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Hearing the Voices of Students and Teachers: A Phenomenological Approach to Educational Research

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Abstract

Many contemporary researchers claim to use a phenomenological approach but seldom connect their methods to tenets from phenomenological philosophy. We describe a distinctive approach, grounded in the writings of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for conducting educational research. Procedures are outlined for bracketing pre-understandings of a phenomenon, interviewing, and thematizing data with assistance of an interdisciplinary interpretive group. Using our approach, researchers capture the figural aspects of a phenomenon that dominate perception as well as the contextual background that is less visible but integral to understanding it. This phenomenological approach offers educational researchers a radical empiricism, a flexible structure, and a dialogical community of support.

Keywords: phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenological research, qualitative methodology, educational research methods, existential phenomenology

Escuchando las Voces de Los Estudiantes y Profesores: Un Enfoque Fenomenológico de la Investigación Educativa

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Resumen

Muchos investigadores contemporáneos afirman utilizar un enfoque fenomenológico, pero rara vez conectan sus métodos con los principios de la filosofía fenomenológica. Se describe un enfoque distintivo para la realización de investigación educativa, basado en los escritos del filósofo francés Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Se esbozan procedimientos para acotar el pre-conocimiento de un fenómeno, para entrevistas y para tematizar datos con ayuda de un equipo interdisciplinario interpretativo. Usando nuestro enfoque, los investigadores captan los aspectos figurativos de un fenómeno que domina la percepción, así como el fondo contextual que es menos visible, aunque integral para su comprensión. Este enfoque fenomenológico ofrece a los investigadores educativos un empirismo radical, una estructura flexible, y una comunidad dialógica de apoyo.

Palabras clave: fenomenología, investigación fenomenológica hermenéutica, metodología cualitativa, métodos de investigación educativa, fenomenología existencial

“Sometimes I’m invisible and sometimes I have to represent every Black in the class.”

“Just college itself is already intense. I just don’t think that anybody needs any added pressures. But you come to University X and you’re Black, it automatically is there.”

“And so a lot of times I felt out of place, because you see all white faces. You know I’m the only fly in the buttermilk, so that took some getting used to.”

Hear the voices of Black undergraduate students at a predominately White southern university in the United States (Davis et al., 2004). Phenomenological research captured the distressful lived experience of these students in a way that no questionnaire research on student retention ever could. The study was undertaken because the graduation rate of Black students was lower than the rate for the university as a whole. Student advisors knew that the campus climate was not always supportive of minority students, but available data provided no clear explanation. No prior investigation had elicited the first-person perspectives of Black students. Interviews with the students yielded rich descriptions of the racism that permeated the world of the university, a world that sounded foreign to us as White members of the faculty. We were unaware of how difficult their daily lives were and how their instructors unwittingly contributed to their difficulties. Black students told disturbing stories about classrooms with bigoted, uncaring, or hostile instructors and classmates. None of us on the research team had experienced feeling like “a fly in the buttermilk.” This study enabled us to walk in the shoes of Black study participants across the campus (where, in a disturbing incident, they saw nooses hanging from a tree), and into their classrooms where they were hyper-visible on some occasions and invisible on others (Thomas & Davis, 2000; Davis et al., 2004; Thomas et al., 2007).

These studies of the Black student experience illustrate the power and efficacy of a distinctive permutation of phenomenological research methodology developed and refined over 30 years by an interdisciplinary team at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) (Pollio, Henley, &

Thompson, 1997; Thomas, 2005; Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989).

Researchers among our interdisciplinary team have used this approach to examine a variety of issues in teaching and learning, including underachieving students and their teachers in K-12 (Oreshkina & Greenberg, 2010), court-mandated adult education (Mottern, 2013), and transformative learning in a graduate seminar (Sohn et al., 2016). Others using our approach have explored prescient topics such as the experience of adolescents who were apprehended while carrying a gun to school (Marsh, 1996), the student experience of other students (Sohn, 2016), and young children's first experience of taking standardized tests (Crisp, 2010), to cite just a few examples.

This methodological approach combines tenets from the writings of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer, but draws principally from the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). Inspiration from his existential phenomenology inspired us to introduce procedural variations from other phenomenological research more widely known in the field of education (e.g., van Manen, 1990). In particular, our methods for interviewing, ensuring rigor, and developing insight during the analytic process are unique and deserve thoughtful consideration by educational researchers. Our approach is both descriptive and hermeneutic: although we strive for a comprehensive description of phenomena, we also engage in the “high-order interpretive work...[within] a well-crafted phenomenological ...description” (Sandelowski, 2008, p. 193). We agree with Friesen, Henriksson and Saevi (2012) that hermeneutic phenomenology is “the study of *experience* together with its *meanings*. Like hermeneutics, this type of phenomenology is open to revision and reinterpretation...” (p. 1). Unlike these researchers and others who follow the work of van Manen (1990), our method remains as close as possible to the descriptions provided by our participants—to *their* words.

