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Meaningfulness as an Epistemologic Concept for Explicating the Researcher's Constitutive Part in Phenomenologic Research

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Back to Top

Abstract

In his philosophy, Husserl gave us the epistemologic concept of intentionality. In phenomenologic research, intentionality can be understood in a practical way as our connections to the phenomena that we are studying. When phenomenologic data are the transcripts of interviews, our connections can be seen during data analysis as we identify passages in transcripts that stand out as personally meaningful. Tracing back through our past experiences to the origins of that meaningfulness provides us with a picture of the preunderstanding, assumptions, and beliefs that contribute to our unique perception of the phenomena that we are studying. Concrete guidelines are given for initiating the process of discovering one's constitutive part in phenomenologic studies.

Over the course of his life's work, Husserl gave us the epistemologic elements of phenomenology: the notions of intentionality, transcendentality, and intersubjectivity. Each of these theoretic concepts denotes an important aspect of human consciousness. Each contributes to understanding human experience and points to the way that our research should be conducted. However, Husserl left us these important ideas as ideas only. His legacy to the research community was his philosophy, leaving to those of us who engage in phenomenologic research the task of devising how his philosophic ideas are put into action. With only passing references to the notion of transcendentality and intersubjectivity, it is the concept of intentionality that is of concern here.

Husserl's early work is characterized by a rather mechanistic and abstract rendering of consciousness as a process. Eventually, he moved beyond a sterile depiction of human consciousness in which he seemed to imply that a completely transcendent point of view of the research arena is possible for researchers. In the work of his later years, he introduced the term "lifeworld" (*lebenswelt*),1 and we were able to appreciate consciousness in a more expanded and humanistic way than before. Lifeworld implies that our everyday experience is the primordial

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Full Text
Request Permissions

Outline

- Abstract
- INTENTIONALITY
- INTENTIONALITY AND SELF-AWARENESS
- MEANINGFULNESS AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL TOOL
- BRACKETING
- GUIDELINES FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE
- DISCOVERING THE QUESTION
- GUIDELINES FOR ILLUMINATING THE RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE IN PHENOMENOLOGIC RESEARCH
- REFERENCES

nature of consciousness. The lifeworld is the realm in which we all live in a straightforward, noncritical manner. It is where we conduct our ordinary, day-to-day tasks and projects—the walking, eating, musing—that comprise what we sometimes refer to as lived experience.

When Husserl acknowledged everyday reality and the lifeworld as the primary mode of consciousness, he implied that it is not enough to explicate the nature of consciousness as simply a reciprocal process between the perceiving mind and its objects; rather, what is called for is *understanding that we live as if what we perceive is what is*. This straightforward, uncritical approach to consciousness is the concern and realm of phenomenology. When he moved away from a mechanistic interpretation of human consciousness, Husserl gave us a glimpse of the future and the ascendancy of hermeneutic phenomenology, which disputes the notion that a researcher can take an absolute position of transcendency in relationship to the objects of study. The prevailing view of phenomenologists now is that as residents of the lifeworld, researchers always already are involved with the objects of their investigations. It would be a mistake, however, if we were to dismiss Husserl's early preoccupation with the mechanics, if you will, of consciousness and overlook the significance that his thinking has for conducting phenomenologic research.

It was Husserl's belief that phenomenology should be seen as the first philosophy, that is, the guiding stance or attitude for all scientific thinking, because phenomenology takes into account the scientist's relationship with research projects, thereby ensuring the objectivity upon which science is founded. Husserl insisted that any projects designed to explain and control the natural world properly begin with awareness of the scientist's own experience of the phenomenon under study.[1] This is true of phenomenologic research as well.

When we engage in phenomenology, we do so because we want to understand subjective experience of the lifeworld. Because we can think about and reflect on our own experiencing, it is immediately clear that phenomenologic inquiry is concerned with transcendental subjectivity. Husserl spent a great deal of time explicating the notion of the transcendental, that uniquely human capacity to look at oneself, to think about thinking, that is, the capacity for awareness of the meaning of one's experience. But more important is Husserl's recognition that transcendental, reflexive activity itself can and should be a focus for study.[2]

Much of what is reported in nursing journals as phenomenologic research lacks a component crucial to the phenomenologic method as conceived by Husserl. Phenomenologic studies typically consist of compilations of themes that describe, often quite elegantly, the phenomena of the world of health care. Although these descriptions have contributed to understanding the lifeworld of patients and nurses, too often they are offered without adequate consideration for the researchers' own involvement with the data and with the resulting description. In order to conduct truly phenomenologic research, we need to develop concrete ways to examine how we, as researchers, and, even more importantly, as residents of the lifeworld, constitute the phenomena that we study and about which we eventually create theories to guide our practice.

