

From Monet's Paintings to Margaret's Ducks

Divagations on Phenomenological Research

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Abstract

This paper deals with a number of aspects related to the application of phenomenology in the area of research. It focuses particularly on some aspects, present in some literature, that the author considers as non-consensual. A number of reasons are propounded to explain the phenomenological principles and application of these within the context of research. The strengthening of the available methodologies of phenomenological research is upheld, as a counterpoint to the fostering of an unlimited number of methodologies currently in fashion in qualitative research. The importance of reflecting on the concept of method is also referred to as well as that of clarifying the differences existent between philosophy, psychology and psychotherapy within the scope of the application of the phenomenological method.

Keywords

Phenomenological method; psychotherapy; phenomenology; qualitative research.

Introduction

We start with the reasons that led us to the drawing up of this text. Recently, we participated in meetings where a number of authors and their proposals of application of the phenomenological method were debated (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Karlsson, 1995; Moustakas, 1994; van Kaam, 1958; van Manen, 1990). From these debates a set of consensual and diverging ideas and opinions emerged. These meetings had a private nature. However, it seemed evident that the discussion of different applications of the phenomenological method should be extended to a wider scope, with eventual positive repercussions for students, researchers, lecturers and therapists. The objective of this text is not to fill that gap or draw up a summary of ideas put forward in the aforementioned meetings. We only want to address a number of issues which seem to us less consensual. However, there is a cross-sectional question, which shall follow-up the themes dealt with in this text. During these meetings the hypothesis we are upholding - a monotheistic perspective of the

phenomenological method - emerged. We argue enthusiastically that phenomenology, as a research method, asserts itself more and more in the international panorama of qualitative research. It is also true that we have some reservations about *how* phenomenology is currently used as a research tool. Nevertheless, we do not judge that a single and adjusted way of applying phenomenology to research exists, but rather we believe there are reasons to question our present context where the fostering of an unlimited number of methodologies is currently in fashion. This is not the hypothesis referred to - the upholding of a singular view of the method - that, as a matter of fact is important, but what is underlying therein, what may reflect on some controversies that we may share, as a community that shares a common interest - phenomenology. The hypothesis that seemed to us to be an ambiguity transformed itself in catalyser.

Obviously questions relating to the application of the phenomenological method are innumerable and are much beyond the ambit of this text. We shall enumerate some aspects that we would state are consensual and clarify the position of the phenomenology as a research. Subsequently, four presuppositions present in some literature are set out and we shall try to briefly reflect on them.

Phenomenological Research

We intend to be brief and enumerate some presuppositions of the phenomenological research. This work has been drawn up by different authors, for example, recently, Spinelli (2006) clarified the characteristics and the fundamental presuppositions of phenomenology when applied to research. We summarize some aspects deemed as consensual. The major object of the study of the phenomenological research is the *meaning of the lived experience* of persons who are closely connected to the world that, in turn, is translated in a social and cultural co-constructed network. Contrarily to other models, it makes use of a fundamental aspect to be able to study human phenomena: the context. On the other hand, phenomenology does not intend to follow an empirical epistemology, in which the model of causality is considered as the only one suitable to achieve scientifically valid knowledge. Phenomenology has as its fundamental referential the concept that consciousness is intentional, i.e., consciousness is always consciousness of something and the object of awareness transcends the act in which it appears. This perspective breaks from the naturalistic attempt to understand psychological phenomena; moreover, it is not only consciousness that is intentional - behaviour (body) is also intentional.

For these reasons, phenomenology presents itself as a qualitative alternative of research, not centring on the quantification of results. The researcher is considered as an observer participant, who attempts to

understand and make explicit the sense of the experience of human phenomena, using to this end essentially descriptive and hermeneutics methodologies. The phenomenological researcher is not a distant and independent specialist who analyses and summarizes determined and identical repetitions. Very briefly, these are some premises that could be considered as being consensual regarding phenomenological research. It is also uncontested to consider that there is no single correct way of undertaking phenomenological research.

Some non-consensual aspects of phenomenological research

Now, we start by enumerating only four presuppositions that seem to be very present and defended by many authors, and we should run the risk to state that these are not consensual, as are those aforementioned presuppositions:

- To develop phenomenological research is to make philosophy;
- There are an unlimited number of ways of developing methodological designs of phenomenological research;
- The notion of method in a phenomenological research is in itself contradictory with phenomenology;
- Undertaking phenomenological research is the same as developing existential therapy.

These are some examples, others could be presented, upheld by some authors and criticised by others, not deserving an easy consensus. Assuming non-existing unanimity, some questions may be added to:

- What criteria to be considered to determine that a study is phenomenological?
- What are the limits that, being exceed, imply that research be considered outside the ambit of phenomenology?
- These criteria are to be based on which arguments?