What this phenomenological approach offers is a radical empiricism, a flexible structure, and a dialogical community of support. We do not impose *a priori* theoretical explanations—we seek an intimate connection with our research participants and refrain from theorizing about them before we come to know them. The phenomenological approach is appealing to scholars in professions such as teaching, counseling, and nursing, but, as Halling (2002, p. 18) noted: “Unfortunately, the phenomenological tradition

is not readily accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with it.” The language of continental philosophy, which retains many German or French terms, is intimidating to non-philosophers, and instruction regarding phenomenological research methodology is not available in many graduate programs.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the elements of our research procedures and emphasize their alignment with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. We write for three audiences: students new to the world of qualitative research, educational researchers exploring various phenomenological procedures and their relationship to philosophical premises, and instructors of qualitative methodology who want a reference that helps their students understand and apply our approach. With regard to the latter, we give concrete suggestions for bracketing pre-understandings of a phenomenon, conducting phenomenological interviews, and interpreting data with the assistance of an interdisciplinary phenomenology research group.

Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a philosophy of *meaning*, and meaning is always human, always worldly, always integral to the work humans are doing in the lifeworld each day (Kwant, 1963). Human beings are not passive before the stimuli in the lifeworld; we take an intentional stance toward the objects and events in our conscious awareness. Merleau-Ponty was criticized within philosophical circles because he found the phenomena of ordinary life more fascinating than the typical focus of philosophers on abstract concepts such as Truth or Beauty. Throughout his life, he retained a humble stance in which he was perpetually astonished by the wonder of the world and he perpetually revised his ideas, some of which we share below.

Perception

Perception is primary in Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1962) phenomenology because it affords a direct experience of the events, objects, and phenomena of the world. He emphasized perception as “the bedrock of human experience” (Moran, 2000, p. 403). And our research goal is to see the world as our study participants perceive it. According to Merleau-Ponty, “in

perception we witness the miracle of a totality that surpasses what one thinks to be its conditions or its parts” (cited in Hass, 2008, p. 49). To accomplish this goal, he applied the figure/ground concept from German Gestalt psychology: perceived phenomena always appear to us as meaningful wholes, yet some aspects will stand out as *figural*. “Every visible [also] involves a ground which is not visible in the sense the figure is” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 246). As we apply this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in our research, we are compelled to illuminate the whole phenomenon in our analysis: what is perceived must always be understood in relation to the horizon (the ground) upon which it appears.

Existential Grounds

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty, van Manen (1990) discusses the four existential themes—corporeality, temporality, relationality, and spatiality—that constitute the grounds of human experience in the lifeworld. In our writing, we strive for simpler language (e.g., Thomas & Pollio, 2002), and for this reason we speak of Body, Time, Others, and World. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, p. 365), “if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, the world, the thing, and others, we shall understand that beyond these there is nothing to understand.”

Body

Western philosophers, adhering to the Cartesian separation of mind and body, were startled by Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on embodiment. Merleau-Ponty asserted that the body creates the possibility of thinking; thought emerges out of the body’s sensory immersion in the world (Moran, 2000). “The body is the vehicle of being in the world...the mediator of [the] world...our anchorage in [the] world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, pp. 82, 144, 145). Educational researchers (focused traditionally on abstract, theoretical analysis) pay insufficient attention to the embodied selves of students and teachers: for example, they are often constrained by their physical surroundings and institutional rules and react emotionally to failure. These phenomena are pertinent to understanding teaching and learning.

Time

In Merleau-Ponty's writings, time is a subjective experience—clocks and calendars cannot define it. For some students, minutes and hours of a class can pass mindlessly until something unusual intrudes into consciousness. According to Merleau-Ponty, “time in the widest sense...is a setting to which one can gain access and which one can understand only by occupying a situation in it” (1945/1962, p. 332). In an educational research project, for example, the interviewer may hear a student describe a class “flying by” or “dragging along.”

Others

Connections with other people allow humans to transcend existential aloneness. Merleau-Ponty's work emphasizes the “knots” or networks of relationships in which we spend our lives, reminding us the first “objects” that a baby sees are the smiles of those who love him: “My own and other people's [paths] intersect and engage each other like gears” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, pp. xx). We give careful attention to other people who appear in participant narratives of lived experience.