The goal of understanding lived experience and the lifeworld depends on thoughtful consideration of the reciprocity between perception and the lifeworld, and how perception contributes to lived experience. Phenomenologic investigative procedures can be explored phenomenologically.[2] This means that for phenomenologists, self-awareness is an integral aspect of exploring phenomena. Self-awareness is the foundation of objectivity in phenomenologic research, and it requires of us a consideration of Husserl's notion of intentionality.

Back to Top

INTENTIONALITY

Intentionality refers to the relationship between persons and the objects or events of their experience, or, more simply, one's directed awareness of an object or event.2 There is always an intentional relationship with the things that make up our everyday lives. We understand the meaning of the things that we use and see around us as the things and places that belong to and signify our world. A phenomenologist is interested in the way that consciousness grasps an object or event as *something,* as *meant*.3 To say that something is understood as *meant* indicates our historic position. As residents of the lifeworld we understand the world's phenomena from the perspective of our particular situatedness. Even as we strive to be open to the meaning of human experience, we bring to our investigations of such events a context of inherent meaning of which we may or may not be aware.

Within the realm of the lifeworld, phenomenology looks not simply at objects and events as such, but at the way that they are experienced. Phenomenology seeks essences, or the universal patterns of experiencing, which are then described as faithfully as possible. The discovery of patterns of experiencing sets us on a path different from that of traditional positivistic science, which conveys the notion that we are separate from or unconnected to the things that we observe, explore, and manipulate. Phenomenology makes clear that consciousness is a creative participant in the relationship between ourselves and the world that we call experience. Our residency in the lifeworld places us in the position of creative cocontributors with that world. As researchers, we must keep in mind that the things that we study are always seen through the collaborative lens of our perceptions. Phenomenologic research, if it is true to phenomenologic philosophy, gives us clear information about how we are connected to the things that we study.

To say that a phenomenon is experienced implies an active relationship between consciousness and its objects. An active relationship between consciousness and its objects suggests a duality in which experiencing depends on the objects and events of the lifeworld. Indeed, one cannot have experience apart from the lifeworld and its things and situations; consciousness is dependent on the world for content. In a way, the content of consciousness—the things and situations that consciousness ponders, sees, and understands—is constituted by it. Consciousness is a creative relationship with the world. This is not to say that consciousness creates the things it sees (or maybe it does!), but only that it understands, and it is this understanding that is unique to each consciousness, each perceiver.

A phenomenon is understood as a cocreation of the interaction between oneself and the phenomenon, bringing one's past experience and understanding of an event or object to the present moment. As I sit here writing, I can look out the window and see my rose bush. To look at this rose is more than simply to see it; looking at it is an experience that is rich with meaning. It is the only rose bush that I have. It is the only rose that I have ever had because, until recently, I have had no garden in which to grow roses. The rose was a birthday gift from my husband, who was with me when I discovered it in a world-famous rose garden. The color has an emotional quality that I can describe only as heart-breakingly beautiful. Its fragrance is divine. It is the most carefully tended plant in my garden. All of these elements come together as the experience of looking-at-the-rose, so that the rose's beauty clearly derives not simply from its pale mauve color, which reminds me of moonlight, or its fragrance, but also from the hundreds of times that I have walked into the garden seeking the-experience-of-this-rose.

In the moment of perceiving, we experience the lifeworld in an all-at-once way, intuitively grasping its meaning. This active relationship in which we experience the things and events of our world as endowed with meaning, as *meant*, is the intentionality of which Husserl spoke. We see the particular characteristics of the object or event, whatever it may be, but more importantly, in the phenomenologic frame of mind, we also see the universal aspects of the phenomenon that let us grasp the essence of the experience, for example, of raising a child who has an impaired heart. The significance of this for researchers is that unless we acknowledge our already meaning-endowed relationships with the

topics of our research, we are deluded about grasping the essence of any phenomenon.

