

PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AS A DISCIPLINE OF A MIND

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This article discusses the opportunities created while practicing phenomenological attitude as one of essential ideas of phenomenological theory and methodology. Phenomenological philosophical method is quite often criticised for its complicated ideas and too few methodological guidelines, however I argue in this article, that the core ideas of phenomenological method have to be understood not as instructions but rather as ideal principles, that have to be modified or interpreted into practices to enable a researcher or social work practitioner not only to understand the phenomenological method, but to actually practice it. Several procedures are proposed that enable the researcher or practitioner to discipline and train the mind in phenomenological attitude. The implications of practicing the phenomenological attitude and the proposed procedures reach far wider than just social work research – they provide also important opportunities for social work practice and are related to such ideals as empathy, respect or compassion.

INTRODUCTION

Social work practice and social work research are quite often making a claim of being client-centred or people-centred. There is a general agreement, that social worker in the role of a practitioner or in the role of researcher should stand on the side of vulnerable people or groups in society, should take a side of those in need or without power and should even represent or advocate the people with specific needs, problems or life situations. At the same time social work practice and especially social work theory is quite often criticised for the lack of firm theoretical and methodological ground. The real complexity of the situation is revealed when one tries to implement the professional imperative of standing on the side of vulnerable people or groups in society with the current theory and methodology practiced in everyday social work. One immediately has a sense of lone gardener without a shovel.

Most of social work practitioners I had contact with claim, that the current theory and methodology that they know of in social work provide some simplified explanations of generalised phenomena in social world at best. Whereas the need is to have theory and methodology that could be used as a tool to understand everyday life situations that are far more specific and far more complex than generalised models provided by for example systems theory. On the other hand what social workers have and use in practice is their life experience and what is more important intuition. The dilemma that social workers are facing however remains – the intuitive knowledge is not „solid“ or „valid“ enough to use when advocating or representing or what is most important predicting.

My aim in this article is to discuss this dilemma because I believe that the implications of one of scientific theories as well as methodologies – phenomenology can provide some useful tools and

solutions exactly for this situation. I argue in this article, that one of the essential ideas of phenomenological theory as well as methodology – the idea of intentionality of the mind and the phenomenological attitude it implies may suggest some very original ideas for social work practice as well as research. I also argue that the philosophical principles as described by Husserl need to be interpreted in a practical (or procedure) sense to become useful in everyday social work practice and research.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL ATTITUDE

Due to the limitations of this article it is not my intention in this chapter to describe the phenomenological theory or to present a full description of phenomenological method, but it is my intention to provide more detail on the key concepts of phenomenological method.

Rather than describing the fully the phenomenological theory and methodology it is worth mentioning (in quite phenomenological manner) the essential requirements for any research to be phenomenological. These requirements constitute a back-bone of phenomenological methodology at the same time reflecting the basic ideas of phenomenological theory. Discussing the essential requirements of phenomenological research Giorgi (Giorgi, 1997) defines at least three of them:

1. One of the most important requirements for research to be phenomenological is phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction consists of at least two ideas that have key importance in this article - a) the idea of bracketing, which basically means recognise and withhold past knowledge about the phenomenon in order to encounter it freshly and describe it precisely as it is intuited or experienced, and b) the idea of withholding the existential index, which means to consider what is given precisely as it is given, as presence or as phenomenon.
2. Second key requirement for phenomenological research is description. The aim and also the method of phenomenological research is pure description and not interpretation, construction or anything else. However the idea of description cannot be presented without the context of key phenomenological ideas – the idea of intentionality of the mind and the idea of experience as it is understood in phenomenological philosophy. Description is valid and valuable aim in phenomenological research precisely because of Husserlian idea that our consciousness is one with the “outside world” and always directed to something (intentional) and because experience in Husserlian understanding is intuition of an object. Describing experience therefore means describing intuition of a person on certain object as a valid way of discovering the object through the appearance of this object in the consciousness.