World

The lifeworld is already there before we begin to reflect upon it. We begin life as a “fragile mass of living jelly...and we all reach the world, and the same world, and it belongs wholly to each of us” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, pp. 14, 31). We are inseparable from the world, and the world invades us, as Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) noted: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me.” Phenomenologists are interested in both space and place, security and freedom, and all the everyday objects and things humans encounter in the world (Tuan, 1977). For the Black students who talked to us about their experience of the university, they were in a White, hostile world.

A Caveat

Merleau-Ponty was a philosopher whose writing was directed toward other philosophers. He was not writing to instruct social science researchers of the 21st century about how to apply his work. Undoubtedly, a philosopher might find fault with the preceding summary of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, or with the ways we non-philosophers have taken up those ideas. Despite these concerns, we believe the existential hermeneutic phenomenology we practice is faithful to Merleau-Ponty's core premises and can be practiced by non-philosophers "as a manner or style of thinking" (1945/1962, p. viii). We have been encouraged by philosophers who welcome phenomenology as it is practiced in disciplines beyond philosophy (see Embree's paper about our work, 2008). In the following sections of the paper, we explain the research method and procedures we use at UTK, including formulation of the question, bracketing, selecting participants, interviewing, analysis, validation of the interpretation, and preparation of the research report.

Procedures of this Research Method

In this section, we describe specific procedures developed by UTK researchers (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) for conducting existential, hermeneutic phenomenological research. Some of our procedures are similar to other phenomenological approaches, but the use of the Phenomenology Research Group (PRG) is not. The PRG is an interdisciplinary group of faculty members and students. Some have years of experience with our methods and others join in order to develop and refine their skills. All PRG members present various aspects of their studies to the group for feedback and confirmation. We believe this leads to a high level of trustworthiness of research findings and, over time, provides an exemplary way to develop expertise in research methodology that can only be mastered through reflective practice and feedback from others. Because PRG members represent many fields of study, we continuously note that feedback tends to avoid bias that can easily occur if all researchers are from one field.

Research and Interview Questions

Educational researchers must begin with a genuine question spurred by deep curiosity. Yet in a university setting such questions often come with the baggage of academia; a trend in the research area determines the question, the background knowledge of highly educated students and faculty may interfere with openness. Because of these potential pitfalls, a first step for the researcher is to bring a research question to a meeting of the PRG. Experienced and novice researchers alike bring their fledgling questions to be critiqued in a constructive, non-confrontational manner.

The role of the PRG in this phase of our approach is to ensure a radical empiricism by helping the researcher attend to “the things themselves,” with the intent of “describing, not explaining or analyzing” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. viii-ix). Researchers must determine the specific domain of the phenomenon to be studied and develop an open-ended interview question that will elicit unconstrained descriptions of participants’ lived experience. To illustrate, in the “Fly in the Buttermilk” study, the interviewer did not refer to race. Instead, she asked, “What is your experience as a student at this university?” thereby allowing respondents to talk about whatever stood out in their perceptions.

There is often a difference between the research question and the interview question. In another example, a researcher wanted to investigate the ways student athletes balance their lives. In a PRG meeting, he shared the following interview question: “What are the stressors of being a student-athlete?” Such a question directs participants towards a specific aspect of their experience rather than letting them describe what aspects of their experience stand out to *them*. The group advised him to ask instead, “What stands out to you in your experience of being a student-athlete?” Interviewees might not feel stressed or select the word *stress* to describe their experience.

In previous research with teachers, we have noticed that they often begin to analyze and explain their teaching behaviors. Therefore, the interview question must help them to speak from their first-person perspective of *what it is like for them* in specific teaching situations, not as offering rationales for what they do. Note that we do not prepare a set of structured or even semi-structured questions as we want to avoid leading participants to describe their experience in a predefined manner.

Bracketing

The purpose of bracketing is to help phenomenological researchers become more aware of their assumptions and intentionality. The qualitative research literature is replete with debates about bracketing: what it is, and how to accomplish it—if it is possible to accomplish it (e.g., Ahern, 1999; LeVasseur, 2003). In the UTK approach, we acknowledge the impossibility of setting aside one’s knowledge, presuppositions, and biases about the phenomenon. Bracketing will not produce “objectivity.” Instead, it helps the researcher develop a keen awareness of assumptions and expectations. These expectations, some of which have developed over a lifetime, can influence the descriptions shared by participants and the data analysis. Without an attempt at bracketing, the researcher might ask questions that lead participants to focus on aspects of the phenomenon that the researcher deems important rather than what stands out in participants’ perceptions. In a unique feature of the UTK approach, researchers undergo an audiotaped interview conducted by an experienced phenomenological interviewer. In this interview they are asked about their own experience of the phenomenon. The interview is done prior to any collection of data.