Back to Top

INTENTIONALITY AND SELF-AWARENESS

Phenomenologic descriptions are created amidst a researcher's past and present experiencing. In Husserlian terms, a researcher's intentional consciousness is integrally involved in the account of any phenomenon. Or, as Gadamer [4] expresses it from a hermeneutic point of view, our crucial concern is the relationship between the text and the way that we understand the reality that it refers to. Zaner, speaking of the phenomenologist, says that "since his aim is to develop his discipline as rigorously as possible, and since that signifies that he must obtain the best possible evidence for the things to be studied, then clearly, the phenomenologist must turn to *his own mental life*."[5(p122)] Husserl repeatedly presents us with the understanding that phenomenologists look at their own conscious processes as well as the phenomena they describe.[1,2] Natanson,[3] discussing Husserl's insight, makes the point that when we look at an object or event in phenomenologic research, we must do more than simply consider what is going on and then describe it. The researcher must also look at his or her own process of seeing, of perceiving the phenomenon. "Intentionality carries with it a reflexive dimension which distinguishes it from what otherwise might be thought of as simple, straightforward inspection of data—the kind of close, painstakingly accurate description of animals done by some naturalists."[3(p13)] If our intentionality is neglected in phenomenologic research, then the labors of what we call phenomenologic research are nothing more than the sorting, classifying, and describing that scientists have done since Aristotle. Husserl considered science naïve about method, unaware of the destructiveness of its objectivism, which is the detachment from and dismissal of the subjectivity, the self-interest that launches all scientific projects. He believed that in phenomenology he had developed a first philosophy of science and had conveyed a caveat to all scientists and researchers for the necessity of self-awareness.[1]

All true phenomenologic research calls forth self-awareness in the researcher, if he or she is ready for such awareness. Self-awareness in phenomenologic research is more than setting aside preconceptions. In a larger sense, it is self-discovery. Natanson states, "Husserlian Reason is committed to the responsibility of man for sustaining and honoring philosophical reflection: the integral person seeking to know himself."[3(p18)] Researcher self-awareness means discovering, in the act of perceiving the phenomenon under investigation, the deep, foundational basis of personal meaningfulness that is always implicitly present in one's research interests.

All true phenomenologic research calls forth self-awareness in the researcher, if he or she is ready for such awareness.

When we look at our relationships with the things that we are studying, we take a step back from our mundane researcher selves who work in a straightforward manner observing, organizing, cataloguing, and conceptualizing as we identify, analyze, and describe something. This reflective pause is taken in order to objectify our method so that we can talk about it, planning our approach and critiquing our work. We want to know if the work that we are doing, our phenomenologizing, as Fink [6] expresses it, is going to produce a valid description, one that elucidates the essential structures of the phenomenon and expands our understanding of human experience, thus drawing the human community closer. We want to know how well we are explicating the way that the phenomenon is constituted in the lifeworld. In so doing, we temporarily abandon our everyday mode of the natural attitude and of uncritical acceptance. Yet we never entirely cut ourselves loose from the natural attitude. All of our "thematic cognitions in the end refer back to [the natural attitude] as the continual situation of the one phenomenologizing."[6(p136)] As long as we remain in the natural attitude, we take for granted that the world is an absolute, existent unity that is quite independent

of us, outside of which there is nothing. The phenomenologic reduction teaches us that what we have held as absolute is really a product of our constituting subjectivity,6 and it is therefore subject to the meaning of our particular history, our particular lived experience.

The meaning that we bring to our interaction with the world and others is intentionality as described by Husserl. If we understand what we find meaningful, then we begin to understand how we are connected to the things that we study and how this connection must be taken into account if we are to produce research that enhances understanding of others and our mutual lifeworld. In this way, meaningfulness can be understood from an epistemologic perspective. The term "meaningfulness" is another way of indicating that we have our own unique history with and experience of the things or events that we are studying. Because meaningfulness guides the way that we relate to the world and to others, it also implies intersubjectivity, a topic whose discussion is beyond the purposes here.

Back to Top

MEANINGFULNESS AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL TOOL

Meaningfulness as a tool for phenomenologic research can be considered concretely with a discussion about how we make sense of the data in interview transcripts. As an epistemologic concept, meaningfulness has two functions for analysis of interview transcripts. One is its obvious and straightforward function as an indicator of the interviewee's experience. In this regard, we identify those passages in a transcript that stand out to us and denote the interviewee's direct experiencing. Such passages are the individual's accounts of interpersonal events, reflective or introspective statements, as well as expressions of emotion. We highlight these passages of transcript as meaningful because they add to the store of data about the phenomena that we are investigating. The passages that stand out to us and that we highlight are the rough building blocks of what ultimately will be a phenomenologic description. We can then begin to sort through these data using imaginative variation 2 to identify a phenomenon's essential structure. This is the familiar work of phenomenologists as they craft descriptions of lived experience. However, there is a less obvious epistemologic function of meaningfulness. As well as indicating the interviewees' experience, meaningfulness also functions indirectly as an indicator of the researcher's experience; that is, those passages that stand out to us as significant for the interviewee's experience are, at the same time, significant for our own experience and hold clues about our decision-making process as the data are analyzed. It is this standing-out function of meaningfulness that will be considered here, for it signifies the intentionality that Husserl repeatedly emphasized as central to phenomenology.

