International Journal of Nursing Studies 93 (2019) 163–167

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Nursing Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/ijns

# Phenomenology in nursing studies: New perspectives – Commentary

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## 1. Introduction

What follows is offered in a spirit of friendly and, hopefully, even creative divergence with the authors of "Phenomenology in Nursing Studies: New perspectives" (Zahavi and Martiny, 2019). Our differing perspectives are not insurmountable and I suspect this dialogue will lead to a wider and even more fruitful exchange between us. It has been remarkable the extent to which so many phenomenological philosophers have been so unaware of the divergent ways in which phenomenology has been applied to qualitative research. This consideration is long overdue. The authors have done a great service to the field by drawing attention to the stark need for clearer understanding of the phenomenological philosophical foundations that should accompany any qualitative phenomenological research. While nobody owns a patent on the word "phenomenology" it has been disheartening to see the term 'phenomenology' so diluted in popularized renditions that makes it unrecognizable from its philosophical foundations. This article is a welcome clarion call for higher standards for applying phenomenological philosophy to qualitative research.

Who could not agree that the research approaches advocated here are worthy and deserving of attention by the Nursing research community? Sass and Parnas's methods may indeed be particularly well suited to the nursing research community and it is certainly true that they should not be overlooked. Also, phenomenological psychiatry is exemplary of the successful application of phenomenology outside of philosophy. The nursing profession and its corresponding research community has been coming into its own stride over the past few decades and the desire for meaningful phenomenological methods that matches the interests of health professionals, as healers, is very real and pressing. However, it would be troubling to me, if the authors where advancing this particular research model at the expense of other kindred and worthy versions of phenomenological research that may not have not been given sufficient attention and therefore a more fair assessment. Using Paley's problematic critique as a starting point may not only be unnecessary but actually work against their own project of promoting better phenomenological research beyond the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy.

I may well be wrong, but appearances suggest that the authors may not have been familiar with qualitative phenomenological research prior to reading Paley's book. I only say this because one gets the impression that the entire field is being seen through Paley's categories. For example, like Paley, no mention is made of the much wider context of the, now vast, field of 'non-phenomenological' and even pseudo-phenomenological qualitative research to which phenomenological psychologists, in the tradition of Giorgi, have been trying to address for decades. More consideration of the disciplinary context of the history of psychology, phenomenology's position as a part of the Humanistic psychology movement, and the application of phenomenological philosophy to direct qualitative research would give much more needed background to the readership.

By beginning with Paley's limited characterization of the field I worry that the authors may be giving him undeserved authority. The recounting of the book jacket comments by Paley's analytic philosopher colleagues gives the appearance that they are actually convinced of Paley's importance. Apart from Paley's empiricist predispositions, customary of analytic philosophers, and his stereotyped misunderstandings of philosophical phenomenology, his most egregious scholarly negligence is the stunning claim that phenomenology lacks a theory of meaning. Moreover, what he offers as a theory of meaning is by no means remotely comparable in scope, depth and fecundity to Husserl's own epistemology and theory of science – and the tradition he engendered. Yet we find no full philosophical critique of these spectacular lapses that practically disqualify Paley as a valid commentator on anything phenomenological – philosophical or qualitative. Instead, while the authors certainly reject Paley's problematical comprehension of philosophical phenomenology, this essay nonetheless actually gives the appearance of *joining* Paley in his rebuke of qualitative phenomenological methods.

Critique from outside of phenomenology is to be expected. But friendly fire from phenomenological philosophers cuts the deepest must be taken most seriously. While applied human science researchers greatly esteem the scholarly authority of their philosopher colleagues for their deeper training in the exegesis of primary sources, we also can't take for granted that they are always able to understand the instituted histories and scientific context of other disciplines outside of philosophy. Nor can we assume that they are practiced in disciplinary methodologies

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2019.02.002
0020-7489/© 2019 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

outside of their training in philosophy. So careful, respectful and *mutual* dialogue is in order here.