The bracketing interview can produce surprising insights, as described by a graduate student who currently participates in the PRG: “This was an incredibly powerful experience which had me fighting back tears on a few occasions. I learned a lot about myself that day.” In addition to heightened self-awareness, bracketing has other benefits. The researcher begins her study as an interviewee—this helps her build empathy for the participants. In rare cases, a student researcher has experienced great psychological pain with regard to the phenomenon (for example, failure in an academic program), or she has too strong a vested interest in finding out something that will confirm or “prove” she is right. In these cases, the PRG would discourage the study.

The PRG members analyze the bracketing interview by reading the transcript aloud. The researcher is present as a silent witness and takes notes. The process is like the analysis of participant interview transcripts (described below). When discussing the results of the study, the researcher provides a summary of the bracketing to allow readers to consider the researcher’s positionality in relation to the results.

Because bracketing preconceived notions must continue throughout the course of the study, the PRG remains mindful of what was learned during analysis of the bracketing interview. The researcher can be gently called to task during analysis of participant interviews if he or she is bringing biases to the table, or overly directing the flow of the dialogue. The PRG's assistance with bracketing enhances rigor of the study.

Participants

The researcher purposefully selects individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and ascertains their willingness to talk about it in an audio-recorded interview. In seeking participants, the researcher needs to demonstrate genuine interest and respect for participants. It is unnecessary to follow the conventions of quantitative research, such as attempting to achieve a representative sample of the population; the goal is not to generalize to a population. Nor is it necessary to collect a great deal of demographic information. A simple demographic questionnaire including relevant information such as age, gender, length or duration of the educational experience, and other contextual information is sufficient. Studies tend to have from 5 to 20 participants, depending on saturation. Saturation is evident when the perceptions shared by individual participants begin to sound very similar to that of other participants even though the specific situations differ.

When the researcher sees thematic repetition, they conduct one or two more interviews; if these are supportive of the developing thematic structure, no further interviews are necessary. When writing about the study, we encourage researchers to report how and when saturation was ascertained; it is insufficient to simply state that "interviews ceased upon saturation." We believe the explanation confirms that the sample size was adequate (Sandelowski, 2008).

Interviews

The principal mode of accessing first-person accounts of human experience is interviewing. Phenomenological interviewing differs significantly from typical interviewing and therefore we devote considerable attention to it.

Although Merleau-Ponty wondered how one could access the private world of the Other, he expressed confidence in the vehicle of dialogue:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric...We have here a dual being...we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 354)

Engaging in dialogue with study participants requires researchers to approach participants with humility, sensitivity, and respect, and a sincere desire to hear what their “collaborators” say. Noted Merleau-Ponty (1973), “He is able to get across to me inasmuch as I am...capable of allowing myself to be led by the flow of talk toward a new state of knowledge” (p. 143). The participants “[lead]...the flow of talk”—the researcher follows.

We encourage researchers to create an atmosphere for the interview dialogue that ensures privacy, safety, trust, and rapport. This atmosphere can best be created by conducting the audiotaped interviews face-to-face, although some have successfully conducted interviews using distance technology such as Skype. The interviewer should be alert to nuances of the participant’s nonverbal communication, such as bodily movement or continual clearing of the throat. These actions can cue the interviewer to convey sensitivity: “This is difficult to talk about. Would you like to take a break?”

The interviewer does not let the participant lead down the path of explanations—since what we seek is lived experience, it is best to redirect participants to recall specific incidents when they begin to analyze or theorize about their experiences. For example, a researcher interviewing teachers of “underachievers” asked: “Tell me about a time when you were teaching a student who you thought could learn much better than she was learning.” The participant offered a kind of overview: “I begin by assessing the student’s level of performance and then focus on what she does not know.” The interviewer followed up with, “Can you tell me a story about a specific time when you were working with the student?” Such questions are more likely to elicit vivid, detailed descriptions of experiences as lived.

The researcher asks if the interviewee can recall other incidents and listens for similarities and differences between them. If the interviewer is

unsure where to go next with a question, it works well to pick up on a word or phrase the participant used at some previous point in the interview and ask for further elaboration, e.g., “You said earlier that you felt left out. What was it like to feel left out?” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 28).

Researchers should conduct at least one pilot interview prior to collecting data. While especially important for researchers new to these procedures, pilot interviews can be helpful to experienced interviewers because questions sometimes need modification (see above, “Research and Interview Questions”).

Most interviews last 45-60 minutes, but the length should be determined by the participant. It is good practice for the interviewer to refrain from checking the time so that interviews conclude naturally—when the participant is finished. When moments of silence occur, the interviewer should not assume the speaker has nothing more to say; he or she may be gathering thoughts before going on. It is always necessary to ask, “Is there anything else you would like to add?” before turning off the recorder.