Perambulations between paintings and ducks

As regards the last point (undertake phenomenological research is the same of developing existential therapy), while not agreeing with many aspects of his perspective, we could recall Casement (1985), when he states that the therapeutic space is, by excellence a "research space", where dynamics of the therapeutic relationship emerge. In fact, psychotherapy in a broad sense could be understood as a space-time, where people construct meaning for their experiences in life. In particular, existential therapy requires therapist and client to position themselves in a way where the therapeutic relationship becomes, in the essential, in a research, in a exploitation and clarification of our being in the world. Spinelli (2006) presented crucial

arguments showing similarities between existential therapy and research on human sciences. There is a fundamental aspect that better enhances than any other, that affinity: "the inter-relatedness as the foundational value upon which any human and humane form of enquiry must rest" (Spinelli 2006). The added value that we may have in relating existential therapy and its characteristics with the research on human sciences is thus undeniable.

However, the argument seems to be essentially epistemological, i.e., the way we produce knowledge on human sciences and in existential therapy, relies particularly on the inter-relational arena. Assuming this argument as being pivot and epistemological, what will happen when we are at methodological level? Could we consider that good therapeutic practices are sound research strategies? Should not our methodological design depend on the topic, on the question of research raised by the researcher and not necessary on way we understand therapy that is a different activity? Should we follow a therapeutic sensibility or a methodological rigour? Probably we try to relate both of them. But, as we know, it might be important to adequate the therapy to a particular client and to his/her specificities, as it may be necessary to exist flexibility on the part of the therapist to enter into a therapeutic contract that serves not only his perspective but also the client. Indeed, it seems that is also necessary that the researcher considers the possibility that a research requires a development that complies with determined steps, different from those followed by the therapist in a journey of research with a determined client. Sometimes, the perspective of the therapist may be suitable, other times it may be not. Despite the existing know-how of the therapist that may help to develop research, for example, the situation of interview as data collection, (very usual in qualitative research), is a typical example where interpersonal capabilities of the therapist could be enhanced and promote the exploration of one of the most important aspects of phenomenological research - intersubjectivity. However, it seems to us, important to develop and promote a proper and specific knowledge, related to the field of research, distinct from the therapeutic area. The boundaries that currently separate therapy and research tend to be tenuous. Our question is simple: fundamental similarities between existential therapy and research on human sciences may exist. However, this aspect shall not prevent us from explicating what are the limitations of extrapolating a given reality, (developing therapy), with another that is different and that has a *setting* also different (producing research). This is an argument that leads us to defend the need to promote an increase of seminars dedicated to research, in training programmes for therapists.

As regards the first point (undertaking phenomenological research is to make philosophy) – we disagree. Phenomenology emerged from a philosophical movement. Obviously, phenomenological research may be

developed of a philosophical nature, I even would state, that this is its more natural basis. However, it does not seem to us that producing phenomenological research, on psychotherapy and on psychology, has necessarily to be considered as a philosophical research. As stated to us by a phenomenologist, phenomenology, as a strict disciplinary area, soon transforms itself in a scholastic way and becomes sterile. It is by the construction of a dialogue with other areas of knowledge that phenomenology may be better developed, recognize itself - not promoting hermetic areas between themselves and other disciplines, but co-constructing the way of seeing the world. It is an invitation for a common work. Philosophy, psychology and psychotherapy are distinct areas. The inter-relations that may exist among them are not previously defined, pre-demarcated; on the contrary, they are still open and require a joint intervention. There are incomplete and still open spaces to be built. We believe that is exactly due to the fact of existing *differences* between phenomenology and other areas of knowledge, as psychotherapy, that allows the construction of a fertile and fruitful knowledge. Not through an immediate joining, or without making a rigorous scrutiny of the application of concepts, of a determined area to another. Besides, this is one of the reasons, contrarily to many authors, because we suggest the need of existing *mediation* between the application of phenomenology to psychotherapy, in which phenomenological psychology may play an important role. Immediate transpositions, from an area of knowledge to another, bring about lesser advantages than an effort of discussion and dialogue, provided that it is assumed that in fact we are talking about distinct areas. And we could easily understand that they are distinct areas. The identification of a determined activity is carried out by means of the recognition of the *tradition* and *community* where this is integrated. Phenomenology as a philosophical activity, phenomenological psychology and existential therapy are each one of *them*, inserted in their own traditions and communities, distinct between themselves, with proper problematic, with specific audiences, with languages inherent in each area. We could also refer to the *institutional* level. All areas of knowledge are developed through the setting up of institutions where the political dimension of all human action is enhanced, in better and worse ways. The works by Foucault, stress magisterially, the interconnection of academic and scientific knowledge with institutional and political powers. To sum up, returning to the initial point, we would state that when producing research on psychotherapy, we should take into consideration that we are actually producing research on psychotherapy, by applying the phenomenological method, what is not, we repeat, necessarily the same of being developing philosophical research.