Philosophers could greatly serve the phenomenological research community in Nursing (and *all* the human sciences by extension) by applying their specialized philosophical training to counter such egregious mischaracterizations as are Paley's. But what would be most helpful to phenomenological social science (or qualitative) researchers would be further instruction on Husserl's theory of *meaning, intuition, evidence,* and (very importantly) empathy in a way that is applicable to direct qualitative research. This kind of philosophical support and constructive critique with regard to both data collection and especially data *analysis* would contribute greatly to improving the 'quality' of contemporary qualitative phenomenological research. Such positive constructive philosophical clarifications would much better serve this community than the tragic advice to abandon pure phenomenology to philosophers and limit their research instead to the old prewar versions of indirect phenomenology or 'phenomenologically informed' naturalism. It is easer to pass over qualitative phenomenological methodology with a benign neglect while bolstering philosophically interpreted experiments. The harder thing to do is to promote this "phenomenological philosophical hermeneutics of naturalism" *in congruence* with a rigorous phenomenologically founded qualitative research. I shall expand ahead.

## 2. Classical, quasi or proto-phenomenology?

What is called 'Classical' Phenomenological Psychology is really the prewar European psychological tradition of doing natural science based experiments and then interpreting them with the help of phenomenological philosophy. This same interpretive approach to naturalistic research was employed by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Gurwitsch and Schutz in a way that I would call a 'phenomenological hermeneutic of natural science.' This was, and continues to be, extremely productive – and necessary - but not sufficient in itself.

What is advocated here, by the authors, is a return to "phenomenologically informed experimental psychology. "Within historical context this would more accurately be described "proto-phenomenological psychology" as exemplified by David Katz. While we cherish Katz's pioneering application of the overall phenomenological attitude to psychological experimentation, when we read Katz closely, at no point does he interrogate his laboratory data in an explicitly phenomenologically *methodological* way that leads to eidetic understanding. As valuable and groundbreaking as his research was, he remains mostly on the phenomenal level. While he has moments of descriptive elucidation and even profundity, his writing is primarily a categorizing process – not unlike the way wine tasters develop their own descriptive cartography for tastes. This is not necessarily un-phenomenological, but to promote Katz as an exemplar of pure or "classical" phenomenological psychology is a misunderstanding of historical context in psychology. It was the incompleteness of such mixed paradigm approaches that motivated researchers to eventually develop a fully phenomenological psychology.

Again, Katz shows a phenomenological *attitude* but no exact phenomenological *methodology* – per se. His was a phenomenologically informed approach or *orientation* to his laboratory results. More then that, we also see how his phenomenological attitude helped in his research designs – now called 'front-loading'. There is no doubt that his phenomenologically informed attitude made him a more creative experimentalist. For example, his descriptive nomenclature for 'thermal touch' (1989) is underappreciated in the history of psychology. But his experiments are always only a propaedeutic to a *fully* phenomenological psychology. Useful gestalt applications are given - especially the principle of *pragnaz*. But what is most psychologically fascinating - touching other living beings (especially humans) - is entirely neglected. Imaginary touch is not even mentioned. Healing touch, self-touching, maternal and parental touch, and last but not least, erotic touch, are not brought up. These are all the sorts of non-laboratory, more-than-sensory, and meaningful phenomena that is of direct interest to health practitioners and other human science researchers. Why are these unmentioned by Katz? The answer is very likely that such phenomena simply do not adapt well to the operationalization i.e. the physically measurable cause-effect dependent and independent variables required for experimental designs. Such ecological and meaningfully complex phenomena do not fit squarely with experimental methodology - so they are excluded from study. Here the method is the tail that wags the dog. At the end of the day, proto-phenomenology is only a propaedeutic to a fully phenomenological psychological understanding of the deeper *meaningful* aspects of phenomena such as human touch. Again, this is not to say that proto-phenomenological approaches could not be compatible with a fully qualitative phenomenological methodology that elucidates deeper meaning. But it is not yet itself a fully phenomenological psychological method.

It may actually be the case that these early 20$^{th}$ century schools of proto-phenomenological psychology could not sustain their programs into the next generation because they did not have a distinguishing methodology, and therefore a coherently consistent paradigm, which may have contributed to the next generations defaulting back into the naturalism inherent to mainstream academic psychology. We see the same with Kurt Goldstein (albeit more distantly) and the gestaltists, whose influence on the history of psychology was immense – but only in a way that was seriously diluted by its assimilation into the all absorbing juggernaut of our ambient naturalism. To contemporary phenomenological psychologists, naturalized phenomenology is a historical *deja vue*. We have been here before. Space does not permit me to lay out in detail the vicissitudes of mixing methodological paradigms that are designed for divergent epistemological contexts. But what we have learned from history of psychology is that mutuality with the dominant experimentalist paradigm is almost always a matter of the larger soap bubble that simply absorbs the smaller bubble. Phenomenology, paired with experimentalism, has almost always ended up in a diluted secondary relation to naturalist experimental designs and conclusions. Epistemological 'mutuality' is easier said than done in this sort of mixed paradigm research. There is much to learn from studying the history for psychology; a history that is here at risk of repeating itself.

