

Reflections upon the conduct of phenomenological interviews

Somayeh Alirezaei (MSc)¹, Robab Latifnejad Roudsari (PhD)^{2,3*}

¹ PhD Student in Reproductive Health, Student Research Committee, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

² Professor, Nursing and Midwifery Care Research Center, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

³ Department of Midwifery, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

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Phenomenological research focuses on the meaning of lived experience, or “the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (1). Hermeneutic phenomenology involves a process in which the researcher and participants work together to explore and develop their understanding of the phenomenon being studied. According to Gadamer, this co-construction of understanding, or fusion of horizons, occurs through a circle of reading, reflective writing, and interpretation (2). What is essential to this process is the collecting of data representative of the experience being researched (3).

Data collection in hermeneutic phenomenology is a reflective process which aims to access the insights of participants as they make sense of their lived experiences and situatedness (2). Jasper comments that “... the researcher using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach needs to develop specific research skills to enable him/her to get the lived experiences without contaminating the data” (4). Using a Heideggerian hermeneutic approach, effective interviewing may result from understanding the issues of personal interaction, space and environment, and process, which have been named the “Who, Where, and How” of interviewing. The ‘Who’ means that interviewing involves interactions between two parties, the participant and the interviewer (3). The ‘Where’ refers to the pragmatic considerations including conducting interview somewhere private to preserve confidentiality and give the ability to the participant to be relaxed and focused and to develop trust with the interviewer and the interview process (5). The ‘How’ highlighted the point that the researchers should undertake an examination of their own origins, biases, and

understandings; to be open and supportive of participants; and to sensibly share experiences and reciprocate with participants through a dialogical interview process (6). Hoffding and Martiny (2015) also argued the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ in framing a phenomenological interview (7). Indeed, the process of interview is analysed with respect to preconceptions and biases of researchers’ and the pursuit of objectivity and the relevance of subjectivity in phenomenological research (8).

A phenomenological interview serves the purpose of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material, and stories or anecdotes that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon (9). Capturing the essential nature of the phenomenon is sought as the researcher and participant co-create the story during the interview (10). In fact, in terms of an interview, it is a subject-subject relation and not a subject-object relation (11). The interview in phenomenology may thus be more open and less structured (12).

At the time of the interview, the researcher can establish the nature of the study through generating an opening question, which is a starting point to elicit a response from participants, as well as inviting them to think along as they articulate their experiences (13). The interview is structured by asking “inside-out” question, such as “what does this means to you?” or “can you please describe as detailed as possible a situation in which you experienced (11). The participant is invited to talk about “what stands out” or comes to mind most readily. What stands out to the participant is often a meaningful event, whether or not the facts of the story change over time (13). This open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they

* *Corresponding author:* Robab Latifnejad Roudsari, Professor, Nursing and Midwifery Care Research Center, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran. Tel: 985138591511; Email: latifnejadr@mums.ac.ir , rlatifnejad@yahoo.com

desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow up. It is important to be probing to what is going on in the subject-subject relation as well as being able to switch to a presence towards the research phenomenon (11). Two types of probes may be especially useful in the interview: the recapitulation probe and the silent probe. The recapitulation probe means returning participant to the story, which is helpful to keep the story proceeding forward. The silent probe through which incomplete sentences used, allows the respondent "to proceed in whatever direction is most interesting or meaningful"(10).

Seidman (2006) suggests an unstructured, three-stage process, which is built on the phenomenological theory of Husserl, which requires three interviews per person. The first is a focused life history that establishes the context of the interviewee's experience: "how did you get here"? It is followed by an interview aimed to reconstruct the experience with its relationships and structures: "what is it like being you"? Finally, an interview that allowed the respondent to reflect on the meaning of his or her experience: "what does it mean to you?" is conducted (14, 10, 15). Participants are not asked for opinions but rather the details of their experience, for instance, they might be asked to reconstruct a day in the context of the subject of interest (15). Indeed, the basic structure of the interview is the question that establishes the focus of each step in the interview (16).

To conclude, it is important to realize that the interview process in phenomenology needs to be closely controlled by the fundamental questions that prompt the need for the interview. This editorial offers an explicit and theoretically based approach of interviewing for researchers, which provide an explicitly phenomenological influence to interviewing. It enables application of phenomenology as a methodology, which guides the method of data collection as well. This knowledge might be particularly helpful for novice phenomenological researchers, to enable them to develop their understanding of phenomenological interviewing techniques.

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