuss the principles of the phenomenological approach as it may be used in psychological research. Such a discussion would entail an examination of: (1) the contrast in perspective between the phenomenologist and the empirical psychologist, (2) the assumptions of phenomenology as regards the nature of consciousness, and (3) the use of psychological phenomenology in the study of conscious experience. An earlier attempt has been undertaken by Neil Bolton (1979) to explain the differences in assumption and perspectives between the psychologist and the phenomenologist in their efforts to understand human conscious experience. Through an examination of his work, one is able to determine the concerns of a psychologist who wishes to use phenomenology as a tool for investigation. The insights provided by Bolton and other scholars who have written about the philosophy of the science of psychology and about the qualitative approach to psychological research form the substance of the present discussion as it attempts to outline the tenets of strategies for the method of phenomenology. It is hoped that through this discussion, psychologists using the approach in their researches will gain an understanding that ties up their knowledge of procedures with the assumption about consciousness in phenomenology.

### **The Resistance of Psychological Science to Phenomenology**

Neil Bolton noted that the psychologist typically would consider phenomenology as "aberration" because it dealt with a realm of reality, i.e. consciousness, that cannot be verified through observation

statements. The phenomenological approach was speculative since without fulfilling the verifiability criterion, the investigator will only find difficulty in obtaining agreement among different observers. This resistance to the approach, according to Bolton, is based on the psychologist's belief that phenomenology is no different from introspection since phenomenology, like introspection, is concerned with the analysis of consciousness without any reference to observable behavior.

What is wrong with introspection? One needs to go through the history of the study of consciousness in western psychology to find out that the method of introspection was considered to be inadequate because it failed to produce reliable accounts of the content of consciousness. That is, there was no agreement to be obtained from different investigators about what was to be observed in consciousness. A more acceptable approach was then to be methodological behaviorism, which should attempt a translation of meanings into terms of observed events or responses produced by the individual in identifiable situations.

The psychologist was required to do away with descriptions that had to do with her own private feelings and experiences. One is forced in this way to conform to a naïve positivistic view of science. Seiffert (1983) aptly described this sort of conformity through an example of a behaviorist who wishes to study the experience of love. The behaviorist may claim her certainty of having loved someone and to express her knowledge of the experience of love. However, she finds herself needing to likewise make the claim that her private feelings have nothing to do with her science. After all, she is of the belief that she cannot generalize her private feelings to other's private experiences, for how is she to know that her experience of love is the same as the other's experience of love. She is then apt to separate her private, personal experience with science. It is, as Seiffert puts it, like a bank teller who should never think that the money she is handling is her own. The areas of the private and of work are to be kept separate because that would have been morally unacceptable. To the psychologist, the areas of one's private self and of one's object to study should be kept separate because that would have been unscientific.

In order to keep one's subjectivity away from one's investigation, one has to locate statements of experience within a non-intentional terminology, or a terminology that is devoid of beliefs, opinions, sentiments and other terms that serves to represent events. Thus, the representational character of mental states or events, i.e. intentionality, may play no role. Instead, mental states are to be transformed into terms of an individual's input, output and disposition states, where disposition is characterized in terms of how these lead to and from input, output and other similar states (Burge, 1991). By transforming mental states into observation terms, the psychologist is assured of agreement among investigators about what goes on in the mind, thus resolving the problems that come with the use of introspection.

Because phenomenology is not concerned with observable behavior in the analysis of consciousness, the psychologist, according to Bolton, tends to mistakenly equate the aim of phenomenology with the aim of introspection. The psychologist is mistaken because the purpose of introspection is to investigate the *facts* of consciousness while the aim of phenomenology is to understand the *nature* of consciousness, that is, to report "what consciousness has to be in order to be conscious" (p. 160). This is to be done by examining the phenomena of conscious experience as they present themselves to us.

