AN OVERVIEW ON PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Luis Fernando Santos
Nanjing Normal University. (República Popular China)

Abstract
This is an overview on one of the Research Methodologies less known by its name, called Phenomenology or Phenomenological Methodology. Phenomenology Research Methodology is very suitable for Qualitative Research, however many Social Researchers are not familiarized with its name, even though, many of them practice it under different names, especially because this methodology does not encompass a specific technique or procedure, but a bunch of techniques coming from other Research Methodologies. We can deepen our understanding of a Research Phenomenon thanks to the features of this Methodology that drives the researcher to immerse into a sensitive reality in a meaningful way; a reality where other methodologies cannot get in.
Key words: Phenomenological Research Methodology, Social Phenomenon, Sensitive social reality.

Resumen
Esta es una mirada a una de las Metodologías de Investigación menos conocidas por su nombre llamada Metodología Fenomenológica. La metodología de la investigación Fenomenológica es muy apropiada en la Investigación Cualitativa, sin embargo, muchos investigadores Sociales no están familiarizados con su nombre, aunque muchos la practican bajo diferentes nominaciones, especialmente porque ésta metodología no contempla una técnica o procedimiento en particular, pero si un compendio de técnicas procedentes de otras metodologías. Podemos profundizar nuestro entendimiento de un Fenómeno de Investigación gracias a las características propias de esta metodología que obliga al investigador a hacer una inmersión dentro de realidades sensibles en una forma significativa; una realidad donde otras metodologías no pueden entrar.
Palabras clave: Metodología de la investigación Fenomenológica, Fenómeno Social, Realidades Sociales Sensibles.
1. Introduction

1.1. General overview about the methodology

When tackling upon Phenomenology Research Methodology, some authors assert that the researcher should have to start from the point that there is no any defined or specific method or bunch of methods attached to this methodology (Holloway, 1997 and Hycner, 1999, p. 143; cited in Lester, S. 1999). Therefore, it is necessary to take into account some criteria or principles for developing procedures conducting to obtain the research objectives and results we are pursuing.

What is mentioned above leads us to think that by a good understanding of the concept of Phenomenology, its nature and the Research objectives, the researcher can conduct his or her investigation with different methods, techniques and procedures, especially those associated with the Qualitative Research Methodology such as the inductive method, and techniques such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, focus group (Hernandez, R.; 2014 and Lester, S.; 1999)

Some criteria and aspects related to the nature and concept of the Phenomenology that could enable the researcher to conduct a Phenomenological Study are presented next:

Phenomenology is the study of lived, human phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them» (Titschen & Hobson, 2011: 121, cited in Pacurar, A. ;2013)

Below, some definitions and key words about Phenomenology cited and stated by Lester, S. (1999)

«Pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions» (Husserl 1970)

«Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual»

«Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives».

«...is based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and interpretation».

«...taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom».
On the other hand, Groenewald, T. (2004) cites the next points of view from different authors about Phenomenology:

«Realities are treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin» (Eagleton, 1983, p.55).

«The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts» (Giorgi; cited in Stones, 1988)

According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189) «the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved»

«A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched» (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed, 1998), and with the «ways in which ordinary members of society attend to their everyday lives» (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, pp. 488-489)

According to Roberto Hernandez (2014), there are two perspectives on Phenomenological Studies, the Hermeneutical and Empirical Phenomenology. The first one is centered on the interpretation of the human experience including the description. The Empirical, transcendental or Physiological perspective focuses less on the researcher interpretation and more on the description of the participant’s experiences.

Finally, in the attempt to answer the question what kind of abilities, conditions or pre-requisites Researchers should have for developing a Research under the Phenomenological Methodology?, among a variety of skills, Raquel Ayala (2016) proposes that strong writing skills are very important and also suggests that is decisive to take on the challenge of ‘making experience’ from the Phenomenology, this is, not to pay attention to the researcher’s limitations to let things manifesting by themselves in the development of their investigations, so that, these themselves can become a learning experience.