Make no mistake: 'phenomenologically informed experimental psychology' is a good, necessary and fruitful endeavor. It always has, and always will, continue to be fruitful – and it must and should be endorsed. But it is not, by itself, radical enough. It also has liabilities that should be honestly and critically spelled out.

## 3. The *epoché* and the reductions

As Merleau-Ponty so succinctly stated: "Phenomenology is only accessible through a phenomenological method." (1962, p. viii) While there is much more to phenomenology then space here permits, the intrinsic core of this method is the *epoché*, as well as the reductions and the eidetic analysis that follows this practice. The *epoché* is the especially crucial first step in doing phenomenology. It is the reflective position that allows us to come to see our unconsciously taken for granted assumption of the world as *res extensia* – as just things. The *epoché* allows us to wake up to the streaming life of consciousness that permeates and sustains all experience. While a complete or perfect *epoché* is as impossible as is a perfectly controlled experiment, it is this *practice* of the *epoché*

that opens the door to grasping the world as a given-ness to experience. It is from this basis that phenomenologists do their work of describing the world as it is pre-reflectively lived. Put briefly, to not practice the *epoché* is to simply miss the foundational point of what phenomenology is all about. To say that only philosophers should practice the *epoché* is to reserve pure phenomenology to the disciplinary domain of philosophy and to relegate all other disciplines to 'partial' phenomenology or naturalist approaches and methods. There is a problem here.

I sympathize with the frustration over how phenomenology gets implemented in qualitative research. But the conclusions here go too far. Nor is a rationale offered! As we all know, experimental 'evidence based' empiricism is vital to health care sciences. But empiricism is necessarily restricted to what Husserl calls the *real* (sensory-perceptual). By itself, it excludes the *irreal* (more than sensory meanings) that are also of vital interest to healthcare practitioners. This is exactly what holistic nursing and other human sciences are pursuing. Reserving purely phenomenological methodology to only philosophers, gives the appearance that the authors would essentially surrender all non-philosophical disciplines over to strictly empiricist methods.

Phenomenological social science rests on our understandings of phenomenological method – especially the 'psychological' reduction. Generally speaking, the reductions are what one does after first achieving the standpoint of the *epoché*. There are several kinds of reductions one can perform within the *epoché*, but Husserl mostly focused on two types of reductions: the transcendental (which one could call the philosophical reduction) and the psychological reduction. Grossly summarizing for the sake of space, Husserl presents the psychological reduction in roughly two ways: 1. as a preliminary stepping stone towards the transcendental 'philosophical' reduction and 2. as the basis of "a vast autonomous science" (1989, p. 411) that serves as a exemplar of how the other 'human sciences' would parallel and even compliment the natural sciences. Philosophers such as Andrea Staiti (2014) make a strong case for Husserl's affinity with such influences as Dilthey and the late 19th century neo-Kantian movement for a 'cultural' or 'human' science autonomous from the culturally ambient ascendancy of pure naturalism. Especially in light of the above, why do the authors needlessly choose only this one more narrow interpretation? It seems perfectly reasonable that neither one is in any way contradictory to the other. Again, no satisfying rationale is offered for this unnecessarily restrictive and debatable approach.

The claim that *only* philosophers should be practicing the epoché and reductions opens the authors to the allegation of disciplinary hegemonism. Such a model, as implied here, would not appear to have fruitful outcomes. Suggesting that only philosophers should practice purely phenomenological methodology may only estrange potentially receptive audiences in Nursing as well as the other human sciences. To my imagination, this is something Fancisco Varela, the co-founder of the journal the authors cite, would have never done.

