I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.

—IBM Chairman Thomas Watson, 1943

I want to share with you one of the joys that new ideas brings to us as faculty and to you as students. I have taught in traditional classrooms for many years. My classes tend to be interactive, with group discussions and participation. As the new age of teaching has brought us into cyberspace, I decided to adapt my class to an online environment. The material that follows is a very small segment from a basic class in qualitative research. I have reproduced one week in our discussion about phenomenology, led by a class member. I should add that we met face-to-face for about half the time so students did know each other and they knew me. Many had taken classes from me before.

This doctoral level course combined face-to-face and online teaching. We met together in our small group of about a dozen students for the initial several meetings. Topics were selected and assignments made. Each student was instructed to present the material and lead the discussion. They were free to do whatever they thought might be helpful. Permission was granted by the students to use their work. I have chosen to remove their last names and email addresses, however. What follows are a number of stimulus questions, responses, and reactions. Owing to space limitations, I have chosen to eliminate some redundant or irrelevant information. All discussions were facilitated via the program Blackboard. All registered students had access to the program and were familiar with its use.

Frank led off the discussions with questions about phenomenology. I want you to pay particular attention to the three general questions he posed and how his fellow students responded. Frank chose to complete the assignment by summarizing the comments into what he called “one pagers.” As an aside, Frank was known to most of the students prior to the class. He apparently has used these “one pagers” before. He is a senior level professional working in the federal government. You will note from the dates that this discussion occurred during the course of a one-week time span. Quite phenomenal!

**Current Forum:** Session 5. Between 9/26 and 10/3
**Date:** Thu Sep 26 2002 4:30 pm
**Author:** Francis

**Subject:** Phenomenology Discussion Rules

Colleagues,

Our discussion of phenomenology will be an asynchronous one that is conducted online. This will allow everyone the opportunity to participate at will and on his/her own schedule. However, to keep everything from getting out of hand, the discussion will be closed as of midnight of the following dates for the discussion indicated:

1. What is phenomenology? - Saturday, 28 September.
2. How would you conduct a phenomenological study (e.g., for 9/11)? - Sunday, 29 September.

3. What might be the advantages/disadvantages of a phenomenological study of the events of 9/11? - Tuesday, 1 October.

You may post to any one or all of the discussion threads at anytime up until midnight of the closing date . . . at which point the discussion for that thread is closed. One of the beauties of an asynchronous BlackBoard discussion, in addition to its independence from time and space constraints, is that at the end of it all, we will have a record of our conversation from which we will draw knowledge—a phenomenological event itself?

So much for now. Let the conversation begin. The three threads are open.

Frank

Date: Thu Sep 26 2002 7:24 pm
Author: James
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?

As best I can tell, Phenomenology attempts to study an event (or phenomenon) by understanding the meaning of the event as it relates to the lives of those who experience(d) that event. The goal is to sift through the data to identify that which is the essence of the lived experience.

As I see it, the conclusions made as a result of this kind of study are dependent upon the characteristics of the sample and the method by which data is gathered. To sample blacks who marched from Montgomery to Selma vs. whites who made the same trek, one may identify a different “essential experience.” Yet at the same time, if one were to interview both blacks and whites who were in the march, yet another conclusion may be made. It all depends upon the point of view and the nature of the population being sampled.

Date: Thu Sep 26 2002 9:28 pm
Author: Tina
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?

Greetings all,

I get a clear image of phenomenology with Creswell’s description—a study that describes the meaning of the lived experiences for individuals about a concept or phenomenon.

What is fuzzier or more difficult to manage is the bracketing, or setting aside all prejudgments, when conducting a phenomenological study. My understanding of Carl Roger's work is that humans judge/evaluate and approve/disapprove of a concept or thing as soon as we see or hear it. (It’s one mechanism we have to cope with the world and respond to constant stimuli in our environment.) If Rogers is right, how can we truly bracket our prejudgments?

—Tina

Date: Thu Sep 26 2002 11:41 pm
Author: Paul
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?