2. Methods and techniques of the phenomenological methodology

As mentioned above, some authors suggested that no prescription or list of defined methods and techniques are suggested, but the Researcher
must follow and observe the concept and nature of the Phenomenological Methodology, besides as it is stated by Lester, S. (1999) «if there is a general principle involved, it is that of minimum structure and maximum depth». Moreover, according to Hycner (1999, cited in Groenewald, T.; 2004) «the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants».

Regardless what is mentioned on the previous paragraph, Lester, S. (1999) and Groenewald, T. (2004) present some guidelines and criteria that can be useful to develop a Research under the Phenomenological Methodology as follows:

- The selection of the population of study can be applied to single cases or to serendipitous (deliberately selected) samples.
- This methodology is not strong at setting generalizations. Phenomenological research can be robust in indicating the presence of factors and their effects in individual cases, but these must be tentative in suggesting their extent in relation to the population.
- Phenomenological studies make detailed comments about individual situations which do not lend themselves to direct generalization in the same way which is sometimes claimed for survey research.
- In multiple-participant research, the strength of inference increases rapidly once factors start to recur with more than one participant.
- As a researcher, seek for a balance between keeping a focus on the research issues and avoiding undue influence by the researcher.
- Establish a good level of rapport and empathy is critical to gaining depth of information, particularly where investigating issues where the participant has a strong personal stake.

According to Hernandez, R. (2010/2014) the following guidelines can be taken into account for conducting a Phenomenological approach-based Research:

- It is necessary first to identify the phenomenon and after that, the data is gathered from the people that have experienced it. Finally, a shared-participative description of the core experience is developed for all participants (2014).
- Gathered information from the people who have experienced the studied phenomena can be related to their feelings, emotions, reasoning, points of view, perceptions, etc. (2010), such as happiness, anger, sorrow, pain, quietness, determination (2015:493).
The Phenomenon of study is identified since the Problem definition of the Research and it can be as diverse as the human experiences are (ibid). A common Research Question of a phenomenological study is: What is the meaning, structure and core of a person’s lived experience (individual), a group, or community (collective) about a phenomenon? (ibid).

To minimize gaps coming from the researcher, Creswell et al. (2007; cited in Hernandez, R. 2014) suggests to describe the experiences together with the participants and use at least two instruments for gathering the data.

Finally, as was already said in the first paragraphs, a variety of methods and techniques that match with Qualitative Research can be taken into account in a Phenomenological-based-research, including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings and analysis of personal texts.

2.1. Main activities implemented in a Phenomenological Design

According to Norlyk and Harder (2010; cited in Hernandez, R. 2014), the next activities are commonly used in Phenomenological Research:

· Problem approaching or definition.
· Context and participant selection.
· Field immersion.
· Data gathering related to the phenomenon.
· Transcriptions of experiences and narrations.
· Descriptions and information reviewing.
· Identify the units of analysis.
· Generate categories, themes, and present pattern in the description and narration.
· Describe the connection between participant experiences related to the phenomenon.
· Determine the phenomenon from the experiences analysis in a constructive and participative way.
· Develop a general narrative including the common and different categories and themes (Description of the phenomenon).
· Validate the narrative and description of the phenomenon with participants and with other researchers.
· Elaborate a Final Report.
3. Phenomenology and its association with other research methodologies

Hernandez, R. (2010), affirms that the borders among Qualitative designs do not exist. For example, a study oriented by Fundamental theory embraces Narrative and Phenomenological elements.

The difference between the Narrative and Phenomenological design is that the first is focus on the connection or succession (sequence) of the events (the chronological point of view or the sequential history), and the second one, in the essence of the shared-experience (Hernandez, R.; 2014).

Hernandez (2010), asserts that the student should not be concerned that much about whether his study is, either Narrative or Ethnographic, but instead should be focus on realizing the Research Study in a systematic and deep way, as well as responding to the Problem Definition (problem setting).

