



Teaching Phenomenology through Highlighting Experience

by Steen Halling

Abstract

Based on the assumption that phenomenology is a style not just of thinking, but also of perceiving and acting, this paper shows how, through specific assignments and practices, phenomenological research can become personally as well as professionally meaningful for students. Disciplined practice helps students to attend to experience even though culturally and educationally ingrained habits devalue its importance. By working together in groups, the phenomenon under study is more likely to come alive for the student researchers, and articulating the core of an experience no longer to seem so daunting. The practice of phenomenology also helps students to recognize that slowing down and giving their full attention to experience is restorative, productive, and deeply satisfying.

My understanding of phenomenology shapes my teaching.

In his memorable preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962), Merleau-Ponty emphasised the need for philosophers to recognize “that phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy” (p. viii). I think Merleau-Ponty would agree that phenomenology is a style not only of thinking but also of attending to experience, and, within the context of psychology and psychotherapy, of acting. Further, he wrote that “We shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology” (p. viii). This implies that phenomenology makes sense and comes alive for us only insofar as we take it up at a personal as well as an intellectual level. Thus, when I teach students about phenomenology, my goal is to help them appropriate it as an attitude, a way of seeing and thinking, and as a practice they connect with on a personal basis rather than just as a theoretical

perspective. In highlighting *experience* I am referring not only to what the research students do to get experience, but also to our collective reflection on experience as a source of understanding. This emphasis on the experiential is both tricky and necessary, given the tendency in much of higher education, and in Western societies in general, to overlook or devalue experience. Moreover, this tendency is interconnected with, and aggravated by, the increasingly frenetic pace of our lives. But here I am getting ahead of myself.

I believe that phenomenology makes sense intuitively even though much of its language is esoteric (Halling, 2008). Appeals to experience as evidence, and calls for a return to the lifeworld (that which we have in common), are recurring threads in the work of phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Gabriel Marcel, J. H. van den Berg, and, of course, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is precisely in respect of experience that phenomenological and traditional psychology part ways. Although fully in agreement about the importance of moving beyond conventional wisdom

or common sense, they differ about where one goes when one moves “beyond”. Phenomenology deepens our appreciation for the depth and nuances of experience, whereas traditional psychology, in giving priority to theory and technique over experience, fosters an overvaluation of technical expertise (Halling, 2002).

Finally, there is a pedagogical assumption that plays a key role in my teaching, and that is that *theory and practice are two inextricably linked facets of human life*. Our actions are based on what we believe, and what we believe is shaped by our experience and the traditions in which we are rooted as persons, students, and professionals. In turn, what we experience gives rise to changes in our theory: that is, our general assumptions and beliefs. Our practice can be improved as we look at theories that give us direction and help us to see things in a new way, and our theories can be improved as we learn from our practice. In my experience, the most meaningful questions arise for students as they engage in projects and other forms of activity. To emphasize the interconnection of theory and practice, I ask the students who own cars how many of them read the owner’s manual to find out how to change a tyre before having a flat; very few have. Of course, the ideal is to practise actually changing a tyre, following the manual, under ideal conditions (good light, enough time, and a dry and comfortable location such as a garage) before one has a flat. This rather mundane analogy has become a guiding metaphor in my teaching. To be sure, phenomenology is an intellectual endeavour, but, as Steinar Kvale has rightly said of interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 1996/2008), it is also a craft.

I have taught phenomenological psychology, in one guise or another, since 1972, but in this paper I will focus specifically on teaching it as an approach to research. At the undergraduate level, I teach an advanced course entitled Qualitative Research Methods. While this course includes methodologies other than phenomenology, the major requirement is the completion of a phenomenological research project and developing basic interviewing skills. All the students are psychology majors, two thirds of whom have already taken our two-quarter sequence on quantitative research methods, and roughly a third having had formal exposure to phenomenology.