Mistakes

Among the worst mistakes a phenomenological interviewer can make is talking too much. After posing the thoughtfully crafted opening question, the interviewer should try to remain silent except for follow-up questions such as “What was that like for you?” or “Can you tell me more about that?”

Another mistake among novice interviewers is to “go after” participants’ emotions. While the affective component of human experience is undeniably important, always asking, “How did that make you feel?” is problematic. Participants will talk about emotion when, or if, their emotions stand out as part of their experience. Another common interviewer mistake is asking a number of questions to elicit factual biographical information such as age at the time of the incident, the year of graduation, or years of teaching experience. In the UTK approach to phenomenology, we trust participants to provide the material needed to understand their experiences. Factual details are less important than what the experience *meant* to the person. From time to time, it is helpful for the interviewer to summarize what she heard to obtain consensual validation or correction from the participant.

During a phenomenological interview, “why” questions are avoided; they generally emerge from our own curiosity and they may place a demand on participants to intellectualize or defend their behavior. Likewise, questions such as “What do you *think* about...” are avoided because they send participants into the cognitive realm rather than reporting their unreflected lived experiences. In contrast to the recommendation of Moustakas (1994, p. 81) to ask interviewees to speculate about “situations that have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon,” we do not seek causal attributions.

Technical issues

Researchers who use our approach customarily record written or audiotaped field notes about the interview immediately after leaving the setting. Months later during data analysis, these can be useful in recalling the particular participant’s body language, nonverbal communication, and the ambiance of the setting and any unusual events (such as interruptions) that occurred. For example, a participant may pause frequently or speak with less fluidity than in an earlier part of the interview. (see [Thomas & Pollio, 2002](#), for more interviewing guidelines and suggestions).

Interviews are transcribed verbatim, including paralinguistic features such as silences, pauses, laughter, crying, and interruptions. In our approach we do not focus on the paralinguistic features of the interview as one might in conversation analysis or discursive psychology, rather these features help members of the PRG enter more fully into the interview experience. If transcripts are prepared by a professional transcriptionist, the researcher should listen to the audio file while reviewing the typed document to ensure accuracy. All names of places and people are replaced by pseudonyms throughout the typed text. Transcripts of good phenomenological interviews include long segments of participants talking without pause or prompt. Quite often participants comment that they achieved new insights about the meaning of events in their lives. Although researchers cannot promise therapeutic benefit to interviewees, many study participants do report greater self-awareness or empowerment.

Analysis

In this subsection we address our approach to analyzing transcripts of interviews in order to interpret the meaning of the experience being researched. While most researchers do analysis by themselves or with others engaged in the study, a distinctive feature of the UTK process of data analysis is the involvement of the PRG.

The PRG is composed of 5-20 faculty and students from various disciplines and diverse ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. It has an egalitarian, collaborative atmosphere. The group meets weekly for two hours, allotting time to one or more researchers who would like feedback on a question, assistance with a bracketing interview, or aid with analysis of research data. The group serves a mentoring function for the novice phenomenologist, and more experienced researchers often comment how much more illuminating the group discussion is in contrast to their solitary first reading of a study transcript.

Of his analysis process, Merleau-Ponty said, “I always go from particular things to more essential things” (cited in [Toadvine & Lawlor, 2007, p. 215](#)), and in our approach, so does the researcher. Capturing the essence of a phenomenon involves scrupulous attentiveness to the particular words, metaphors, and phrases chosen by participants to describe their experiences. We analyze the data line by line and word by word, often consulting a dictionary as necessary to discover the etymology of a word along with its various meanings. We sometimes need a cultural insider to tell us how a word is being used by individuals outside our usual sphere. For example, in a transcript of a Black participant, several White members of the PRG considered “clowning” to mean playful, silly behavior that intends no harm. Fortunately, a Black member of the group pointed out that in the cultural context of the interviewee, the word had a more negative connotation.

Our devotion to “unpacking” the meaning of each phrase of an interview transcript requires that we carefully consider latent or alternative meanings, not only what may attract attention at first glance. We interpret the data in accordance with this passage from Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968, p. 155):

In a sense, to understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, to *hear*

*what it says...*The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of ‘psychic reality’ spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear.

Meaning units

At the same time that we focus on coding the “micro” aspects of a transcript, those specific words and phrases that are commonly known as *meaning units* (Polkinghorne, 1989; Thomas & Pollio, 2002), we are ever-mindful of “macro” aspects, such as recurring patterns that ultimately may become *themes*, and the context of the experience being described, the *ground*. The goal of coding is to see both the forest and the trees.