Now, we should like to present a number of arguments on two aforementioned aspects as non-consensual: there are an unlimited number

of modes of developing methodological designs of phenomenological research and using the concept of method under a phenomenological research is, in itself, contradictory with phenomenology. Once again, these are two fascinating and highly extensive questions, which cannot be suitably debated in a so short space, allowing us only to share some clues for discussion.

A speedy, efficient and legitimate manner of positioning ourselves in relation to the first question, is to follow the suggestion put forward by Hans Gadamer, that is to say, de-valuing the proper concept of method, much dependent on a scientific and rationalist vision. A counterpoint, overlapping another perspective, might be where aspects of everyday life are highlighted, of which art and culture are examples, as spaces of excellence for research. Spaces where man has the possibility of being able to know himself in a situated, local and temporarily way in permanence. In Gadamer, along with Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Ricoeur – although these authors do not share similar visions – two fundamental aspects are valued. The historical dimension, man when understanding himself does so in dialogue with a pre-existent tradition. In the existential dimension, man is an intervening and active agent in building this comprehension and in the way how elaborates his interpretations.

More radically, we could follow Feyerabend (1975) who in the work "Against the Method", challenged the presumption of scientific knowledge holding the privilege of being a higher knowledge and, particularly, demonstrated that sometimes new discoveries or the appearance of new knowledge are achieved as, precisely, methodological rules in force were breached. All methodological rules have limits, which often, are violated; however, this position does not imply to the defence that methodological rules are not important or that they must not be followed. What Feyerabend showed with clarity was the lack of effectiveness with the usage of a single universal method, which could be applied to a phenomenon of any kind whatever of study. It is not only to defend that rules and procedures do not help researchers to produce good results, sometimes it happens this way. However it must be also highlighted that these same rules in determined researches bring about resounding failures. According to the author it is necessary to develop a contextual approach, not to replace absolute rules, but to complement them. The proper methodological act may demonstrate the need to question the methodological premises. Nevertheless, this does not mean to uphold a position of "anything goes". "Epistemological anarchism", as Feyerabend expressed it, is not a mere rejection of the usefulness of methodological rules or the defence that any methodological design is valid, but the verification that the methodology used must not remain unchangeable in relation to the diversity of situations of research and phenomena to be studied, as well as facing historical conditions in which, any research is inserted. Some authors sustain that Feyerabend

deviated the epistemology for the rhetoric. The methodology adopted would therefore dependent upon internal coherence of arguments presented by the researcher, the validity of same, discussed within the community where the researcher is integrated, the rigour of the methodological steps, of a demand of coherence between the data and results, from among other aspects.

In the case of the phenomenological method, we may assume the concern that we could be falling in a situation of "anything goes". A number of reasons contribute to this scenario. Let us start for some points apparently of slight importance, but not less important. Phenomenology, as it is known, has its source in philosophy. But, the source is not unique, on the contrary. Various authors of philosophy defend distinct viewpoints on phenomenology. We should even state that one of the characteristics of phenomenology has been its continuous *movement*, in a permanent *re-write*, through the time and the pen of different authors. Transposing these dissimilar viewpoints to other areas of knowledge, as research or psychotherapy, results often in a number of double meanings. Another aspect generating confusion is linked to how we currently write and communicate regarding phenomenology. The fact that a determined author refers to phenomenology does not mean that he is dealing with phenomenology as understood by the reader. In itself, this is not a problem. What may constitute a serious hindrance when writing about phenomenology is not being clear and accurate on the concepts used and, moreover, if these are not in accordance with the formulations of authors quoted. This is not something new: in 1967 Kockelmans call attention to the fact that "many psychologists talk about phenomenology without offering any real clarification of the meaning of the term they are using (...)" (Kockelmans, 1967, p.5).