At the graduate level, Seattle University offers a two year MA programme in therapeutic psychology. Our programme has an existential and phenomenological orientation, and also draws upon the contributions of the humanities and contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives. Although our primary purpose is to provide our students with a solid foundation for therapeutic practice, we have also developed a

tradition of involving students in phenomenological research. In the second term of the first year they are required to take a course, Issues in Psychotherapy, that I have taught for roughly fifteen years. Here students work in groups studying topics such as the experience of dreaming, of transference, or of being in a healing relationship. These projects introduce them to phenomenology as a research methodology and help them to understand what transference and other clinical terms refer to in experiential terms.

As phenomenological psychologists we have an advantage in teaching, a foot in the door, so to speak, because our starting point is something that is already familiar to students, namely experience. However, in practice the situation is a good deal murkier. The following example, which in its essence will be familiar to anyone who has taught phenomenology, illustrates how this is the case.

In the undergraduate course, students also work together in groups on a small-scale phenomenological project on a topic they select. Several years ago, one group focused on the experience of being inspired by someone with whom one had personal contact. When I attended one of their early meetings, the students were discussing a description written by one of their fellow researchers. At the beginning of the class, the students are introduced to the dialogal phenomenological approach to research (Halling, Leifer, & Rowe, 2006), which requires that the researchers start out by writing their own descriptions of the phenomenon they are going to investigate. They then discuss these descriptions among themselves before collecting descriptions from research participants outside of the group. As I entered the room, one of the students was reading her account of being inspired by her younger sister who, in spite of having significant physical and mental limitations, held a positive attitude toward life.

At that point I was really pleased to see that the students were doing what they were supposed to be doing. The student researcher’s description was well written and compelling, and her colleagues were listening attentively. The story was truly inspiring and, even as an observer of this group, I was caught up in what this young woman related.

After she had read her story, her peers started to comment on the story. Again, so far so good. But the discussion quickly took a different turn. One of the group members had brought along an article about inspiration, and now they started to discuss whether the description fitted with what the author of the article had written. Glancing at the article, I noted that it was highly abstract and of questionable quality. I am not usually very directive once the students start their project – the point being that they learn on their

own and find out what works and what does not – but, in this case, I told them to set aside the article and return to their discussion of the description.

What happened here? Had they not received enough theoretical background on the lifeworld, on Edmund Husserl's thought, and on the importance of experience? Perhaps. But I don't think this was the key issue. Something quite similar happens when I teach at the graduate level, even though these students have already had three courses that expose them in depth to phenomenology at a theoretical, clinical and personal level. I remember one graduate student group doing research on the experience of healing. In spite of having been told to start with their own experience, they initially spent hours going through the literature, hoping to find a definitive definition of healing. As Churchill (1990) has commented in his discussion on teaching phenomenology, "it is quite possible to possess knowledge about something while having little in the way of lived acquaintance with the subject matter" (p. 48).

My conversations with students, graduate and undergraduate, have helped me to better understand their hesitation to look to experience. Firstly, through years of education they have come to see the published literature as authoritative, especially when it comes to psychological research. Before starting a research project, they have been told, you must review the pertinent literature and then you gear your study to what has already been done. Those students who seek out phenomenology do have some critical distance from the practices and principles of mainstream psychology. But, like the voices of parental figures, these assumptions about "science" (narrowly defined) and authority, to which all of us have been exposed over the years, are still operative in the background. When confronted with the ambiguity and the newness of actually doing phenomenological research, there is a tendency to fall back upon the known and the procedural, just as humanistically oriented therapists-in-training often (and understandably) reach for treatment manuals when they start seeing clients.