The researcher's account of the decision-making process is a crucial component for the validity and credibility of phenomenologic research. Because we are scientists, we are concerned with objectivity and with the validity of the descriptions of human experience that we create. As researchers, the stance from which we begin, from which we step aside, and to which we return countless times throughout our work is accountable to phenomenologic inquiry.2 Contrary to the objections of phenomenologists who decry the notion of transcendence and insist that the idea of the transcendental was Husserl's fantasy and should be abandoned, it is important that we use our capacity for self-reflection and awareness, despite the inherent limits to our vision and understanding placed on us by our residency in the lifeworld. Rather than dismiss the possibilities for transcendental understanding, as researchers we can begin the search for our connections with and our guiding interests in the things we study, thereby qualifying the term "transcendental" as referring to the constituting subjectivity that is revealed when we perform the reduction.6 When we pause to consider the phenomena being studied and identify the way that they are lived uncritically in the lifeworld, we have the opportunity to meet ourselves and discover what is meaningful to us, to discover the constitutive role that such meaningfulness takes in our experience of the phenomena. Passages in interview transcripts stand out because they signify inherent personal meaningfulness to us; they stand out to us because we are already involved with them.7-9 They provide clues to the way that we experience the phenomena that we are studying. "Phenomena, unlike gods, are

not self-generating; they point back to where they have come from and to how they have traversed their constitutive path."[3](p98) We ponder the experience that the interviewee has shared, and, equally as important, we wonder why that particular passage caught our attention.

When we see our personal connections to the phenomena, then we have begun the process that separates phenomenology from all other empirical research. The methodology of empirical research entails sorting, categorizing, and conceptualizing objective data. Empirical research does not require the researcher's consciousness to be considered as data. If we simply describe a phenomenon, however succinct and exquisite the description, we have not given a phenomenologic account of it. It is not enough to write about participants' experiencing; one's own experiencing of the study belongs to the data as well. As Giorgi 10 expressed it, "Phenomenology is empirical and it is more." The more we understand how we are connected to the phenomena we are studying, the less likely we will be bound by our connections and miss seeing their essence.

Back to Top

BRACKETING

Any discussion about intentionality, self-awareness, or meaningfulness calls forth Husserl's term "bracketing." Bracketing is about objectivity. Objectivity (as opposed to objectivism, which means being caught in the misunderstanding that subjective experience can produce no knowledge) in phenomenology means maintaining touch with one's intentionality, one's unique perspective of the phenomenon being studied. As an analogy for the mental activity in which one puts out of play one's assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation, Husserl introduced bracketing, which echoes his mathematics orientation. Speaking about Husserl's ideas, Merleau-Ponty 11 asserted that absolute objectivity, however desirable it may be, is an unreachable goal; that is, bracketing with the aim of a total phenomenologic reduction is impossible. However, the reflexive activity that bracketing signifies is essential to all phenomenologic research, whether Husserlian (descriptive) phenomenology or Heideggarian (hermeneutic). Aside from the philosophic differences between these two perspectives regarding bracketing and objectivity, it is the significance of reflective activity itself that is important. Regardless of the extent to which it can be achieved or how one embarks upon it, reflexive consideration of one's experience with the subject matter of any scientific research project is essential for the validity of that research. The continuing attempt to identify and explicate one's unique and particular experience of a phenomenon in order to see how such experience influences the results of one's research is the hallmark of phenomenologic research.

In positivitic-oriented research, objectivity is sought by attempting to purge a study of the researcher's personal connections to it and by reliance on statistical theory to account for significance. In phenomenologic research, objectivity is approached directly by identifying and examining the researcher's subjective involvement with the phenomenon being investigated. Alluding to subjective involvement, Gadamer and Heidegger use the terms "historicity," "preunderstanding," and "assumptions" to depict researcher involvement, cautioning that such involvement can be a deterrent to grasping the principle or the essence of a phenomenon.[7,12] As researchers, we may have our own particular experiences of phenomena, and the effect of our experiences can obscure our seeing the essences of the phenomena that are the patterns of experiencing that others recognize as their experiences as well.[13] Because one's personal involvement with a phenomenon is unique, phenomenology calls for a temporary setting aside, as nearly as possible, of one's individual experience of the thing being explored. But just how does one bracket, that is, reflect, on one's assumptions? What does the term suggest, concretely?

First, bracketing is not a research step that, once done, can be dispensed with. Bracketing goes on throughout a study, from the first moment that the topic or theme of a study is chosen to the final discussion of the study's findings. Second, and more importantly, in order to set something aside, we have to be

able to recognize and identify it. Although examining one's assumptions is continuous throughout a study, the bracketing that I focus on here occurs in phenomenologic research during the analysis phase when one chooses certain portions of a text, such as an interview transcript, as particularly meaningful. Understanding why passages in a text are selected as meaningful makes it possible to account for the decisions that one makes about the nature of the phenomenon.