If the psychologist adopts the phenomenological assumption that the individual subjectivity is that which gives sense to reality, but still assumes no difference in purpose from introspection, the psychologist may again mistakenly assume as well that reality is nothing more than the meanings accorded to it by subjectivity. This is what is known as the error of psychologism. Bolton points this to be a mistaken notion as he cites the proponent of the phenomenological method, Husserl, who describes the consciousness as that which *does not create* meanings for reality but as that which *allows* these meanings to come out. Thus: "the objective is 'relative' to consciousness but consciousness reveals the objective" (p. 168). According to Bolton, psychologism is that error thus committed when the objective is reduced to psychological processes making the subjective the measure of the objective. In this way, there is no

distinction made between that which is subjective and that which is objective. We see this error clearly in instances when a psychological event is explained in terms of mental operations, for example, when one explains fear in terms of levels of psychological arousal, or love in terms of interpretative mental schema. One is said to fall easily into this error when one sees one's task as the objective study of the subjective. For the phenomenologist, however, there is an essential unity between the real and the mental such that: "One would then study not perception but what is essentially revealed through perception, not emotion, but how feeling forms the world for us" (p. 172). One may say that phenomenology reverses the errors of psychologism by gaining insight into human experience not through objective but through subjective means.

### **The Phenomenological Investigation is Subjective**

Both psychology and phenomenology are concerned with the study of the mind, and as Bolton points out, both are concerned about how it is to be objective about the mind. The psychologist, is, however, found to approach this problem in a different way as compared to a phenomenologist. As mentioned earlier, the behaviorist/psychologist answers these concerns by verifying statements that refer to observable behaviors. These behaviors to be observed are responses to manipulated stimuli. Explanations about observed responses are couched in terms of connections between input and output states. These connections may be established through inferences about structures within the individual that are responsible for the processing of information. Thus, according to Bolton, the behaviorist's object of study is not the private realm of consciousness of the individual but the interaction between the individual and the environment. This approach to the study of the mind allows the researcher to report about his findings while excluding his own private experiences. Bolton therefore concludes that the purpose of psychology is to determine what the mind should be so that it may be investigated without needing to include the personal world of the investigator. The mind must therefore be viewed as a part of the world of objects.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, solves the concern about being objective about the mind by examining mental phenomena and how these are used in revealing the world of objects to the individual. The phenomenologist tries to determine how the mind should be in order for the world of objects to exist for it. The phenomenologist is interested in finding out how our objective world becomes the components of the mind. The purpose then is to find out how the objective is subjectively constituted. In phenomenology, therefore, the mind need not be viewed as part of the world of objects, instead, for the phenomenologist, the mind remains subjective.

Phenomenology, like other methods in Geisteswissenschaften/Lebenswissenschaften (*Human Science/Life Sciences*), requires that one focuses on life as experienced as its subject matter (Seiffert, 1983). The investigator in the human sciences can obtain an understanding of this subject matter in so far as he himself has been informed about how it is to experience an event through his own existence in this human world. As Seiffert points out: The psychologist can only work on those events that he knows from his own experience. For example, he can investigate the experience of anger because he knows what anger is from his own experience in his/her existence in this human world.

Seiffert makes it clear that in the human sciences, the "private" becomes the source of and tool for knowledge. The subject matter of science need not only be that which is "objectively" researchable, but must also include the "life" of man with his/her subjective experience, and we can understand human experience when we make as subject matter what man does and experiences in his/her everyday life. The phenomenologist is the scientist who puts under scientific scrutiny that experience that was once lived. Experience for the phenomenologist does not function as *samples* which with the help of exact methodology can be generalized. Experiences to the phenomenologist are *examples* through which events may be explained through a wholistic interpretation of the everyday situation. It would have been absurd then to require a phenomenologist who wishes to study the experience of "fatherhood" to limit his documentation of this experience to fathers who only have one son. The task of the psychological phenomenologist is not to "objectivize"

the experience by imposing his reality of fatherhood, i.e. that the objective reality of fatherhood with one son can determine the subjective experience of "fatherhood." Rather, his task is to explore the experience of fatherhood as it is revealed in the consciousness of an individual in the varied circumstances when the label of "fatherhood" needs to be used. Certainly, the experience of fatherhood cannot be determined by fathers with only one son!

The problem of determining how the mind identifies objects and knows when objects are identical has since confronted philosophers in the study of consciousness. If we apply this problem to the case presented earlier, the question would be stated as follows: How is an individual to know that his experience is given the label of "fatherhood"? How is an individual to know that other past, present, future experiences are likewise to be given the same label of "fatherhood"? In order to provide a solution to this problem, Husserl distinguished between the *act* of consciousness and the *object* of consciousness. By making this distinction, an object may be sensed through various acts of consciousness. When an individual has a sensation (the act), one experiences the object in his/her subjectivity. There is to be no difference between the act of sensing and that which is sensed. This underlies the principle of the intentionality of consciousness—a fundamental doctrine of phenomenology.