The second, related, issue has to do with how students think of experience. They rarely have any difficulty writing about their own experience, and often do so with enthusiasm. And yet they believe, at least implicitly, that personal experience is subjective or idiosyncratic, as revealing and expressive of oneself but not necessarily of phenomena. And, even if it were, students, not surprisingly, are at a loss to know how to move from the specific to the general. There is no question but that analyzing experience is difficult under any circumstances; it is hardly a cornerstone of the contemporary university. In any case, one of the strongest antidotes to this view of experience and the

uncertainty of how to proceed is not theoretical but experiential. It is not that theory is irrelevant, but that it is not enough. If students are going to come to see experience as an authority, they must first meet up with it, so to speak. Here again I will clarify with an example.

Early on in the undergraduate class, the students spend considerable time becoming familiar with and using the descriptive phenomenological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (e.g., Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Giorgi, 2009). Working together in their groups, they apply the steps of this method to a description written by a young woman who had experienced religious disillusionment. This woman, who was a research participant for a doctoral dissertation (Holtz, 1984), told of being raised in a Catholic household and taking her faith very much to heart. When her fiancé applied to medical school, she steadfastly prayed that he would be admitted. Her assumption was that, since she had lived her life as a faithful Catholic, God would respond favourably to her prayers. When her fiancé was denied admission, she was shocked and dismayed. Typically, the students are perplexed by her reaction and make various critical judgments about her level of maturity or religious naiveté. Prior to this assignment, we have discussed "bracketing" judgments and preconceptions and looking at experience with an attitude of wonder in some detail. But, however much students might subscribe to these principles in the abstract, they find it difficult to implement them in practice – they simply do not have the requisite practice and exposure.

Fortunately, implementation becomes possible for at least some of them. As they go through the process of breaking the young woman's description into meaning units, summarizing the psychological meaning of each unit, and so on, they have a kind of epiphany. In the context of working with the story in this structured way, they start to realize that they have been evaluating this young woman's experience from their own point of reference instead of being open to her perspective and life context. Sooner or later, a student says something like: "Ah, now I get why she was upset that her boyfriend did not get into medical school when she had prayed so hard that he would be admitted. This showed her that the God she had so firmly believed in, a God who can be relied on to answer the prayers of the faithful, did not exist. It was not just about her boyfriend. It was about everything in the world that she believed in."

There are two interrelated dimensions to this realization – firstly, this is what is going on for this woman, and, secondly, one must first recognize and move past one's own egocentric and previously unrecognized perspective in order to see her point of

view. This kind of awareness is essential for anyone's learning, because it involves, as Sharon Salzberg (2002) has said in a somewhat different context, "verifying and validating through our own experience what we had previously only heard of or seen outside of ourselves" (p. 48). Setting aside one's own preconceptions and seeing something in a new way is no longer a mere slogan. The breakthrough typically is accompanied by a sense of freedom and even exhilaration, along with some embarrassment or puzzlement that "it took so long" to get to a now obvious insight.

Having emphasized that "getting to experience" can be something of an uphill struggle, I want to say more about how I try to make that possible. As I have indicated, the students work together in groups on a small-scale research project. I want them to learn about the dialogal phenomenological research approach that has been developed at Seattle University (e.g., Halling, Leifer, & Rowe, 2006), but, more importantly for the purpose of the current discussion, this approach is effective in making phenomenology accessible as a form of practice.

Firstly, I believe it is important that students study a topic with which they have an affinity. In the graduate class there are five prescribed topics, and students are divided into groups based on their interest. Once constituted as a group, they decide on exactly how they will approach the topic. For example, they might focus on healing as it occurs in psychotherapy or alternatively in friendships. The undergraduates are asked to come up with their own topics; typically their choices are thoughtful and creative (for example, being inspired by another, growing to respect someone, coming to see parents as fellow human beings, receiving a memorable gift, and experiencing a significant loss).

Secondly, through the writing of the researchers' own descriptions of the phenomenon and the discussing of these stories in detail, the phenomenon truly becomes a "partner" in their research endeavour, or even a "presence" in the room. An open discussion of the stories does require that the researchers come to trust each other (Halling & Leifer, 1991), which does come about in most groups, although not necessarily always easily. The essence of this process of the development of trust is that one person's disclosure of personal experience brings forth responses of respect and openness from other group members.