Coding of meaning units in the UTK approach differs from the procedures followed by Polkinghorne (1989) and Giorgi (2007), who categorize participant meaning units based on theories of their discipline. They encourage the researcher to state what meaning units are about in language of the field. According to Polkinghorne, this process is “necessary because the original descriptions given by subjects are usually naïve regarding psychological structures and often include multiple and blended references” (1989, p. 55). The interdiction against multiple and blended references is odd considering most phenomenological researchers acknowledge that life itself has multiple and blended references. Rather than idiosyncrasy that needs to be relabeled, inconsistencies can reveal meaning.

Todres and Galvin (2008) and van Manen (2014) talk of another kind of transformation; they manipulate participant stories to make them “more resonant.” We take issue with the presumption that researchers’ words are more evocative or universal than the participants.’ Transformations put words on participant descriptions, and manipulations for resonance put words into their mouths. In our view, a researcher using these procedures presumes either that participants do not know what they are talking about or they do not talk about it in a sufficiently artful way. But nomothetic titles and poetic re-wording distract from the rich meaning that is *always already there*; they compromise bracketing in that the researcher’s assumptions about what the participants say are substituted for their own words.

In our approach to analysis, participants' own words are highlighted or circled on the interview transcripts as they are being read aloud. *Hearing* a text is different from *reading* a text: as one member of the PRG group reflected, "Reading aloud allows the researcher to not only see but to also hear the text, making it a more experiential process—it brings the text to life." One member of the group takes the part of the interviewer, and another takes the part of the participant. The reading continues until a member of the group asks the reading to stop because something "stands out" regarding the meaning of the phenomenon. This is then explored further until the group is ready to move on to another section of the text. If a member proposes a tentative interpretation such as, "I am sensing that the participant feels guilty..." other members ask, "what part of the text directly suggests this?" This process of deliberating the possible meanings of the text mirrors the hermeneutics originally practiced by interpreters of religious texts.

When the PRG members are analyzing, the researcher takes notes on the discussion. Later, PRG members return their copies of the transcripts (with notes in margins and circled words) to the researcher. This procedure enhances the rigor of the study: it aids researchers in reflecting on differences in the interpretation of the PRG members from their own, it reveals assumptions that the researchers may not have observed that are influencing findings, and ultimately confirms that the findings can be interpreted in a similar fashion by others. A researcher spoke of the value of reading these PRG comments:

Am I doing these powerful stories justice? When I go through the comments from the group on transcripts from my study, it has been incredibly affirming that we have seen many things the same way. When there is a section of the transcript that I was struggling with understanding, comments from the group have frequently shone a powerful light where I needed it most.

Final decisions about meaning units and thematization ultimately are made by the primary researcher. The PRG members give advice, not decrees.

Imaginative variation

After coding meaning units, the next step in the analysis is to engage in *imaginative variation*, which moves toward identification of themes. Polkinghorne (1989) described the process as a “type of mental experimentation in which the researcher intentionally alters, through imagination, various aspects of the experience...The point...is to imaginatively stretch the proposed transformation until it no longer describes the experience underlying the subject’s naïve description” (p. 55). Our process of imaginative variation does involve taking different perspectives on the phenomenon, somewhat like turning a kaleidoscope to more fully appreciate aspects of a pattern, but *we do not want to leave behind the “naïveté” of participants’ descriptions*. Our goal is to understand their experience more fully and deeply. Discussion among members of the PRG can involve connections to other academic studies, personal experiences, and exploration of ideas from other literature. These varied sources provide alternative perspectives on the data. Levinas, Buber, Dahlberg, or Heidegger may be brought into the conversation, as well as an NPR program or a TED talk. In this way the group research process helps the researcher find more literature for review or discussion. For example, during analysis of a transcript from the “Fly in the Buttermilk” study, interviewee comments about Black identity and visibility spurred a group member to mention the classic novel *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952). This novel enriched the discussion of the findings, consistent with the tradition within phenomenology of drawing upon the humanities.

Reflections from PRG members refer to the “electric atmosphere” and “collaborative synergy” of the group. Discussion is intellectual but not competitive, serious but also playful and punctuated by laughter. Sudden flashes of intuition occur, taking the discussion in new directions. One member compared the group process to improvisational jazz in the way that the musicians “call” and “respond” to one another and blend their talents seamlessly, always respecting a musician who goes off on a tangent. Similarly, in a typical phenomenology group meeting, a member may proffer what seems to be a brilliant insight, but then someone else’s comment, from a different perspective, is interwoven. There is a collective “aha” when we feel and know we have a rich interpretation and we can move on to a new section of a transcript.