How does this doctrine solve the problem about determining the perceived identity of objects? Since phenomenology views the act of consciousness as constituting the world of objects (i.e., the act equated to that which is sensed), a conscious act itself is that which presents the subject with an identifiable meaning which retains its identity within temporal possibilities of perception of the object. What a phenomenologist will need to determine is therefore what these identifiable and identical meanings are which are presented with and through the conscious act. In the study of phenomenology of "trust," for example, a psychologist will have to determine the identical meanings that emerge as experiences are identified as "trust." It must be remembered that by exploring these meanings, one learns to understand the act of consciousness, because at the most basic level there is the unity between act and the sensed which constitutes the world of "lived experience" where sensations and

intentions are undifferentiated. There is to be no difference, for example, between meaning-making activity in the subjective world about "trust," and the circumstances in the objective material world that constitute conditions of "trust." It is therefore wrong to assume that the world of intention is that which gives meaning to sensations. In phenomenology, the act and the content of consciousness are one.

To be objective about the mind is to be able to produce those judgments about experience "which have arisen out of the flow of intentional life and which, therefore, both owe their existence and meaning to consciousness and 'stand before' it for inspection" (Bolton, 1979, p. 168). Objectivity is achieved when the investigator has separated the object of experience from its mode of apprehension; when the investigator has produced the continuity in content of the object in varied acts of consciousness. In this moment of inquiry, the subjectivity of the investigator becomes an important tool since it is at this juncture when "there is no discontinuity between the investigator and the investigated in the sense that I shall only truly understand the object of study, the mind, by advancing my own thoughts as to the truth revealed to us as human beings" (Bolton, 1979, p. 173). This continuity between the investigator and the investigated parallels the continuity between the subjective and the objective—an identity that occurs at the most basic level of human life experience. According to Bolton, this is the authentic way of being objective about the mind.

To be objective about the mind, the investigator therefore determines how the world can come about through mental phenomena. In other words, she determines how the objective is subjectively constituted. In order to do this, the investigator has to abandon the notion that the world of objects exists for himself. The psychologist, for example, in the phenomenological study of "trust," should abandon her commonsense or scientific notion about "trust." If this notion is not to be abandoned, the investigator holds on and starts with an already constituted nature of reality which will not enable her to focus on the acts of consciousness that allows us to experience this reality. She may instead engage in a pursuit of determining the truth or falsity of her own beliefs about the world and this would



thus make it impossible for her to obtain an understanding of how reality is subjectively constituted. This requirement for objectivity in the phenomenological approach makes the method of investigation personal or subjective.

The attitude of mind that needs to be abandoned in phenomenological research and that allows us to take for granted that the world exists for us is called the "natural attitude" (Bolton, 1979). This natural attitude accepts knowledge of reality as a self-evident fact; it simply accepts reality in terms of its meanings. In order to investigate how subjects relate with the world of objects, it is necessary for the researcher to suspend her commonsense belief in reality. In phenomenological research, the suspension or abandonment of the "natural attitude" is called bracketing, reduction or epoche. Bolton explains that when Husserl required the researcher to abandon any commonsense understanding of a phenomenon, this did not mean that the researcher should deny or doubt the existence of a phenomenon. Instead, epoche bars the researcher from making any judgments about the nature of that phenomenon. Reduction, bracketing or epoche takes us away from any information that culture, science or commonsense gives us about the phenomenon, and allows us to enter original experiences of encounter with the phenomenon, to re-experience these original encounters so that ultimately we may understand how the phenomenon appears in consciousness.

