Phenomenology
A Qualitative Method
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Many scientists believe that the only true method of scientific inquiry is the quantitative randomized control study. However, there are parts of the human system that are not amenable to quantitative measurement and need another form of scientific inquiry. Qualitative research methods were developed to meet this need.

Qualitative research involves understanding human or social problems and may include methods such as historiography, biography, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography. Because it is so time-intensive and requires extensive resources, undertaking a qualitative study requires a strong commitment to the study.

There are several unique aspects to qualitative research. The inquiry is conducted in a naturalistic setting so that the context is considered part of the phenomenon, but the researcher makes no attempt to place experimental controls on the phenomenon being studied. The number of participants is usually small but large enough to obtain rich data, and they are not randomly selected. Rather, the participants are individuals who are willing to discuss and explore a phenomenon, and the researcher determines essences or common themes to explain the phenomenon. Only after the study is complete is the literature review conducted. This article will focus specifically on the qualitative method of phenomenology.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is a qualitative method of inquiry in which researchers attempt to discover the meaning of lived experiences by human beings as they exist in the world. Although there are many phenomenologists, this article will provide a brief overview of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Spiegelberg, Heidegger, and Husserl. According to van Manen, this dynamic interplay of lived experiences involves 6 activities that include turning to the phenomenon, investigating experiences as human beings live them, reflecting on the essential themes, using art and writing to discuss the phenomenon, and balancing the research context. Phenomenologists will use all or some of these activities.

In his form of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty focused on people’s perceptions as things were experienced differently through their bodies (feeling, tasting, touching, and hearing) where he believed consciousness was located. He believed that the only way to perceive the world was to stay away from preconceived ideas and notions that were found in the head.

Spiegelberg believed that phenomenology begins in silence while observing what is happening around the individual. He stated that one “sees” a phenomenon only after experiencing perplexity and frustration in the face of the phenomenon and trying to find the proper description for it. Spiegelberg’s method of phenomenology involved 3 operations: (1) intuiting, which means living with the phenomenon; (2) analyzing, which means looking at the structure of the phenomenon; and (3) describing, which means presenting what the researcher discovered.

Heidegger’s major focus was determining the meaning of being. In works discovered after his death, it was learned that Heidegger spent a great deal of time attempting to understand this phenomenon. For the concept of being to exist, Heidegger proposed 3 aspects of being. Beings were always in the world (facticity); beings were always in advance of themselves (existentiality); and beings were distracted by the insistent claims of everyday moods, interests, and companions (forfeiture). Unfortunately, many phenomenologists were critical of Heidegger, saying that he never really developed a set of ideas or system of phenomenology.

Husserl is considered the leader of the German phenomenological movement and founder of modern phenomenology. He proposed that phenomena cannot be separated from experiencing them. He introduced the term bracketing, the attempt to suspend preconceptions, assumptions, and biases, which is still in use today. He believed that bracketing was primary to an outstanding phenomenological
inquiry, provided the inquiry with scientific rigor, and offered a condition of personal openness for the phenomenon.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data in a phenomenological inquiry, it is important to transcribe all the participants’ recorded statements. Once transcribed, it is much easier to code the statements for specific themes and essences using colored pencils or index cards to find various words that may indicate an essence of the phenomenon. Today, however, there are computer-based programs for analyzing qualitative research that provide broad categorical names based on the data input.

WRITING UP THE QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

When writing the final narrative, Munhall\(^8\) states that nurse researchers must impart a story that is relevant to other nurses whether in practice or education. Therefore, writing up a qualitative inquiry provides a great opportunity to exercise creativity. The author may use a variety of presentations, from straight narrative formats to diaries, to present the story to colleagues. Participants’ direct quotes are provided as a means to further describe the phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Conducting a qualitative phenomenological inquiry takes time and patience, but the outcome may describe a phenomenon that is new to all of us. Give it a try!

References