

Differences between Phenomenological Research and a Basic Qualitative Research Design

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Adapted from a number of materials I created for my Capella courses, learners and faculty

It is far more likely that qualitative researcher in the SOE will conduct a basic qualitative study than a phenomenological study although it is not unusual for our learners to propose phenomenological research without fully understanding the design and when it is appropriate.

Phenomenological research can be a bit confusing because (a) phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that underpins all of qualitative research; (b) phenomenological research is a distinct qualitative method for discovering the underlying structure of shared essences of some social phenomenon; (c) phenomenological research might not be adequately addressed in many general research methods text books; and (d) because so few qualitative methodologists include a basic or generic category of research, the result is that researchers, faculty, and learners tend to incorrectly label any form of qualitative research that is not ethnographic, grounded study or case study as phenomenological research. As a result, much of what is not phenomenological research gets labeled as phenomenological research and the confusion regarding phenomenological research is exacerbated.

Michael Patton (1990) has a clear detailed explanation of the aim of phenomenological research since he bases this method of research on:

the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to the identity of the essences of the phenomenon, for example, the essences of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, the essence of being a participant in a particular program. The assumption of essence, like the ethnographer's assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study. [p. 70, emphasis in original]

Phenomenology is focused on individuals' meaning making as the quintessential element of the human experience (Patton, 2002). The important findings derived from phenomenology are an understanding of a phenomenon as seen through the eyes of those who have experienced it. Phenomenological inquiry holds the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience (Patton, 2002). The focus of a phenomenological study is in uncovering and interpreting the inner essence of the participants' cognitive processing regarding some common experience. Thus the final product of a phenomenological inquiry is a description that presents the essence of the phenomenon. A reader of a phenomenological should have a strong sense of "now I understand what it is like to have experienced that particular phenomenon."

In general "a phenomenological research is well suited for studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26).

The nature of the research question will determine the methodology and the specific research design. A phenomenological study should have a strong central phenomenological question. Please note the “affective, emotional and intense human experience” conveyed in each example phenomenological research question below and how the phenomenon is clearly identified.

Here are examples of phenomenological research questions:

- What is the experience of motherhood for female soldiers deployed to Afghanistan who have children between the ages of 1 and 3 at home?
The phenomenon in the question above is motherhood
- What is self-forgiveness for convicted murders?
The phenomenon in the question above is self-forgiveness
- How do high school teachers use intuition in making classroom management decisions during high risk incidents?
The phenomenon in the question above is the use of intuition
- How do female high school teachers who have been physically assaulted by students overcome their fears so they can effectively teach?
The phenomenon in the question above is the recovery process
- What role does spirituality play in the remission of cancer in patients?
The phenomenon in the question above is spirituality

Do you see how the central research question identifies phenomenon being examined? Phenomenology attempts to get below the surface of simply perceptions to discover and identify how the phenomenon was experienced and the shared essence of that experience. If a learner or mentee cannot readily identify the phenomenon that will be studied, then a phenomenological design is most likely not the appropriate design.

Merriam (2009) describes a basic qualitative research study as having been derived philosophically from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction and as being used by researchers who are interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). Ultimately, the purpose of educational qualitative research is to improve our practice and the basic qualitative research design is particularly well suited to obtain an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes (S. B. Merriam, personal communication, September 5, 2013). For example, a basic qualitative study can be used to uncover strategies, techniques, and practices of highly effective teachers and administrators. Such insight is not possible with quantitative approaches. Phenomenological research is not used to examine processes.

In our ED8112 Introduction to Qualitative Research we emphasize the value to practitioners of uncovering effective practices and processes through a basic qualitative research design.

A basic qualitative research design will attempt to uncover

- the participants' experiences
- the meaning the participant ascribes to those experiences, or
- a process (e.g., How have 12 school leaders transformed their schools from low achieving schools to high achieving schools?)

It is also possible to discover experience, meaning making and process in one study. An example might be to investigate the experiences of high school seniors traveling abroad as part of a school program. The researcher might inquire about the actual experiences abroad, what those experiences mean to the participants and the transformative nature of the experiences in terms of changed view of global issues, cultural sensitivity, college and career planning, etc.

A basic qualitative research design will not focus solely on beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or ideas about things. Beliefs, opinions, etc. might emerge as part of one's findings but should not be the purpose for conducting a basic qualitative research design. If a researcher's primary focus is on beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or ideas about things and there is a compelling reason for the investigation, then beliefs, opinions, etc. can be collected via quantitative survey research with an instrument for which there is published evidence of its validity and reliability.

References

- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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