The argument for abandoning the natural attitude is simple. How are we to investigate the commonsense belief in the existence of reality if we were to start with our own commonsense beliefs? We must set aside the objects of the world (which make up our belief about the world) in order to view the acts of consciousness in the encounter with these objects:

Phenomenology is, therefore, a profoundly reflexive discipline, since in its attempt to understand the taken-for-granted objectivity of the natural attitude it requires of the investigator himself a shift in the direction of attention from the objectivity to the subjectivity in which the objective world is constituted. (Bolton, 1979, p. 163)

The phenomenological investigation is thus subjective. It has nothing to do with whether the phenomenon being studied matches with anything in the objective world. As the philosopher Charles Pierce (1958) stated, phenomenology is the description of that which is present to the mind, regardless of whether it corresponds to anything real or not. What a phenomenologist needs to do is to scrutinize direct appearances and must therefore not be influenced by any authority or any tradition that give presuppositions about what facts are and ought to be.

To summarize, phenomenology is premised on the intentionality of consciousness and thus involves the study of how the subjective constitutes the world of objects. To be able to engage in such a project, the investigator must suspend all known belief about the phenomenon of study so that exploration of how the phenomenon should be to be what the phenomenon is in consciousness may be undertaken. What must be determined is the identity of the phenomenon as subjectively constituted in varied acts of consciousness. The goal is to determine the unchanging quality or the essence of experience of a given phenomenon. The steps to be undertaken to achieve this goal will now be discussed in the context of psychological research.

### **Psychological Research as the Investigation of the Essence of Experience**

The underlying principle in the use of the phenomenological approach in psychological research, according to Moustakas (1994, p. 13 in Creswell, 1998), is "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences of structures of experience." It is assumed that variations may be made or may be found with the object of experience without changing the essential nature of this experience in consciousness. This experience is observed without changing the essential nature of this experience in consciousness. This assumption rests on the doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness, which, as already mentioned, equates reality with the meanings or appearances in

consciousness. In Husserl's words (in Bolton, 1979, p. 163):  
163):

We may in free fancy, vary our actual world and transmute it to any other which we can imagine, but we are obliged with the world to vary ourselves also, and ourselves we cannot vary except within limits prescribed to us by the nature of our subjectivity. Change worlds as we may, each must ever be world such that we could experience, prove upon the evidence of our theories and inhabit in our practice...My psychological experiences, perceptions, imaginations and the like remain in form and content what they were, but I see them as "structures" now, for I am fact to face at last with the ultimate structure of consciousness.

Thus, in spite of variations of circumstances, our psychological experience will be the same. This invariant nature of psychological experiencing makes possible the identity of the object of experience for us. This in turn makes the object of experience real in consciousness.

Our task in doing phenomenological research in psychology is to determine the invariance of psychological experiences in varied circumstances of encounters with the object. What we will be able to come up with is the essence or the structure of experience. But when do we know the essential in experience? Creswell (1998) proposed that what is needed is to enter the participants' field of perception by listening to participants' account of their experiences and seeing how they live these experiences. From these accounts, the researcher is to draw the meanings of these experiences. The steps to be undertaken in looking for invariant meaning(s) are incorporated in the research process at the phase of data analysis.

These steps are outlined by Creswell as follows:

1. Read descriptions or expressions of experience in their entirety.
2. Extract significant statements from these expressions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>What may be considered to be "significant" expressions are those statements that revealed instances of lived experience with the phenomenon investigated. For example, in an investigation on the phenomenology of "trust", significant expressions would consist of those statements that reveal instances of experience of trust in the everyday live of the individual.

3. Formulate the significant statement into their meanings.
4. Cluster the meanings into themes.
5. Integrate themes into a narrative description of the experience.

The narrative description represents the investigator's account of the objective as it is constituted by the subjective; it is the account of the investigator's description of the experience in terms of its invariant meanings.

Again, an important step in the phenomenological approach is bracketing (or epoche), wherein, as earlier mentioned, the researcher has to abandon the "natural attitude." This may be done concretely in the research process by avoiding asking participants questions that contain the researcher's preconceptions about the phenomenon of interest. To determine what one's preconceptions are, a process of self-reflection may be engaged in prior to the formulation of interview questions for gathering data (see for example, Lemon and Taylor, 1997).

Another distinct feature of the phenomenological approach is the formulation of meanings (Step no. 3 of the analysis) drawn from the significant expressions in the participant's account of their experiences. A concrete example of how this step may be accomplished is found in the procedure undertaken by Lemon and Taylor (1997) in their study on the concept of nursing care. For their study, Lemon and Taylor conducted 7 interviews which produced 154 significant statements. Each statement was then entered into separate cards with the code number of the informant and the position of the statement in the sequence of statements in the interview transcript. An example of a significant statement is as follows:

They were in tune with what I wanted, as though they could read my mind and they anticipated my needs, like telling me what they were doing and why and what would happen.