One of the risks in this dialogal approach is that the phenomenon becomes present in a way that is hard for the student researchers to manage. I attended one of the meetings of the "significant loss" group, where the losses that the students shared with each other were so profound that the whole group was in tears by

the end of the meeting. There was no doubt that, in this group, "experience" was taken seriously. Fortunately, they were able to "contain" the grief that they experienced together and to share a constructive, albeit emotionally challenging, experience with each other. Of course, the instructor should not only warn students about the possibility that certain phenomena can be difficult to manage emotionally, but should also rule out topics that are likely to be unduly disturbing for researchers and research participants alike. In any event, the critical factor is not that the experience being studied is dramatic or intense, but that the students share their experiences in depth, allowing the phenomenon to become prominent and provide a clear direction for the group.

But, even if experience is front and centre, this does not in itself overcome the challenge of uncovering its implicit core, of moving from the specific to the general. This is one reason that the students are taught the basics of the Giorgi method of analysis and apply this method to the description of religious disillusionment. However, I introduce this method as much as a means to an end as an end in itself. That is, this method provides an effective structure for easing the students into the practice of phenomenology, and especially for helping them to move toward the articulation of the structure of a phenomenon. Yet, contrary to what the students often assume, I do not require them to use this method in their project. Rather, I want them to understand that there are various ways of doing phenomenology.

The group dialogue provides another means of moving toward the same goal. As the students listen to and ask about each other's stories, the fundamental themes (or constituents) often start to become evident. Finding words that speak to the core of a phenomenon is tricky, but it is made easier by the presence of a clearly identified phenomenon within a group where the researchers trust each other and are able to "dwell" with a phenomenon and with each other. Different perspectives and a variety of ways of saying things allow for a gradual elucidation of what is being studied. One word leads to another, just as the first drop of water is the beginning of a stream (Halling, 2005). As soon as even a few words are spoken, they can be tested out for fit, and other researchers can comment and say more. As I have observed the research groups over the years, I have seen how awkward silences and false starts gradually give way to growing conversations and important insights. This is often a slow process, and one that takes time and patience. Yet, typically, students rate their group projects as the most valuable aspect of these courses. They are surprised that they have accomplished as much as they have, especially given their initial uncertainty, and they value having had the experience of working successfully with others.

Conclusion

I have emphasized the importance of teaching phenomenology by getting students involved with and reflecting on experience. This is only a part, even if it is a critical part, of what is involved in teaching phenomenology. It matters what readings one uses, how one introduces students to this tradition, and so on. But the experiential focus is critical, I believe, if the students are going to gain a personal sense of what phenomenology is about as both a practice and a theoretical position. This focus is also vitally important for what I would describe as less technical reasons.

Increasingly we live in times where everyone seems to be rushed and where “People lose their inner sense of coherence and equilibrium” (Menziez, 2005, p. 3). My students often complain that they are always behind and have little hope of catching up.

This sense of being rushed is aggravated by the fact

that Seattle University is on the quarter system, with classes meeting for only ten weeks. I must confess that the tempo of my own life is not unlike that of the students.

Yet phenomenology requires a kind of attentiveness to experience (and, in dialogal phenomenology, to one’s fellow researchers) that is hard to come by either in the everyday world or in academia. It requires a “leisurely attitude” (Buckley, 1975), because “Leisure is a form of that stillness that is the necessary preparation for accepting reality; only the person who is still can hear, and whoever is not still, cannot hear” (Pieper, 1948/1998, p. 31). It requires concentration and contemplation, an arena where receptivity and creativity spring forth. This is something that all of us need – not just for our professions, but for our lives. One of the lessons that at least some of the students learn through their practice of phenomenology is that slowing down and giving their full attention to experience is restorative, productive, and deeply satisfying.

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