3. Third key requirement in the phenomenological research is the search for essence of meaning or intuition. Whatever is given factually becomes one example of possible instances of the phenomenon, and by multiplying possibilities one becomes aware of those features that cannot be removed and in this way also what is essential for the object to be given to consciousness. Even if one is interested in describing the intuitions of the object, the final goal is to look beyond concrete factual intuitions and discover the constituents of the phenomenon that are essential, without which the phenomenon would not be that what it is.
4. The idea of intersubjectivity or the ability of personal experience to involve experiences of other people. Without this key idea the use of phenomenological method in research would be impossible, because it would only allow the researcher him- or herself to intuit on a studied phenomenon. However, the experience of other people would be useless. C.Moustakas notes, that “although Husserl recognised the imperative of the transcendental ego in the uncovering of meanings and essences, he did not ignore the importance of intersubjective, particularly in connection with self-insights and subjective perceptions of what is real”. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 37). Any person is not experiencing separated private world, rather he or she is experiencing the world of others too. My existence and the others existence are co-present in intentional communion. This community sense exists as possibility in every human being. In principle, there is within me a realm of virtually infinite access to other human beings. This is how the illusion of solipsism is overcome. (Moustakas, 1994)

Summing up, the phenomenological attitude as it is discussed in this article can be characterised by attributing to all four above requirements. Phenomenological attitude means being able (and also providing effort to) to bracket one's pre-knowledge about the phenomenon, being able to describe rather than interpret (or to take intuition as a valid means of discovery), being able to (and also providing effort to) relate to experiences of others and being able to (and also putting effort) to look for essential meanings.

These requirements however are not instructions, nor were they intended as such. The above requirements form a backbone of philosophical phenomenological method; however they have to be modified in order to be used in scientific analysis. I also argue later in the article, that with a certain modifications they can also be used in analysing (understanding) social work practice. The idea of bracketing has to be modified into the assumption of the phenomenological reduction of researcher or practitioner. Even if achieving absolute withholding from any previous knowledge while researching certain phenomenon is very hard to imagine in practice, because it would also imply

abstaining from professional and academic training, any learned theories, personal experiences and know-how in the field, nonetheless the researcher has to adopt the attitude of phenomenological reduction. He or she must withhold from any previous knowledge not in absolute terms but in terms of distorting his or her ability to intuit the concrete instance of phenomenon as it is presented in research participant's description. The researcher has to put effort to abstain from that previous knowledge that would distort his or her ability to accept the description of phenomenon as it is, not as researcher would like (or imagine) it to be. The second important requirement of being descriptive has to be modified into the ability of researcher to get as detailed and precise descriptions of experiences of phenomenon as possible from research participants. Being descriptive in this sense means abstaining from generalisations or abstractions as much as possible in this step, because rather than enriching research data they distort it. Being descriptive here would mean systematic and scrupulous effort to look for smallest, subtlest details that may seem totally insignificant or irrelevant from the first glance. And the idea of looking for essential meanings has to be modified to looking for essential scientific constituents of studied phenomenon in the framework of a given science. In our case this modification would mean analysing the descriptions and looking for essential constituent meanings of a studied social work phenomenon. And the idea of intersubjectivity has to be modified to empathy, as an effort to involve other experiences into my experience. Empathy here is the ability to intuit on the same object from the perspective of other human being as well as your personal perspective.

Summing up it must be noted, that the requirements that constitute the backbone of philosophical phenomenological method should not be viewed or understood as instructions, rather as ideals or ideal principles and therefore have to be modified in order to use them as a research method in scientific research of social work or as a everyday analytic tool in social work practice. These modifications constitute transformation of an ideal principle into practical principles related to scientific research of social work and inquiry of social work practice.

THE USE OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL ATTITUDE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I further discuss the modifications of key phenomenological ideal principles in order to provide a set of instructions enabling social work researchers and practitioners to employ phenomenological theory and methodology in social work research as well as social work practice. I argue, that the ideal principles may be modified to form a certain discipline of a researcher or practitioner mind, which can be practiced rather than merely intellectually understood and therefore may provide a useful tool for everyday social work research and practice.