This aspect relates itself with another that should deserve more careful attention: the proliferation of secondary sources. We refer ourselves to an immense quantity of literature (books, theses, articles) that is public, supposedly relevant, but that when analysed with attention, it may be verified that the authors may for example, address hermeneutic phenomenology by Heidegger, without never having read Heidegger, basing their work only on other authors who, supposedly, did read Heidegger: What has been stated about Heidegger is applicable to other authors and is thematic of the area. In the ambit of social and human sciences, phenomenology is mentioned and claimed by the most varied authors, but in an incipient way and without the rigour required.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003), presents its theoretical basis in two pages. In these pages, it is stated that "IPA is therefore intellectually connected to hermeneutics and theories of interpretation" but it is added that "different interpretative stances are possible, and IPA combines an empathic hermeneutics with a questioning

hermeneutics. The authors continue to affirm that “IPA also acknowledges a debt to symbolic interactionism”, but still more, “IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being (...) and this suggests an interesting theoretical alliance with the cognitive paradigm that is dominant in contemporary psychology”. To the best of our knowledge, the authors “combine” different theoretical stances, they do not clarify what each one of the concepts referred to means and do not explain how they may be articulated together as a theoretical body of a methodology of research. Carla Willing (2001) analysed IPA and questioned herself if this should be deemed genuinely phenomenological, concluding, among other aspects “that genuinely phenomenological research should not study people’s cognitions; instead, it should aim to understand lived experience”. Much could be stated on theoretical proposals of IPA; we could question if its denomination would not be more correct as Integrative Interpretative Analysis. The most important lessons from the example of IPA are the need to clarify concepts, be explicit about their articulation, and demonstrate coherence between principles and practical application.

As it is commonly known, a research accurately conducted must demonstrate a balance among the ontological level, epistemological level and methodological level. Incoherencies between these dimensions could result in serious consequences, promoting another disinformation of researchers rather than a suitable improvement of knowledge. Another aspect that contributes to this context is connected to a more extended scenario of qualitative research. Qualitative research in general and phenomenology in particular, are still at an immature stage of their growth, and possibly have not yet reached the adolescence phase. As a consequence of this situation their limits are being experienced. We are still in a resisting stage of wishing to demonstrate to others that there are always other modes of doing things – our proper manner. From this situation, innumerable distinct ways emerge of using the phenomenological method. These are almost unlimited, as if each author intended to present his/her proper method. Nowadays, in qualitative research, the legitimacy is more promoted by each researcher presenting his/her method, than in investing in the strengthening and improvement of methodological proposals already available.

It is particularly this aspect that we question directly.

As stated, following Feyerabend, to recommend a variety of procedures does not mean to foster the appearance of separated methodologies. More still, the argument is not only quantitative: on the contrary, the interrogation that is raised is to know if it is the free multiplication of distinct methodologies that better may ensure the production and the discovery of new knowledge. This is the true question. In our view, the fact of being ourselves circumscribed to a determined space (method) is not

necessarily a synonym of loss of freedom (creativity in the research). As opposed, we even judge that the creation of limits (methodological steps), compels the researcher to elaborate and put into practice his/her creative capacity and to produce inter subjective knowledge. We could also outline an analogy with the therapeutic space. It is not uncommon, that therapists hear their clients state that the single thing that could help them was a “changed of life”, or “to start everything again”, or even, only if they “moved to another country, where they could restart from the zero”. The therapists knows that the therapeutic room constitutes itself, paradoxally, as a space of limits and, simultaneously of freedom, in the sense that it reflects and is example of the “outside” world; that therapy ends, and that it sometimes provides transformations in the sense of the client is able to *re-think* his/her existence and way of being.

Allow us to follow the advice of Gadamer and present two examples of everyday life. The first example that appeared to us suddenly, relates to some paintings by Claude Monet. The impressionist painter adopted throughout his life the principle of exploiting incessantly in a canvas the same theme, the same object, from the same angle, although in different moments of the day, with different tones of light, that produced different colourations. An example of this is the series of paintings of the Cathedral of Rouen. Here Monet followed an invariable basic matrix and painted the same object at the same angle. Though circumscribed by this limit, he produced the difference of the look, let to flow at random the stroke with a brush, marked in the fixed and rigid canvas, the perceptive fluidity, the fugacity of the tone and of the temperature of the light. What did our painter intend? To be rigorously methodical and objective? Monet was objectively subjective. He looked within the limits of a same space, in the systematic representation of the same theme, and in doing so demonstrated and enhanced the subjectivity of the human eye. Shouldn’t the researcher do the same? Does the use of the same methodology of research, of systematic and rigorous steps, applied to different contexts of research, mean that results produced will be less important or that they will give lesser relevance to subjectivity and creativity of the researcher and of the knowledge elaborated by him/her? Could it be true that justice in relation to the study of human phenomena could only be made should we accept the unlimited proliferation of methodologies of research? Is using a method on phenomenological research a nonsense? We do not believe so. Creating limits is to help to grow and to discover. More important is to recall again with Feyerabend, the mistake that we made when we created dichotomies in methodological discussions, between the contexts of *justification* and *discovery*. If science, or if we wish the production of knowledge, were carried out only by procedures of justification, it would be to conduct it to a dead end. It is the interconnection between the processes of justification and discovery, the right use of each one of these fields, in a way and in the

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