Recognizing that what stands out to us in a text tells us something about our own perceptions is, in part, what makes a study phenomenologic. What stands out is replete with intentionality, that is, with meaningfulness, and it points to one's own experiencing of the phenomenon. When one can set aside his or her own past experience of a phenomenon and the natural inclination to engage with it uncritically, that is, to accept without question its existence as given, then one is in a position to grasp the principle or essence of the experience.10 We perform bracketing in order to grasp the phenomenon "as such."13 The act of grasping the essence of a phenomenon goes beyond counting or naming; it involves seeing as Husserl meant it—intuiting—as grasping the larger point, the meaning of the experience as such. This is what Husserl means by "eidetic seeing." Bracketing that opens our vision and leads to clear exposition of phenomena depends on understanding and using meaningfulness as an epistemologic tool.

Back to Top

GUIDELINES FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE

We can now begin to formulate guidelines for undertaking a phenomenology of the researcher's experience. The concrete activity of bracketing in the analysis phase of a phenomenologic study begins with the search for our own relationships with the phenomena. We do this by returning to the transcription passages that have stood out to us as significant. At this point the researcher probably has transformed the interviewee's words into conceptual language that is reflective of the discipline.14 Because the researcher has returned to the passage in order to see his or her own experience of the phenomenon, the task of naming this passage takes on a different slant. What is needed next is a brief statement of the researcher's response to the passage in light of its meaningfulness. This statement may be in the form of an observation about oneself, a recollection of a similar event, or any number of ideas about the personal significance of a passage. The nature of the significance is less important than the fact that the passage is recognized as having personal meaning for the researcher.

Some of the passages that stand out will be immediately identifiable as pointing to particular experiences that the researcher has had relevant to the phenomenon. For other passages, the connections to personal experience will be more difficult to name. At this stage, it is not necessary to understand why a passage seems important, only that it is meaningful. As these passages are identified, it is important to be aware of one's emotional reactions and to record any thoughts to that effect. With the assistance of a colleague who is an expert listener who knows how to listen unconditionally and help clarify ideas that may be vague or muddled, one can identify the personal connections that particular passages hold. Gendlin's 15 theory of preverbal understanding, one's "felt sense," offers good preparation for this phase of phenomenologic research. What is meaningful to us makes its appearance first in the bodily understanding mode before it is articulated with language. In the process of searching for and identifying personally meaningful transcript passages, nothing is considered irrelevant or trivial. Guiding the process are one's bodily responses to and seemingly random thoughts about the ideas, memories, beliefs, hopes, convictions, and values that are associated with the phenomenon. One must then ask, "Why have I noticed this particular passage?" and "What does my noticing of it suggest to me about my preconceptions of this phenomenon?"

In the process of searching for and identifying personally meaningful transcript passages, nothing is considered irrelevant or trivial.

The question arises, do we need full understanding of all of our connections to the phenomena that we are studying, or is it enough simply to recognize that connections exist? The answer is, it depends. Each researcher must answer this question within the context of the particular study, because the extent to which a connection is explicated depends on the nature of the connection and the way that it plays out in the research process. Like meaning, understanding is never once-and-for-all complete but is always expandable.[16] Only the individual researcher can decide when his or her own connections have been satisfactorily explained for the phenomenologic research task. However, this decision is not and should not be a solitary event. One's research colleagues are of inestimable help in this regard.

Back to Top

DISCOVERING THE QUESTION

Once we have identified and stated how passages are meaningful to us, then we are ready to set about discovering the questions that are behind the statements. Gadamer asserts that "every statement has to be seen as a response to a question and the only way to understand a statement is to get hold of the question to which the statement is an answer."[4(p106)] To concretize the process of identifying connections with one's research, I will share an example from my own research, a phenomenologic study of the lived experience of research. This project was conceived as a result of my musings about how researchers experience their work. In philosophic terms, I was puzzling over the researcher's "natural attitude,"[2] that is, the mundane events in the lives of persons for whom research is their lifework. Specifically, I wanted to know how scientists' ordinary lives are connected to their work.

One of the researchers I interviewed was a physicist whose niche is cosmology. I asked him to describe the nature of his research so I could understand what he does on a day-to-day basis. He replied, "It hasn't changed since graduate school. I've always had a deep interest in kind of a big question: Where did everything come from, what caused the universe to come into being?" I asked him if he remembered when he first knew that he was drawn to cosmology. He described how, as a child, he became aware of what his lifework would be. He related overhearing his parents reassure a concerned neighbor that their 10-year-old son had been out in a cornfield after dark because he was studying the stars.