We have already modified the ideal principle of phenomenological reduction to the principle of researcher or practitioner taking care of abstaining from any previous knowledge that can distort his

or her intuition on the phenomenon. In my understanding this principle, due to its importance has to be discussed in more detail. In order to become a practice of discipline of the mind this principle has to further be modified into a set of instructions that enable a research or practitioner to practice phenomenological reduction and excel his or her ability to abstain from pre-knowledge. Therefore I would suggest that the act of abstaining should be discussed here in more detail. I would argue that the practice of phenomenological reduction raises at least two distinct problems – first of all how one can recognise the possibility of distortion in practice? And the second what does it mean in practice to abstain? The first problem is strongly related with the mental capability of a researcher or practitioner for self-reflection. Self-reflection is the key ability in recognising the ways ones' mind can distort ones' intuition. Being able to reflect on the processes of mind provides the firm ground for the ability to recognise the possible distortions. For example being able to recognise the moment one some stereotypical pre-understanding or cliché is distorting my intuition on a certain phenomenon means in practice the ability to reflect on my mind and the understanding of the ways my mind generally works. In this way phenomenological attitude and research becomes much related to a kind of meditation practice. However self-reflection in itself is an ideal principle. And it would be wrong to require from social work practitioners and social work researchers to know the ways their mind works perfectly. Rather this principle can be modified further into practice. And self-reflection practice in phenomenological research or in social work practice from the phenomenological attitude would mean providing systematic effort to notice the alterations of one's' mind in the process of research or practice, and to find constituent essences of those alterations as a kind of habit patterns of the mind. To put it in other terms, researching certain phenomenon in the world means using one intuition on the phenomenon and therefore requires systematic effort not only to analyse the object of intuitions but also the process of intuition. In practice, phenomenological reduction is practiced in especially in the analysis of data (experiential descriptions) and it is aimed at minimising the distortions of intuition on the description. Therefore I would suggest following procedures as a possible guidelines for practice of phenomenological reduction attitude in both social work research and practice:

1. Systematic checking of one's' mental state. It is imperative to keep the track of changing mental state – tiredness, agitation, enthusiasm, apathy, confusion or any other state of mind, because it is one possible source of distortions of intuition. The mind may tend to stick to the first intuition just due to the fact of being tired or agitated. Therefore the systematic checking of the mental state provides opportunity to decrease if not eliminate in the long run the distortions of intuition caused by a mental state. This can be practiced in everyday life as well as research situation by simply spending some minutes self-reflecting the state of mind.

2. Systematic checking of one's physical state. Even though it is strongly related to the above procedure I have described it separately in order to stress the importance of self-reflection on one's physical state. The mind of a hungry, sleepy or tired person sure is working differently from the mind of a well-rested person. Therefore it is also important to self-reflect on one's physical state.
3. Systematic efforts to recognise clichés, stereotypes, prejudices, presuppositions. In practice this means a kind of efforts to trace back the intuition and check whether it is not grounded in cliché, stereotype, prejudice or some other form of pre-knowledge. This procedure may also be called critical reflection of one's intuition on the phenomenon. In practical sense this procedure means spending some time after an intuition and critically reflecting on it rather than hurrying up further into experiential descriptions.
4. Systematic efforts to keep the concentration of the mind on the matter of experiential descriptions. It is an inherent feature of every mind to be intentional, however the intentionality of the mind is always changing – which means that the object towards which the mind is intentional is always changing, which can be yet another source of distortions. Therefore there is a need to systematically notice what is the object of the intentionality of one's mind and if needed focus back on the subject matter of the research or inquiry of social work practice. In practical terms, noticing the focus of the mind means systematically spending some minutes on self-reflection of one's concentration.