Finally, it seems only fair to let the reading audience know that this particular view on the *epoché* and the reductions would not enjoy a consensus among all phenomenological philosophers. Many philosophers promote the use of phenomenological methodology (the *epoche'*, reductions and eidetic analysis) as an interdisciplinary practice and would reject this notion that philosophical phenomenology holds 'disciplinary sovereignty' regarding phenomenological methodology. Philosophers maintain an essential and authoritative position of scholarly leadership in interdisciplinary phenomenology - not unlike the relation of physics to the other natural sciences. Phenomenological philosophy is the *indispensible* foundational discipline to all applications of phenomenology – but this is not *sovereignty*. I would instead suggest that the authors consider a more inclusive two-pronged approach that affirms both applications of the *epoché* and the reductions rather then this hegemon model which is likely to only be ignored or belittled – but, more importantly, it may just be one big tragic mistake.

## 4. On Giorgi

Paley's presentation of the field offers a false resemblance between the three methods he selected for critique. Close up, they have little in common. IPA is phenomenological in 'name only' with limited relation to the actual phenomenological tradition. Van Manen's is a very broad interdisciplinary phenomenological approach targeted primarily for the field of pedagogy and therefore maintains a very open-ended position on actual methodological application. The very act of lumping them together, in the way that he does, again indicates Paley's unfamiliarity with the different disciplinary contexts of phenomenology and the history of qualitative research generally. Of the three, Giorgi's method cannot be understood apart from his wider more radical theoretical project of inaugurating an autonomous psychology on a purely phenomenological basis – a whole disciplinary paradigm that is a unified theoretical approach, methodology and specifically psychological content. This is what Paley can't see. Here, again, I wonder if Zahavi and Martiny, framed by Paley, may be making this same oversight with regard to Giorgi. Giorgi is a well-regarded scholar in contemporary theoretical psychology, yet we see no indication that the authors have fully reviewed Giorgi's theoretical writings – nor the results of the research (1985) he has supervised, or influenced, for over 50 years. Again, the authors seem predisposed by the first impression received from Paley's flawed framework. Instead, it would be helpful if the authors were to review representative phenomenological psychological research studies on learning, thinking, criminal victimization and self-deception as published in an exemplary 1985 collection.

There seems to be an essential misunderstanding here regarding Giorgi's Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method, (1970,1985, 2009). Giorgi's is not a data *collection* method, it is a data *analysis* method. The field of psychology has always been surfeited with interview methods. But what was needed was a reliable phenomenological procedure for explicating the meaning of interview transcripts. It serves no interests to overstate, out of context, that particular Barbro Giorgi quote on interviewing. That quote is entirely unrepresentative of this approach to psychological research. *No phenomenological psychologist would ever endorse refraining from asking questions.* In that book chapter (2006), she was pedagogically addressing the subtleties of interviewing that are usually lost to inexperienced beginners. All interviewers seek rich description that is as close to the pre-reflective givens as possible. Beginner interviewers ask distracting and leading questions that result in intellectualizing. Phenomenological psychologists avoid asking leading and intellectualizing questions, yes. But so do most trained interviewers – of any persuasion. And, yes, for this reason, the emphasis has been on *unstructured* interviews. But the term 'unstructured' here is a misnomer. The very *raison d'etre* of the 'so called' unstructured interview is to avoid the mistake made by designers of questionnaires which pre-frame the categorical structures of the phenomena before the interviewee even speaks. Phenomenological interviewers prefer, as much as reasonable, to take a 'discovery' approach to interviewing. This not the same as a policy of passivity or a 'hands off' approach.

Put another way, phenomenological interviewing techniques, like any good interviews, seek out *maximally rich descriptions* that avoid the Scylla of presumptuously structured and invalidating leading questions or the Charybdis of meanderingly

intellectualized, un-situated, abstract and otherwise vague descriptions. Nobody wants to waste time analyzing poor descriptions that only offer weak intuitions for elucidation. To receive maximally rich descriptions, phenomenological interviewers employ a host of techniques generally available in the psychological literature – especially the clinical literature.