My own experience in this area is limited. So, I'm not sure that I can bring
any interpretation to this discussion, other than what I have gleaned from
the text. That being said, I feel like Creswell did a pretty fair job of
explaining his interpretation of this tradition. As best as I am able to tell, a
phenomenological study attempts to illustrate the realness and meaning
of a phenomenon, as it is perceived by and through the senses of
individuals that have lived and experienced it.

Paul

Hi All. For this definition, I decided to go beyond what Creswell had
stated in our textbook and found some work of Husserl on the World
Wide Web. I understand that German philosopher Edmund Husserl,
Phenomenology* (1913; tran. 1931). He defined it as the study of
essences, such as the essence of emotions. He later held that only the
essences of certain special conscious structures are the proper object of
phenomenology. His formal definition states that phenomenology is “the
study of the structures of consciousness that enable consciousness to
refer to objects outside itself.” I think this is interesting because he
implies that it is setting aside the question of the real existence of the
contemplated object.

I must admit that this definition does not help me to understand what it is.
What do you think? Please help me to make sense of this.

Alvin

I had been monitoring the discussion, but did not make a comment until this point. You
will notice that I comment on a previous posting and then pose a question for everyone.
Teaching online is quite a different phenomenon than traditional classroom teaching.

Lichtman, Marilyn <mlichtma@vt.edu>

Alvin. You must have been reading my mind when you looked up Husserl. Now let’s see what
the meaning is beneath what you have written. He says to study the essence of conscious
structures. Well, I think that has come to be seen as studying the lived experiences of individuals
who have some common experience. I have read a phenomenology of the lived experiences of
people who have survived heart attacks. Now you also ask the question about the “real
existence” of the object. Well, in much qualitative research there is no “real” existence beyond
what is constructed by the researcher. I’d like to see what others have to say as well.

Lichtman, Marilyn <mlichtma@vt.edu>

Re: What is Phenomenology?
I want to jump in here to comment that phenomenology has a long tradition. Philosophical underpinnings are more prevalent here than in any other tradition Creswell considers. Did any of you read Husserl?

Date: Fri Sep 27 2002 9:59 pm  
Author: Heather  
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?  
I hadn't read Husserl, but did read about the history of Phenomenology on the links that Dr. Lichtman provided. Heidegger's concept was more clear to me since the website stated that "phenomenology should make manifest what is hidden in ordinary, everyday experience." I suppose that is what Husserl was implying when he questioned the "nature of the meaning of something." I had a few thoughts on how this could be applied to 9/11 which I'll throw out under that question.

Date: Fri Sep 27 2002 10:44 pm  
Author: James  
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?  
In reading Heather's comments I found myself wondering . . . If the goal of phenomenology is to bring to light that which was hidden, does it then really get at the "shared" experience? If the essence of an experience is hidden, then how can it be shared? Are we talking here about the tie that binds? If that which is hidden is the "true" thread that binds us together, then disasters, wars, rallies, rituals, and the like are only shadows of that truth.

Sorry, I know that sounds a little trippy.

Date: Sun Sep 29 2002 1:04 pm  
Author: C  
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?  
As I read the resources on phenomenology, what strikes me are the following words and phrases:  
* General references to the “lived experience,” “meanings,” “insights,” and “reflections”;  
* Husserl's reference to “essences of conscious structures”; and  
* Heidegger’s “structure of everydayness or being-in-the-world.”

I am curious how a researcher genuinely achieves bracketing. In fact, I made this attempt during my interview experience on my topic of choice. I found it a very conscious, deliberate action that interfered, I fear, with giving undivided, open attention to the person whose experience I tapped. (In essence, I feel I failed to adhere to Boeree's admonition to be prepared to listen! While my intentions were pure . . . ) Tina's reflections on Rogers prompted me to consider if my experience with bracketing was quite natural. How do my own experience, judgments, and preconceptions serve to inform the research--particularly as they align with the hermeneutic phenomenology approach--and yet preserve the experience of those interviewed. As I feel I'm thinking, feeling, and talking in circles at this point, I'm curious to read more to help inform my appreciation and skill development in this area.