Thematization

The goal of coding, imaginative variation, and the process of the PRG is ultimately to identify the “meaningful consistencies among different experiential accounts of a phenomenon” (Ihde, 1986). At this thematic stage of the analysis, small details of participants’ stories are left behind as we move toward commonalities in their descriptions of the *phenomenon*. To meet the criterion of a global *theme*, evidence must be present in each participant’s transcript, or at least not blatantly contradicted by any participants’ narratives. It is a misconception that a theme name indicates unanimity of participant experience; a theme can express variability. For example, the theme “stepping out of the box/staying in the box” expressed tension between polarities in the meaning of the experience of education in a study of urban Black women. A woman could remain safe “in the box” focused on caring for her children, rather than “step out of the box” to achieve her goal of obtaining a high school equivalency certificate (Young, 2005).

During thematization, the researcher presents a set of themes to the PRG that arise from a shared context, or ground, for participants. The proposed theme labels are debated, rejected, and revised until they merit provisional consensus. As noted earlier, the PRG is *advisory* to the primary researcher, who decides on final versions of theme titles and their interrelationship. Themes must be supported by quotations from the transcripts in such a way that readers of the research report will find the interpretation reasonable. We generally use participant words to name themes as part of our overall emphasis on respect for participants and our understanding that the words and phrases of participants share meaning in a manner that jargon cannot. Perhaps in mistaken homage to the quantitative research tradition, some guides for phenomenologists suggest a certain number of quotations that should be cited for each theme. In contrast, we argue that the evocative power of the quotes is more important than their number.

The *thematic structure* is a description of the general relationships among the themes, woven together with description of the existential grounds against which the phenomenon must be understood. The structure is sometimes depicted in a diagram and sometimes depicted in a narrative paragraph in which all the themes are included. Such a paragraph is often written in first-person, so that the combined voices of study participants can

be heard as one voice, expressing the essence of their lived experience. Consider this example from the study of Black students in the contextual ground of a predominately White university world (Davis et al., 2004, p. 436):

Unfairness, sabotage, and condescension are everyday occurrences in the white world in which I live at the university. In order to connect with students, faculty, administrators, and others on or around campus, I must be the one to initiate interaction, and I must also prove I am worthy as a student or friend. I am continuously made aware of how different I am, especially when I am the only black student in a class. Life is full of opposites: I feel as if I am seen as the same as other blacks by many whites, yet I often feel different from other black students. Perhaps the most common experience I have is one of extremes: either I am invisible or I am its opposite—I am super-visible.

Thematic structures, when well executed, reveal the essence of an experience *and* its context. The structure reveals that the themes are natural lines of fracture in the figure, set against a ground, which is our interpretation of the phenomenon. Our fundamental purpose is tied to the gestalt nature of perception as described by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962).

Participant Validation

Unlike researchers who seek validation of their interpretations exclusively from other researchers, we also attempt to seek validation from the study participants. Retaining an initial stance of humility, the researcher returns to some of the interviewees to engage in dialogue about the thematic structure. What is sought is a fusion of horizons, which van Manen has called the “phenomenological nod” (1990). After obtaining participant feedback, the researcher then determines whether to revise findings before sharing with the scientific community. Some phenomenologists (such as Giorgi, 2007) dispute the practice of member checking, arguing that participants do not have the skills or perspective to judge the researcher’s analysis. Our collective experience in hundreds of research projects leads us to believe otherwise. The affirmation from participants that our accounts resonate with their lived experience is important and highly valued. In our experience,

participants have suggested minor changes in theme labels rarely, but we have never encountered strong disagreement with researcher interpretations of the meaning of the experience.

The Research Report

Perhaps no one writes more eloquently about phenomenological writing than van Manen, who says that the writer's task is to "induce wonder" (2014, p. 360), appealing both to our "cognitive and noncognitive modes of knowing" (p. 391). Thus, in our reports we attempt to take the reader right into the classroom, into the struggles and triumphs of teachers and learners, in a vivid style that

brings the meaning into existence as a thing as the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 182)

The reader should have a new appreciation of the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon, perhaps feeling startled, stirred, or inspired. Although theory was set aside in the bracketing process, educational researchers should connect their findings to theories of teaching and learning, where possible, or suggest modifications or expansions of extant theories. This is the true value of phenomenological research: to bring alive the voices of teachers and students that may lead to expanded research based on such perspectives that may be influencing the efficacy of certain pedagogical practices. We agree with Polkinghorne's (1989, p. 58) admonition that the research report should also include "an implication section where the significance of the findings for practice and policy is spelled out."