The ideal principle of description and modified principle of getting the experiential description as detailed, precise and scrupulous as possible is related to the practice of reflection and reviewing. One can follow and practice the attitude of descriptiveness while keeping one's mind concentrated on the subject matter of phenomenon, abstaining from any previous pre-knowledge and reflecting upon the description in terms of its fullness, richness and amount of subtle detail. In practice this means training one's mind to seek subtle detail rather than hurry up with generalised abstract descriptions. In practice this means spending some minutes reflecting and reviewing the description and looking for the general, abstract and therefore unclear parts, clarifying them, and again spending some time reflecting and reviewing to be able to notice subtle inconsistencies.

The ideal principle of searching for essences of meaning of phenomenon and the modified principle of looking for essential scientific constituents of the phenomenon in the framework of a given science may also be in fact practiced as intuition. The two above mentioned procedures or practices are intended to provide the firm ground for the intuition practiced here. They are intended to minimise the distortions, however they must not be understood as consequent steps, rather as constant continuous practice that should also be present during the intuition process. Therefore

looking for essential meanings also involves self-reflection, reflection and reviewing in order to minimise the possible distortions.

The ideal principle of intersubjectivity and the modified principle of empathy also require same practices of reflection and self-reflection, because in order to achieve empathy one has to be able to understand the experience from the perspective of the experiencing person. The first two practices described in this chapter also provide the firm ground also for empathy.

Summing up, the described procedures provide opportunity to practice the phenomenological attitude in social work research and in social work practice. They should not be understood as a steps or a prescription to try once, rather they should be understood as a continuous, systematic effort of training and disciplining one's mind to be as focused and authentically intuitive as possible and to be able to avoid the possible distortions. It is evident that such practice takes not only effort but also time, and this is important also in a way that systematically organising separate time for self-reflection, reflection, reviewing means also disciplining one's mind to be less hurried and shallow and more concentrated and intuitive.

The practical application of principles, procedures and practices discussed in this chapter may help a researcher conducting a phenomenological research in the field of social work, but also they may help a practitioner of social work conducting an everyday inquiry in social work practice.

Due to the fact, that the described procedures should be understood as a continuous systematic practice they have implication not only in an act of research or inquiry but also in a broader sense of everyday social work practice. For example disciplining the mind to be more focused and training it to be more able to notice subtle details in a phenomenological research setting also implies the mind is able to do that in an everyday setting.

The key practices of self-reflection, reflections, reviewing, and focusing the mind not only provide opportunity to conduct phenomenological research but also provide opportunity for social workers to train (in quite similar manner as physical trailing of the body) one's mind in empathy and insight. In a similar way the idea of empathy, which has a central role in everyday social work practice is merely an intellectual abstraction of one does not have a practice of making oneself excel in it. Just understanding the ideal of empathy may be interesting but hardly useful until one has a sense of practical application – to put it simply if one does not know how to practice empathy.

Giorgi also argues that one of the most difficult problems concerning phenomenological thought is the communication of it. One of the reasons for it is that phenomenological thinking is intrinsically difficult since it goes against natural tendency of consciousness to go toward things rather than its own processes (Giorgi, 1985).

And yet another implication (and also a challenge) of practicing phenomenological attitude is related to time. Since it is exactly the real or imagined lack of time in everyday social work practice or in social work research that created opportunities for fast stereotypical understandings, decisions and actions the suggested procedures of organising separate time moments in both social work research and practice for self-reflection, reflection, reviewing again enables slower, but deeper understandings, decisions and actions.