On the other hand, Auto-ethnographic study has a close relationship with Phenomenological study, since the first one also gathers experiences, however not from others, but from the same researcher (Sparkes, 2000; cited in Naidoo, L.; 2013), as it is mentioned by Naidoo, L. (2013:2) » Auto-ethnography as a research method became the looking glass that reflected my principalship and its enactments within a particular sociocultural environment.»

Finally, the close relationship between Phenomenological studies and Autobiography and Ethnography studies is settled because the first one merges these two last Research Designs, as it is said by Cahnmann-Taylor (2008, cited in Naidoo, L.; 2013).

4. Examples of phenomenological based-research

Roberto Hernandez (2010/2014), cites some cases of studies that can be developed under the Phenomenological Research Design, as follows:

- Experiences of sexual abuse cases.
- An inquiry to people who have been Kidnapped to understand how they define, describe, understand and feel this terrible experience.
- A cancer case: for example, an individual internal sensation of breast cancer.
Sensations and feelings coming from experiences such as: insomnia, parental divorce, couple engagement, preferences on a particular product, working with a new machine or technology, accidents such as a factory fire, an educative system, a certain innovation, etc.

5. Scope and limitations of the methodology

5.1. Issues and limitations

According to Lester S. (1999), these are some issues and limitations that this Methodology can present when applying:

- Expecting similar parameters to apply as for quantitative research, in aspects such as sample size, statistical validation, accurate general interpretations, etc.
- The time to study a big group of participants can be limited.
- Phenomenological approaches are good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard. In sensitive cases, this can be a problem when interest’s conflicts are involved.

Furthermore, it is not suggested for generating Generalizations and theoretical models (Hernandez, R.; 2014:493) and according to Pacurar, A. (2013) some forms of conceptualization in advance or preconception from the Researcher could influence later the theoretical development in the contact between the researcher and the empirical data.

5.2. Advantages and scope

- Get in-depth information and comprehension of certain phenomenon.
- Excellent for exploring and describing individual experiences (Hernandez, 2014).
- Suitable for inquiring sensitive cases.
- Free of complexities of statistical procedures.
- Could be developed with Less Human and material Resources.
- Suitable for fields such as Psychology, Education, Nursery, Management (Gallagher and Francesconi, 2012; cited in Ayala, R.; 2016), and also Journalism and Law.
6. Conclusion

In the field of Social Sciences, the Phenomenological-based-research is a great asset to the Academia, since it offers to researchers the possibility to deeply develop Social Studies, being this, one of the main features of this approach, regardless its limitations for generalizations in the interpretation process and for generating theoretical models as the Fundamental Theory Methodology does.

Phenomenological Methodology is strongly recommended for studying ‘sensitive topics or phenomena’ such as problems or disorders related to emotions, health, relationships, bad performance and outcomes in school, business, and other similar topics, but also for researching outstanding experiences such as good performance and success in business, school, sports, innovations, relationships, and others.

This Methodology can be developed through a variety of methods, techniques or procedures associated to the Qualitative Research Model, in a flexible and open way. It means that it can perfectly be combined with different methods and activities linked to the Social Sciences.

Procedures or Techniques in-situ are best guided by the ‘Defined Problem and Phenomenon’, including the Objectives and Nature of the Study, rather than an established framework of prescribed techniques and procedures. In other words, there is not any exclusive method, technique or procedure strictly attached to the Phenomenological Methodology, and if there are some few methods or techniques recurrently used in this methodology, based on the literature I read, these are the Participant observation, Interview, testimony and narrations. Moreover, triangulation or the usage of more than one instruments or techniques for gathering data, can strengthen the Research results.

Finally, some recommendations that the researcher should take into account when following the Phenomenological Methodology are: a good immersion into the community or studied-group, develop good empathy or relationships with them and avoid including gaps or bias in the interpretation and results of the Research that could come from preconceptions or emotional interference.
References.