Date: Sun Sep 29 2002 2:31 pm  
Author: Lichtman, Marilyn <mlichtma@vt.edu>  
Subject: Re: What is Phenomenology?
Leeanne. You raise some very interesting points. First, about bracketing. I don't think anyone would say you can put your own experiences completely out of your mind—in fact, I don't think that should be your goal. But by being aware of them and acknowledging them, you can compare and contrast what you learn with what you know from your own experience. I don't think you’re talking in circles, because much of this material is somewhat confusing.

**Current Forum:** Session 5. Between 9/26 and 10/3  
**Date:** Sun Sep 29 2002 11:51 pm  
**Author:** Talisha  
**Subject:** Re: What is Phenomenology?  
Everyone brings up some very good points. I, too, was questioning the true ability of the researcher to effectively achieve bracketing. Like Tina pointed out, it is extremely difficult to set aside prejudgments because it is human nature to prejudge or judge as soon as we hear or see something.

Dr. Lichtman's explanation that the goal is not to set aside our prejudgments, but rather become aware and acknowledge them helps me to understand better what Creswell meant.

**Date:** Mon Sep 30 2002 9:18 pm  
**Author:** Wells, C.  <cwells2@vt.edu>  
**Subject:** Re: What is Phenomenology?  
Thanks for your clarification and support. This is quite a process and one that I'm thoroughly enjoying!

**Date:** Mon Sep 30 2002 10:21 pm  
**Author:** Angela  
**Subject:** Re: What is Phenomenology?  
Everyone made some interesting points about bracketing. As I was reading some of the responses, I began to think about my interview experiences. When I was interviewing the “graduate student,” I found myself slipping into the counselor role. I had to keep reminding myself that I was doing an interview and not a counseling session.

**Date:** Sun Sep 29 2002 6:09 pm  
**Author:** Francis  
**Attachment:** answer_1_-_what_is_phenomenology.doc (31232 bytes)  
**Subject:** What Is Phenomenology - An Answer  
Classmates,

Thank you for participating in the discussion to answer our first question. I have read all the comments and, as moderator of the discussion, I have put together a one-pager (talk about being scientifically linear) that captures the essence (nice pun, eh?) of the conversation about phenomenology and offers a definition thereof. Hope this helps.

Frank

Classmates,

Thank you for participating in this part of the discussion. Every one of you has either asked questions and/or made comments in an effort to help us understand phenomenology, a most
difficult concept. This is my one-page (yes, I am scientifically “linear” that way) synopsis/précis of what phenomenology is in response to question 1 . . . what is phenomenology?

Perhaps what makes the concept so vexing for us is that we have been trained in the “scientific method” from an early age. Many cultures in the world see Westerners, especially Americans, as being very linear—we like to find a cause for everything and we want to do it unemotionally. For example, we separate our business lives from our personal lives . . . if someone is fired, it is a “business decision” although we like the victim “personally.” We want to separate our emotions from our actions so that the latter are not “biased.”

Alvin helped us with a reference to Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher who introduced the term “phenomenology” in his book, *Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913; trans. 1931). He defined it as the study of essences, such as the essence of emotions. He later held that only the essences of certain special conscious structures are the proper object of phenomenology. His formal definition states that phenomenology is “the study of the structures of consciousness that enable consciousness to refer to objects outside itself.”

Martin Heidegger, a German philosophical contemporary of Husserl’s, said that phenomenology “should make manifest what is hidden in ordinary, everyday experience.” Jean-Paul Sartre, French existentialist, agreed with Husserl that consciousness is always directed at objects, but criticized his claim that such directedness is possible only by means of special mental entities called meanings.

Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre . . . philosophers all; no wonder those of us trained in the scientific method find it difficult to reconcile ourselves with the concept of phenomenology. We need a more concrete definition, so as Jim Mudd says, “Phenomenology attempts to study an event (or phenomenon) by understanding the meaning of the event as it relates to the lives of those who experience(d) that event. The goal is to sift through the data to identify that which is the essence of the lived experience.” Aha, now we are getting somewhere, we are starting to speak more simply and getting away from the language of the philosophers. We need to know what phenomenology is so that we can use it as a research method or tool; the philosophers have no need to worry about tools . . . they can spend their time arguing over the meaning of words.

As a researcher, I prefer the plain language definition of phenomenology provided by C. George Boeree: “. . . phenomenology, which instructs us to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself in its fullness. You ‘look’ at it from all perspectives, using all your senses, even attending to your thoughts and feelings. Phenomenologists say that phenomena are apodictic, which means they ‘speak for themselves’—which means in turn that we should be prepared to listen!”

But Tina rightly observes that “What is fuzzier or more difficult to manage is the bracketing, or setting aside all prejudgments, when conducting a phenomenological study. My understanding of Carl Rogers’s work is that humans judge/evaluate and approve/disapprove of a concept or thing as soon as we see or hear it. (It’s one mechanism we have to cope with the world and respond to constant stimuli in our environment.) If Rogers is right, how can we truly bracket our prejudgments?” But hold that thought, the proper place to address Tina’s concern is in our answer to our second question regarding how one would conduct a phenomenological study.

I have included Frank’s summary for his second and third questions, but in the interest of space have not included the lively discussions.
Subject: How Would You Conduct A Phenomenological Study - An Answer

Classmates,

Here is my one-pager regarding the subject. As you know, I try to get a sense for how the discussion is going and then I attempt to provide the “schoolbook answer.” Although this is a tough subject, hopefully you find these one-pagers helpful in your understanding of phenomenology.

Frank

Colleagues,

Just as I tried to give you a one-page synopsis of what phenomenology is, so too, I will now attempt to describe ways on how one would conduct a phenomenological study of the events of 9/11. As you know, I suggested that you look at the Discussion Board postings for Session 2 of this course to help you formulate an answer to this question. If you did not find much there, could it be that some members of the class were just too close to the event to post something to that Discussion Board? Given that Professor Lichtman made posting to the Session 2 board a voluntary act, maybe some folks were moved to not post just as others were moved to post.

Heather seems insightful: “I would also say, in relation to reviewing our postings from the week of September 11th, that it is interesting to note what each of us brought to the discussion. People used music, photographs, psychology, and spirituality to remember and cope with the issue. And that was just within a small online discussion of 10–12 people. Another story that is unseen might be the vast array of coping techniques that people use to grieve, remember and persevere.

In the Beverley Campbell article Dr. Lichtman provided us as a reference for this session, Lather (1991) is quoted:

> Research has been dominated in the last hundred years or more by what is commonly known as the scientific method. Also known as positivist or quantitative research its emphasis is on objectivity, neutrality, measurement and validity. To live in the scientific method means to live within an understanding of the beliefs, values and techniques that guide scientific inquiry.

In conducting a phenomenological study, it seems that one must practice what Boeree calls “warm” analysis, wherein empathy is integral to the analysis. According to Boeree, we conduct a phenomenological study by understanding intentionality and practicing bracketing. After some very trying conversation, he kindly gives us the practical definitions of these two terms:

- **Intentionality** means being open to all aspects of the phenomenon, not leaving out what belongs.

- **Bracketing** means putting aside our biases, prejudices, theories, philosophies, religions, even common sense, and accept the phenomenon for what it is.

Well, Tina noted that bracketing is very difficult, but it seems that one must do one’s best if one is to “do” phenomenology. Thus, once one comes to grips with bracketing, then one might follow the three steps that Boeree says Spiegelberg (1965) outlines:

1. **Intuiting**—Experience or recall the phenomenon. “Hold” it in your awareness, or live in it, be involved in it—dwell in or on it.
2. **Analyze** and investigate all aspects both in their outward forms—objects, actions, others—and in their inward forms—thoughts, images, feelings.
3. **Describing**—Write it down. Write it as if the reader had never had the experience. Guide them through your intuiting and analyzing.
Quite frankly, such a study seems very difficult to do. No wonder so many people prefer the relative security and “objectivity” of quantitative analysis. But then, who is to capture the “essence” of 9/11?