Also, the quote from Giorgi's 2009 text is taken out of a five-page context where he is clearly *supporting* the practice of interviewing (and asking questions) in the data collection process. In this section he actually offers much good common sense advice about interviewing. But he restricts his comments to 'general principles' because his 50-year career in supervising interview-based data collection taught him that interview techniques must flexibly adapt to the context of the phenomenon being studied. The literature on psychological interviewing is vast but nothing at that time was written on how to analyze or phenomenologically elucidate interview descriptions. So while it is true that, for historically necessary reasons, Giorgi's writings were weighted towards data analysis, this was *never* at the expense of interviewing or data collection. Furthermore, ex-students and colleagues of Giorgi, for some time now, have been giving more explicit instruction on how to vary interview techniques for different phenomena (see Englander, 2012; Churchill (2018); Wertz (2010), Wertz et al. (2011), Wertz et al. (2017)). For example, some phenomena, and interviewees, would best receive a more gently reiterative approach while other phenomena, especially *psychiatric* ones, would need considerable structure and active interrogation to get the job done. (Here is where the EASE checklist especially makes sense – despite its risks in the wrong hands) As an interviewer myself, there are moments when it is preferable to intensify the interview with forceful and insistent interrogation and then there are other moments when one needs to go slack and let the interviewee take the lead. Interviewing is a science, a craft and an art. A sophisticated humanistic approach to interviewing would maintain these *multiple* aspects to this practice.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that a dialogue is beginning to happen between Giorgi–style (if one can say that) researchers and the practitioners of the elucidation (or micro-phenomenological) interview technique. Both approaches share a common basis in Husserlian thought and have begun to make contact with one another. Recently an article was published in the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* on the experience of mathematical intuition that combined the elucidation interview method for *data collection* with Giorgi's Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method for *data analysis* (Van-Quynh, 2017). It is very likely we will be seeing more of this fusion in the future. For example, one could view data collection and analysis on micro, meso and meta levels. Intensive micro-phenomenological interviewing may be most suitable for 'fine grained' detailed 'zooming-in' on (static level) phenomena that are close to the *present moment* – such as meditation, certain emotions, certain experiential moments, or daydreaming imagery. But a meso phenomenological interview approach (less interrogative and more narrative) may help to understand other kinds of phenomena that are more widely extended temporally – such as interpersonal relationships and life historical phenomena. A meta level could refer to even more temporally expansive socio-cultural phenomena.

Philosophers outside of this field can't be expected to know all of this, but it would appear to be in the interest of all of us who are dedicated to the promotion of high quality phenomenological research to find venues for cross-disciplinary collaboration and consultation. We do not need disciplinary walls. Experienced qualitative phenomenological researchers from various backgrounds – regardless of initial incongruities – should be receptive to critical feedback from philosophers. Having said all of this, I hope the authors see that it is not in anyone's interests to operate on these misunderstandings regarding Giorgi-style research methodology. There may be other reasons for critique – but not this one. Finally, to sum up: there is a heck of a lot more to Giorgi then interviews.

## 5. Suggestions

Like it or not, qualitative research is not going away. It is a huge, vast and roaring movement within the academy and the professions. Suggesting, that nursing or any researchers give up applying the *epoché* and reductions is essentially the same as saying that they should abandon doing purely phenomenological qualitative research. Again, if I understand this correctly, it is not clear how this suggestion will positively advance the authors' own project of promoting the fruitful application of philosophical phenomenology to other fields beyond philosophy. It could also foreclose opportunities for dialogue, appropriate training, and potential improvement of such methods – including the 'mixed paradigm' methods they advocate. Also, while the authors' recommendation of phenomenologically informed experimentalism is perfectly reasonable, it does not really advance the full potential of phenomenology in the wholly *radical* way that many believe it was intended as a foundation to *all* science - but especially a qualitative science. Apart from all of this, the productive future of applied phenomenological philosophy is to lead qualitative research in the direction implied by Husserl's mission to restore the sciences on a phenomenological basis.

Philosophical phenomenology is the *best* basis for *any* truly qualitative research. It is Husserl's foundational theory of knowledge and science and specifically his ideas regarding intuition, evidence, meaning and empathy, that will ultimately give *any* qualitative research method real validity. It is phenomenology's inevitable mission to clarify the disarray and confusion that is qualitative research generally – not just the methods that Paley calls 'phenomenological' (with varying degrees of accuracy). While philosophers' apprehension towards this field may be understandable, and initial misunderstandings are inevitable, I am appreciative of Zahavi and Martiny for jumping into this fray and advocating for rigorous philosophically informed qualitative phenomenological methodology. In closing, let me reiterate that I would not want to diminish the authors' proposed revival of philosophically informed experimentalism. In Varela's spirit we speak of mutuality between philosophical phenomenology and natural science. But my question is: why not *also* advocate for mutuality between philosophical phenomenology and an autonomous human science - a human science based on purely phenomenological methodology?

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