Validity and Transferability

Considerable angst still appears in qualitative research reports by authors who bemoan their inability to meet the traditional standards set for quantitative research, despite the publication of hundreds of books and

articles proffering more appropriate standards for qualitative investigations (e.g., [Denzin & Lincoln, 2000](#)). Many researchers write, “these findings are only generalizable to the present sample.” There would not be much point in conducting or publishing research that *only* applies to one small group of people somewhere in the world. Qualitative findings, while not intended to be generalized to a population, contribute to deeper understanding of human experiences, advances in concept and theory development, and development of pedagogical and counseling interventions ([Sandelowski, 2008](#)). Findings of educational research using phenomenological methodology can be transferable to other settings if they illuminate essential aspects of the meaning of the phenomenon that will resonate with other teachers and learners.

Conclusion

We have described our methodology and its specific procedures for conducting meaningful educational research. Our approach, derived from the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is both descriptive and hermeneutic, transcending rigid boundaries that have been espoused by some scholars. As Langdridge says, “such boundaries [are] antithetical to the spirit of the phenomenological tradition that prizes individuality and creativity” (2008, p. 1131). Our paper addresses a gap in extant literature: many popular textbooks used in qualitative research courses (e.g., [Creswell, 2013](#)) rely on older phenomenology sources ([van Manen, 1990](#); [Moustakas, 1994](#)), and/or do not include sufficient information about the philosophical underpinnings from which procedural steps of research were derived. We value the contributions of many contemporary scholars of phenomenology, but we believe our approach offers philosophically grounded enhancements to strengthen and perhaps invigorate application of the existential phenomenological approach in education.

We are concerned that many researchers claim a phenomenological approach but only loosely connect their methods to tenets derived from philosophical ideas. Their research reports appear no different than content analysis or thematic analysis. For example, an approach called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has achieved great popularity in Europe, especially in the UK, with its recipe-like set of methods, but its philosophical background has not been well articulated,

leading Chamberlain (2011, p. 50) to suggest that “phenomenology [is] getting lost along the way.” Other researchers claim to be basing their procedures on Heidegger or Husserl but fail to demonstrate depth of knowledge and understanding regarding phenomenological philosophy and their procedures reveal contradictions.

We have sympathy for thesis and dissertation students who do not receive adequate preparation in coursework for phenomenological research, lack mentors to conduct interview training, and have no community of scholars with whom to examine their data. Our research group has hosted a number of students from distant locales. Some of these students tell us that no one on their faculty committee is knowledgeable about phenomenology. It is a disservice to students to permit them to attempt a phenomenological study when no mentor is available.

While stringent page limits for some journals prevent researchers from detailing philosophical premises of their work, we believe readers are owed a clear statement of the tradition in which the work was produced. The reader should find the interpretation of the data compelling and not a mere compendium of quotations from participants. In a report of educational research that claims to be phenomenological, it should be evident that stories of teachers and students have been respected, rather than chopped up to support pre-existing ideas or deconstructed to conform to *a priori* theories. As we found in the “Fly in the Buttermilk” study, one need not take a critical race theory approach to bring to light racism in academia.

A question sometimes posed to us when presenting our research at conferences is if the PRG approach can be recreated elsewhere. A PRG can be started in almost any locale where a phenomenological scholar can recruit three or four interested people who agree to respectfully engage with texts; several of our former students have started groups at universities when they were appointed to faculty positions. Individuals in a college of education are encouraged to look for potential collaborators in psychology, social work, nursing, and other applied disciplines. Distance technologies such as Zoom can be used to link scholars in diverse locales when face to face interactions are not possible. We concur with the sentiments of Ouellette (2003, p. 24) who employed a group analytic procedure with her students:

Too many of us have been socialized as scholars to think that real thinking happens only when we are alone, that we cannot speak until we have thought it all out, and that what we have written (after all that time thinking about it) is precious. We need to provide our students with other models for working and other spaces in which they can freely engage in those models.

A recent text by Friesen, Henriksson and Saevi (2012) devoted to hermeneutic phenomenology in education and van Manen's (2014) newest book contribute many stimulating new thoughts that deserve careful consideration. For example, Finlay, in her chapter in Friesen et al., proposes that "phenomenology needs to move forward and take its place beyond the modernist-postmodernist divide" (2012, p. 31). For readers new to phenomenology, such as graduate students, both books provide depth well beyond what we can offer in a journal article. We invite both new and seasoned scholars to participate in further dialogues about methodology, methods, and procedures. In this way, all of us can continue to learn about phenomenology and share our understandings with one another. In our development of phenomenology, as in life, we believe, "Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him" (de Saint-Exupery, in Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 455).

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