As some of you may know, PBS has been engaged in a Ken Burns fest this past week. Could his film on the Civil War qualify as a phenomenological study? I daresay yes. But then the Civil War was fought almost a century and a half ago. Ken Burns has produced a brilliant piece about an event in the distant past; could something equally emotive and telling be done about 9/11? Stay tuned for the advantages and disadvantages of a phenomenological study.

Date: Thu Oct 3 2002 6:16 pm
Author: Francis
Attachment: answer_3_-_advantages_and_disadvantages.doc (35840 bytes)
Subject: Advantages/Disadvantages - An Answer

Colleagues,

Here is my last “one-pager” that attempts to provide an “answer” for the third question. I will bring copies of all three “one-pagers” to class tonight. Thank you, all, for participating in this asynchronous, online discussion.

Frank

P.S. Check out the website that Professor Lichtman provided in her announcement for this date.

Colleagues,

This is my last “one-pager” and, as was the case with the other two, I will give you what might be the advantages/disadvantages of a phenomenological study of events such as 9/11.

Tina’s observations seem to capture part of the essence of the advantages/disadvantages question: “... an advantage of the 9/11 phenomenological study is the tremendous sample pool to tap into. The researcher could explore many of (sic) areas (e.g., losing a child, being a single parent, going to war).

A significant disadvantage of 9/11 as the topic of study is the (still) raw emotion that many people—including the researcher—may still (sic) struggling with. The researcher would have to be highly skilled in managing the interviewee’s emotion and be mindful of his/her boundaries in offering counseling/support if the interviewee becomes overwhelmed.

Dr. Lichtman responded: “Tina. You bring up an important point regarding this extraordinary phenomenon. What do we do with our emotions? How do they affect what we study? How can we bracket such emotions when the experience is so incredibly overwhelming?”

Heather says, “Yet there is undoubtedly a tremendous amount of information and data in that event. I suppose that eventually it could be captured accurately in this type of research format - similar to perhaps (sic) other international tragedies have been (i.e. Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, Oklahoma City, etc.) “

Professor Lichtman offered in response to Jim’s commentary: “You raise an interesting point regarding the term bias. In traditional quantitative research, the researcher tries to take an objective perspective and remain as unbiased as possible so as not to influence the outcome of the study. This is especially true in experimental work. This is essentially a positivist or post- positivist perspective. In qualitative research, the researcher operates more from a subjective, interpretivist viewpoint and acknowledges it. Phenomenology introduces the concept of bracketing. Perhaps others will comment on this.”
Beverley Campbell notes that there are possibilities and dilemmas when phenomenology is used: “Phenomenology does offer ways of understanding not offered by other research methodologies. In contrast to the scientific method it is both poetic and interpretive. . . .” She goes on to ask the question: “Is simply interpreting life narrative enough?” She says that throughout her research project “the research question was mine and remained mine and the analysis and interpretation were mine.”

Gary Shank in the Forum: Qualitative Social Research (the journal to which Dr. Lichtman referred us), Volume 2, No. 1–February 2001, wrote “It’s Logic in Practice, My Dear Watson: An Imaginary Memoir from Beyond the Grave.” The abstract says that “the voice of Sherlock Holmes is used to highlight critical issues involving actual logic in use in qualitative research.”

I realize that the concept of phenomenology is difficult to internalize, but it seems to me that the advantages/disadvantages are as have been stated by all of you. The bottom line for me is that it is up to each researcher to know himself/herself well enough to recognize when they may be getting too close to the subject of study and understand the limitations of their bracketing. They must balance their knowledge of their limitations with what they are doing. This may seem like an imperfect answer, but what method is completely perfect?