The meaning formulated by the researchers for this statement is given below:

*The nurses were sensitive to the unstated concerns and needs of the patient.*

*They understood, respected and responded to those concerns and needs.*

The extraction of meanings entails an examination of the phenomenon as experienced by the subject and an interpretation of what it would be like if one lived in the subject's world. This is the stage when a continuity is forged between the investigator and the investigated, when the researcher may now express his thoughts about the truth that is revealed in that statement of human experiences.

### **The Use and Issues of Phenomenology in Psychology**

The increased interest in the phenomenological approach in psychology may be indicative of the felt need among psychologists to further examine the concepts used to guide research. Bolton contends that phenomenology can indeed help determine the course of empirical psychology by determining the essential nature of consciousness before psychology can start to investigate consciousness as part of the objective world. According to Bolton, the phenomenologist would not consider progress in psychology to be guaranteed by the experimental methodology. More fundamental to progress is a determination of how the field of psychology is essentially constituted.

Nagel (1991) may be said to share Bolton's position on the need for the phenomenological account or the attempt at understanding the subjective character of experience:

It is impossible to exclude the phenomenological features of experience from a reduction in the same way that one excluded the phenomenal features of an ordinary substance from a physical or chemical reduction of it—namely, by explaining them as effect on the minds of human observers (p. 423).

Nagel, however, points out that if we were to determine the subjective character of experience, an examination of such would be impossible because it essentially involves only one point of view. When psychology investigates consciousness as part of the objective world and develops an objective theory on it, this one point of view

is accessible to many points of view. Nagel asks if it were possible to have an objective understanding of the mental without having to take up the point of view of the experiential subject. In answer to this question, he proposed the formation of new concepts and a new method which he called "objective phenomenology." Objective phenomenology would not be dependent on empathy or the subjectivity of the observer, and its goal is to describe the subjective character of experience in a way that will be comprehensible to those who would be incapable of having those experiences, for example, describing to a congenitally blind man how it is to have vision, or describing to a human being how it is to be bat. The concepts to be developed "may enable us to arrive at a kind of understanding even of our own experience which is denied us by the very ease of description and lack of distance that subjective concepts afford" (p. 427). Nagel, however, sees the limitations of an objective phenomenology:

...it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. (p. 423)

Nagel thus supports the notion of the subjective nature of the phenomenological approach and how the approach may be a unity of the objective and the subjective:

It is often possible to take a point of view other than one's own, so the comprehension of such facts is not limited to one's own case. There is a sense in which phenomenological facts are perfectly objective: one person can know or say of another what the quality of the other's experience is. They are subjective, however, in the sense that even this objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view—to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third so to speak. (p. 425)

As Nagel points out, a Martian will be able to understand the Earth's rainbow as a physical phenomenon, but will never understand the rainbow within the Earthling's world of experience. A being's understanding of the phenomenal experience of rainbow does not, however, rest solely on the fact that he possesses an Earthling's perceptual apparatus. The rainbow may be experienced in different ways depending on the social context one may find oneself in.

It was Tyler Burge (1991) who directed our attention to the mistake of treating mental phenomena in purely individualistic terms. In Burge's opinion, the two dominant metaphors of the mind, the infallible eye and the automatic mechanism, have encouraged the neglect of the social features of mental phenomena. According to Burge:

...mentalistic attribution rests not on the subject's having mastered the contents of the attribution, and not on his having behavioral dispositions peculiarly relevant to those contents, but on his having a certain responsibility to communal conventions governing, and the conceptions associated with, symbols that he is disposed to use. It is this feature that must be incorporated into the improved model of the mental (p. 563).

Is there to be a new metaphor for the mind? Shall psychologists and philosophers have to review the precepts of phenomenology to accommodate the non-individualistic mind? Should we prepare and engage ourselves towards the construction of a new psychology? Phenomenology has taught us that we should differentiate between the realities of a toothache and a hole in a tooth. Will phenomenology still be the most effective method in distinguishing variations in essences of experience, i.e. when the essence of a toothache experience varies with variations in shared meanings?

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