> I was about 10… at that point it kind of dawned on me, yeah, I am studying the stars and the cosmos and that is what I am interested in… hearing my parents say, "he's just studying the stars," you know, that's when it came together that this was something that really interested me, not something that just passes from here to there… that's when I became self-cognizant of the fact that that's what I was interested in… it was something that I had done as long as I can remember.

I had highlighted this passage and next to it in the margin had written, "somewhere within us is our lifework even before we are aware of it." When I returned to the transcript in order to look for my own connections to the study, I was aware of the impact of this note; I could feel the sense of excitement that I had experienced when I first read it. Recalling Gadamer's words that "every statement has to be seen as a response to a question,"[4(p106)] I thought about what I had written in response to the interviewee's awareness of his lifework at the age of 10. How did my conviction that we all hold our lifework within us and, furthermore, know it, even before we discover what it is, contribute to my understanding of not only his particular experience as a researcher, but also to the experience of lived research as a whole? Did my note indicate an assumption that I had brought to the study, an aspect of what hermeneutic phenomenologists call preunderstanding?

Proceeding with Gadamer's thought, I reasoned that the question for which my statement was an answer should reveal something about my preunderstanding and

the way it influenced how I interviewed researchers and then made sense of the transcripts. The question that emerged was one that I recognized as personally compelling: How does one discover the direction to take in life? This question brought to mind the period of time when, as a graduate student, I puzzled over the direction I found myself taking. I wondered why I found certain ideas exciting and felt the need to pursue them. As I look back at this time, it is clear that I knew the path to follow in order to find my lifework even before I understood what the work would be. But I was puzzled. If I knew *what* to do, why did I not also know *why* I was doing it? It seemed that part of me knew more about who I was and what I should do with my life than my waking, conscious self. (As I recall this time of my life, I realize that I had the good fortune to be allowed to follow my path and discover who I was. Who I am now is the result of having taken a direction that was unclear to me except for the conviction that I was going in the right direction. I imagine that everyone has had similar self-discovery thoughts.)

The question "How does one discover the right direction to take in life?" opened the way toward understanding some of the preconceptions that I brought to this study because it prompted me to consider what I have discovered about my own identity. In my family, education was important, and those who achieved advanced degrees were held in high esteem. Scientists and researchers, especially those in the natural sciences, were seen as above the mundane world of ordinary folk. The consequence of this assumption was that ordinary, everyday experience was regarded as less significant than the experience of highly educated people who lived a life of the mind. Along with this assumption, and seemingly contrary to it, was my own experience of feeling drawn to what I can only call the immediate —a single plant growing in the underbrush along the road that I saw for an instant from a car window as a child, the sense of loneliness evoked by late afternoon sunlight shining through the gnarled trunks of hedge trees growing along a fence. As a child, I believed that the world of the immediate was unnoticed by and unimportant to the busy adults around me. These beliefs and impressions about ordinary life and the significance of the immediate were the tacit preunderstanding with which I entered into an investigation of the lived experience of research.

The question "How does one discover one's life direction (and consequently one's identity)?" and the statement in answer, "somewhere within us is our lifework even before we are aware of it," took me back to the origins of the preunderstanding that I stood in the midst of as I conducted the researchers' experience project. In part, my preunderstanding had developed as an unarticulated conviction that understanding our place in the world of the immediate tells us, in part, who we are. I had embarked upon the researchers' experience project with the conviction that the significance of the ordinary lifeworld is hidden. I wanted to show the connection between the work of research —the life of the mind—and researchers' everyday lives. I had come to believe that, unlike my family's fantasy that scientists and researchers live removed from their immediate, everyday lives in a highly theoretic state of mind, they are like everyone else. Researchers do not always know precisely what they are up to, and projects can stumble along until the researcher becomes clear about what the question is or how to make sense of what has been found. Furthermore, researchers are anything but impartial about their work. Instead, they are thoroughly invested in it, and it is not without reason to suppose that, although they may be unaware of it, discovery and creation of their identities are part of that investment. The influence of my preunderstanding may have been simply in seeing the investigation of researchers' immediate, everyday experience as important in bringing the scientific community's attention to the significance of the mundane world, and perhaps in understanding that theories depend on the experiences that they are created to explain.