Summary

This article discusses the opportunities created while practicing phenomenological attitude as one of essential ideas of phenomenological theory and methodology. Phenomenological philosophical method is quite often criticised for its complicated ideas and too few methodological guidelines, however I argue in this article, that the core ideas of phenomenological method have to be understood not as instructions but rather as ideal principles, that have to be modified or interpreted into practices to enable a researcher or social work practitioner not only to understand the phenomenological method, but to actually practice it. There are 4 main phenomenological principles discussed in the article that distinguish the phenomenological method among many others – phenomenological attitude or reduction, description of phenomena, extracting essential structural constituents of experience and intersubjectivity. Each of the four principles can be transformed into practical procedures however. Firstly the principle of phenomenological reduction can be transformed into practice of abstaining from the use of abstractions or stereotypes or any other forms of pre-knowledge on phenomenon. The principle of describing the experience can be transformed into abstaining from abstract universal descriptions and rather seeking the subtle details in descriptions. The principle of extracting essential structural constituents of an experience means in practice abstracting concrete and detail description of an experience until unique core structural constituents of an experience can be distinguished. And the last principle of intersubjectivity in practice means testing the extracted core structural constituents by the use of the transformed descriptions of an experience or with the help of research participant. Several procedures are proposed that enable the researcher or practitioner to discipline and train the mind in phenomenological attitude. The implications of practicing the phenomenological attitude and the proposed procedures reach far wider than just social work research – they provide also important opportunities for social work practice and are related to such ideals as empathy, respect or compassion.

Santrauka

Šis straipsnis aptaria fenomenologinės laikysenos, kaip vienos esminių fenomenologinės teorijos ir metodologijos idėjų, praktikavimo sukuriamas galimybes. Filosofinis fenomenologinis metodas yra dažnai kritikuojamas dėl savo sudėtingų idėjų ir per menkų metodinių nurodymų, tačiau šiame straipsnyje teigiu, kad esminės fenomenologinės teorijos ir metodologijos idėjos neturėtų būti suprantamos kaip instrukcijos, o greičiau kaip tam tikri idealizuoti principai, kuriuos būtina modifikuoti į praktines procedūras. Tik tuomet fenomenologinė laikysena leis socialinio darbo tyrėjams bei praktikams ne tik suprasti fenomenologinį metodą bet ir jį praktikuoti. Straipsnyje aptariami 4 esminiai bruožai išskiriantys fenomenologinį metodą – fenomenologinė redukcija, patirties aprašymas, patyrimo esminių struktūrų paieška ir intersubjektyvumas. Tačiau kiekvieną šių keturių idealizuotų principų yra įmanoma transformuoti į konkrečias praktines

procedūras. Pirmiausia fenomenologinės redukcijos principas turi būti susiaurintas ir transformuotas į susilaikymą nuo išankstinių nuostatų ir išankstinių teorinių prielaidų tiriamojo reiškinių požiūriu. Antrasis idealizuotas patirties aprašymo principas turi būti transformuotas į maksimalų susilaikymą nuo interpretacijos ir patirties aprašymo tikslumo bei detalumo išlaikymą. Trečiasis esminių patirties struktūrų paieškos principas turi būti transformuotas į esminių patirties sudedamųjų dalių paiešką, ne tik detalių patyrimo aprašymą ir galiausiai ketvirtasis idealizuotas intersubjektyvumo principas reiškia, kad aprašyta ir suabstraktinta patirties struktūra turėtų būti patikrinama kartu su tyrimo dalyviu ar remiantis jo aprašymu. Kiekvieno šių keturių principų laikymasis turi lemiamos reikšmės fenomenologinės analizės kokybei, tačiau kyla sunkumų juos praktiškai taikant tiek moksliniuose tyrimuose tiek kasdienėje socialinio darbo praktikoje. Straipsnyje aptariamos ir siūlomos kelios konkrečios procedūros, kurios leidžia tyrėjams bei praktikams disciplinuoti ir treniruoti savo protą fenomenologinei laikysenai panašiu būdu, kaip fiziniai pratimai treniruoja kūną. Fenomenologinės laikysenos praktikavimo rezultatai yra reikšmingi ne tik socialinio darbo tyrimams, bet taip pat kuria naujas galimybes ir socialinio darbo praktikoje ir gali būti siejami su tokių idealių idėjų, kaip empatija, pagarba ar atjauta supratimu ir praktikavimu.

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