Let me share another example of how what stands out points to or leads back to the researcher's experience. I conducted some interviews to learn how people experience their bodies. One of the interviews was with a woman who had survived surgical repair of a cerebral aneurysm 14 years earlier. She described the first 24 hours of the event, in which she had experienced a sudden, severe headache and an immediate feeling that she was going to die. Over the next few hours her symptoms abated somewhat and she tried, unsuccessfully, to tell herself that she had contracted a virus that was going around, "Deep down inside I knew

that there was something more serious than that." The following transcript passage was one that I had highlighted:

I had to be at work at 7:00 in the morning [in order to travel] with a physician to some outpatient clinics. He took one look at me and said, "Something is wrong with you, you don't look like you feel well," and I said, "I didn't sleep all night," and I jokingly said to him, "Maybe I have a cerebral aneurysm." He sort of pshawed that and said, "Oh, come on!"

Next to this passage, I had written in the margin, "She knew what it was!" I had been astonished with the significance that what seemed to have been an offhand remark had proved accurate as events unfolded. As I looked again at the comment I had made, I realized the question behind this statement was something like, "How is it possible to understand what our bodies convey to us?" As in the previous example, seeing my note in the margin of the transcript elicited for me the same sense of excitement I felt when I first read that passage. However, this comment "She knew what it was!" pointed to something other than beliefs or assumptions that I had brought to the study. Instead, the comment and its underlying question simply reminded me of my fascination with tacit knowledge, that elusive understanding that escapes capture with language and thwarts our eternal drive toward facts. Such elusiveness is probably best referred to as spirit.

The question "How is it possible to understand what our bodies convey to us?" also reminded me of what nurses know so well—that patients understand better than anyone else what they are experiencing in the moment. They have an acute sense of their bodies' functioning, a prescience about themselves that supercedes caregivers' attempts to understand through diagnostic and objective means. Our understanding of our bodies and selves is first of all a spiritual one. That I found this passage meaningful suggested to me that what I brought to this study was a belief in the sovereignty of the human spirit in regard to bodily life, a belief that the human spirit provides profound tacit understanding of one's body.

I realized then how I was treating the data from these interviews. I had been looking for the ephemeral aspect of spirit in all of the interview transcripts, and when I felt it was missing or had not been focused on clearly in the dialogue between myself and the other person, I considered that interview to be less valuable, perhaps even useless. If there had been a sense of connection between myself and the interviewee that facilitated the sort of expansion and elaboration that makes an interview especially fruitful, I considered that interview to be of value. Subsequently, I had concentrated on the interviews that contained both elements—interviewees who had contributed depth to our dialogue by being articulate about the lived subjective body and spirit, and interviewees with whom I felt connected in some way. Invariably, the more articulate individuals were those with whom I felt a connection.

Next I had to reconsider my reaction to the participants who were less inclined to speak of intangibles. With this awareness, I went back to the interviews and searched for new meaning. There were two interviews that I had seen as having little value to the study. As I reread them, the first insight that occurred was the realization that, even if I could redo these interviews, there are no interviewing tactics I could use that would finally produce the depth I wanted. The second insight was of more significance. By dismissing these two interviews I was, in effect, dismissing the persons themselves. This realization came about as I reread a passage that I had previously given only cursory attention. The interviewee described how she meticulously monitors her heart rate since her coronary occlusion and subsequent bypass surgery. Describing how she carefully counts and interprets her heart rate, she said, "I've watched my body like that since my operation, which I did not do before." Suddenly this line was full of meaning, and I saw clearly the nature of her relationship with her body now. It is a fearful one, in which death is never far away. How would it be to live like this? And how could I have ever assumed that this person had less capacity for the spiritual than another person who was simply more articulate about it? I was reminded of something that I believe but had lost sight of—that all persons are spirit, with capacity for the

spiritual, and we are never justified in assuming otherwise. Indeed, who can say how spirit and body are related in anyone other than oneself? And perhaps most significant for nursing is the actions that are taken because we believe that our patients' spirits are part of their bodily experiences. Unless we act on this belief, we run the risk of dehumanizing those for whom we care.

During my search for new meaning in the transcripts of the subjective body project, I remembered Merleau-Ponty's 16 assertion that the subject matter of phenomenologic research is limitless, for meaning that can be understood from the lifeworld is never finally complete but always potentially expandable. Stein expresses the limitlessness of meaning even more provocatively when she states that meaning engenders the power to grasp another's experience.17 This is precisely the goal of phenomenologic research, a goal that becomes more fully realized when, as phenomenologists, we examine our own constitutive part in our research and discover how it has informed the way we understand another's experience. Understanding how our own experiences of phenomena contribute to their description as interviewees have related them to us requires going beyond the themes that we have chosen to organize and describe our observations. What is needed is what I refer to as a synthesis of intentionality, a composite of the major themes derived from interview transcripts and one's own bracketed assumptions and beliefs, that is, preunderstanding. The synthesis of intentionality is created by looking at the list of themes extracted from the interviews together with a list of bracketed assumptions and beliefs, and letting them speak together in order to form a new list of merged statements. These composite statements are the building blocks for the phenomenologic description.

A word of clarification: a synthesis of intentionality is not the same thing as the essential structures of a phenomenon. Essential structures, according to Husserl, are those universal aspects of a phenomenon that can be identified through imaginative variation.2,13 A synthesis of intentionality, rather, is composed of both the researcher's and the study participants' direct experiencing of the phenomenon and has unique qualities from these two respective points of view that may not be considered essential or universal elements of the phenomenon. Although the synthesis of intentionality is a composite of the researcher's and participants' experience, it is created only by the researcher; it is a product of the researcher's, not the participants', perception.

The following is the synthesis of intentionality that helped me to begin crafting description in my subjective body project:

Body and self, or spirit, are in relationship.

Body may be an object for oneself.

Body and spirit are inseparable.

Spirit has primacy over body.

Body conveys its own self-understanding.

Tacit understanding is of greater significance than that which is expressed in language.

All persons are spirit as well as body, with capacity for the spiritual.

Persons who are articulate about the spiritual and about their bodies convey who they are more readily to the listening caregiver.

Persons who are less articulate about the spiritual obligate caregivers to diligent and careful listening.

A synthesis of intentionality does not have to be lengthy or elaborate. It is primarily a working tool for the researcher to use as a beginning point for writing

the phenomenologic description. However, because it includes the researcher's experience of the phenomenon under investigation, the synthesis of intentionality should be treated as part of the data and accounted for in the method section of research reports. Such an accounting makes it easier for readers to discern what is often referred to as the "audit trail" in qualitative research. Once the synthesis of intentionality has been created, the phenomenologist is ready to begin identifying the essential structures of the phenomenon and complete the phenomenologic description.

Back to Top

GUIDELINES FOR ILLUMINATING THE RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE IN PHENOMENOLOGIC RESEARCH

The following may serve as a guide for the stage of analysis wherein the researcher's experience of and relationship to the phenomenon is explored.

* Identify passages in the narrative data that are meaningful to you.

* Write a statement of premise for each passage that is considered meaningful.

* Look for the personal question for which the statement of premise is an answer.

* Look for the origins of the question.

* Compile all of the premises and questions into a meaningful whole. This may be simply a list of thoughts, or it may be in narrative form.

* Think about the meaningful whole that you have compiled and what your statement and the question underlying it reveal about your assumptions and past experience of the phenomenon. This is where assistance from a colleague listener is helpful.

* Compare your own experience of the phenomenon (your list of assumptions/beliefs) with the themes derived from the study participants' experiences. Identify how your experience and the experiences of your participants come together to constitute the phenomenon.

* When you have compiled the results of this comparison (in whatever form serves you best, whether as a list of points or a narrative summary), you will have created a synthesis of intentionality.

Tracing one's assumptions and beliefs and then making sense of them as data in order to see the part that we play in our research is the most obscure and elusive aspect of phenomenologic research. It is no wonder that this task has been neglected or inadequately addressed by phenomenologic researchers. Because of this neglect, some of the criticism of phenomenologic research as soft science has been justified. After understanding the rigor required for conducting true phenomenologic research, maintaining the view of it as easy or shallow is no longer warranted. Those who entertain such a view of phenomenologic research have not experienced the extent of the mental labor required to follow one's experience of a phenomenon back to its foundation of preunderstanding and to explicate it to a fruitful conclusion.

In summary, we have seen here how preunderstanding might be traced and explicated in order to understand the researcher's influence in the analysis phase of phenomenologic research. Recognizing that the lines or passages that we mark in transcripts as significant to the interviewees' experiences also hold personal significance for us opens the door to the preunderstanding [7,12] that all researchers bring to the phenomena that they study. Explicating that personal significance, however, is not always a simple or straightforward task. It can be an exhausting exercise in self-understanding, requiring patient assistance of friends and colleagues in research as we sort through the tangle of past experience revealed in the beliefs that influence the way we conduct our research. Complete

self-understanding is probably not possible, and it eludes us for two reasons. First, Merleau-Ponty's assertion that meaning, and therefore understanding, is never complete; and second, the hermeneutic principle that we can never completely transcend our own point of reference in the lifeworld.12,16 Nevertheless, an attempt at self-understanding as researchers, however incomplete, sets us on the path toward Husserl's vision of science that will foster a world fit for humans.1

Back to Top

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Key words: assumptions; bracketing; epistemology; intentionality; meaningfulness; phenomenology; preunderstanding; self-awareness

Previous Article | **Table of Contents** | **Next Article**